



What and in which Way do Bachelor Degree Students of Translation Studies at the University of Graz, Austria Report on their Mandatory Internship Abroad? An Empirical Analysis of Students' Written Reports and Educational Implications

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Abstract

This study is based on the analysis of 32 practical abroad training reports of Bachelor degree students at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz, Austria from 2008 to 2014. The sample group (28 female, 4 male students) completed their mandatory internship in 17 different countries and in eight different languages. The analysis focuses on the questions which intercultural and language-related (professional) experiences students report on after their return, in which ways they do so, which conclusions they draw from their experience and which strategies they developed when dealing with intercultural irritations. Another research interest consists in the question if and to which degree the students develop an observing-explorative attitude, not taking on a hasty, judging and pejorative attitude, to what degree the ability to reflect can be found in texts and whether they result in reflecting their own cultural bonds by dealing with persons with other cultural backgrounds. Finally, in view of promoting linguistic and cultural awareness, suggestions for teaching will be given, in particular on how the insights gained from the analysis can be purposefully dealt with in a learning and teaching context.

1. Introduction

The bachelor's programme *Transcultural Communication* at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz, Austria, offers students a sound academic introduction to transcultural communication in 12 different languages: Arabic, Austrian Sign Language, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish and Turkish. Students attend courses in their native (= first) or second languages (= language of pre-university instruction), which must be one of the above stated languages, as well as in two foreign languages, which students can select from the above list. Besides language skills, students can acquire comprehensive knowledge of the social, political, cultural and economic situation of the relevant countries and they are offered an introduction to different approaches in Translation Studies. The BA in Transcultural Communication prepares students for a master's programme in Translation or Interpreting, which allows them to extend their knowledge of (foreign) languages and translatory skills acquired in the bachelor's programme. The MA focuses on training students in basic scientific skills and methods, as well as practical abilities required for their professional careers in the area of translation and translation studies.

As this article concentrates on Bachelor degree students doing their mandatory internship abroad I would like to stress the requirements and qualifications expected from them. A key part of the bachelor's programme involves either studying abroad or completing a work placement abroad, enabling students to come into direct contact with other cultures and acquire language and intercultural skills. Expected results are described on the official website from the University of Graz as follows.

Students will have acquired key qualifications and soft skills for their careers such as independent and targeted working methods and intellectual flexibility. They will have acquired excellent competence in their native or second language and in two selected foreign languages as well as basic translational competences including comprehensive cultural knowledge. [1]

Other qualification students are expected to gain by the bachelor's programme *Transcultural Communication* consists of relevant scientific skills and methods for analysis and reflection of intercultural and transcultural communication. In this article I would like to report on a study conducted

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at the Department of Translation Studies analyzing a) which intercultural and language-related (professional) experiences students report on after their return from a work placement abroad, b) in which ways they do so, c) which conclusions they draw from their experience and which strategies they developed when dealing with intercultural irritations. If one of the outcomes from study-related work abroad on a short-term basis is officially stated as enhanced critical reflection skills, it will be interesting to ask if and to which degree the students develop an observing-explorative attitude, not taking on a hasty, judging and pejorative attitude, to what degree the ability to reflect can be found in their texts and whether they result in reflecting their own cultural bonds by dealing with persons with other cultural backgrounds.

2. The guided mandatory internship abroad

Bachelor degree students of *Transcultural Communication* in Graz, Austria, can choose between studying abroad or completing a work placement abroad consisting of 100 hours worked. On their return they have to submit a practical experience report comprising 5 to 10 pages, giving detailed information on the activities exercised and a reflection on skills and competences gained at university that proved to be helpful in a working environment. For the internship abroad together with the report students get 4 ECTS credit points and they are provided with an online guideline on how to write their report. [2] The guideline was developed following the principles of reflective experiential learning promoting user-oriented application. In the guideline students are provided with different concepts of culture, formal criteria to be fulfilled as well as structure and content of the report (presentation and discussion of exercised activities, reflection on professional experience, language acquisition and intercultural competence). The guideline aims at an increased awareness of culturally influenced orientation systems, one's own cultural patterns and their effectiveness. The students can choose between three topics as a basis on which to collect and reflect on as many as possible experiences and observations. 1. Time and space (e.g. mealtime, punctuality, proxemics), 2. Society (e.g. social hierarchy, sense of belonging, social role attributions), 3. Communication (e.g. establishing contacts, non-verbal communication, conversational routines). In their written report on the experience acquired in one of the set of issues students must discuss *in situ* applied learning strategies to improve their oral and written language competence as well as their competence in mediating between languages and cultures. [3] Woodman (2008: 143) highlights the importance of the ability to reflect on the impact of cultural differences.

Moving the main focus from other to self and developing one's investigation skills to research one's own assumptions brings with it a more critical approach to life, an approach which seeks multiple perspectives before coming to any conclusions. [...] Moving the main focus to self makes sense because self is the only constant factor in this flow of interaction and it is the inevitable starting point for all comparison with otherness. [4]

This article is based on a study analyzing 32 practical abroad training reports of Bachelor degree students at the University of Graz from 2008 to 2014. The sample group (28 female, 4 male students) completed their mandatory internship in 17 different countries and in eight different languages: Italian 8x, English and French each 6x, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and Spanish each 3x, Arabic, German, Russian each 2x. The following tables show the kind of internship, target language country and exercised activities, whereby the first one depicts those internships that were generally evaluated as useful (in a company or public/private institution) and the second one those commonly evaluated as less useful (au-pair or hotel).

<i>Kind of internship</i>	Company: 10x	Public/private institution: 6x
<i>Target language country</i>	Bosnia-Herzegovina, Great Britain (2x), Guatemala, Canada, Croatia, Austria, Russia, Spain, United Arab Emirates	Burkina Faso, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Russia, Slovenia
<i>Exercised activities</i>	General office and secretarial duties, simple translations, structured archiving, research work, e-mail correspondence and phone calls; reception, catering, preparation of advertising and information material	Office and research activities, processing of applications, provision of information, teaching activities, translation and interpreting activities, website localization for the German-speaking area

Table 1. Generally *positively* evaluated internships



Kind of internship	Au-pair: 12x	Hotel: 4x
Target language country	Egypt, France, Great Britain, Italy (6x), Canada, Austria, French-speaking Switzerland	France, Italy, Serbia, Spain
Exercised activities	Child care, domestic work, educational and organizational tasks	Reception desk, hotel services, simple translations (guest book entries, hotel reviews), hotel descriptions online and in print

Table 2. Generally *negatively* evaluated internships

Interestingly, all male students had opted for an internship in a private or public institution, which proved to be one of the best evaluated work placements abroad, together with internships in a foreign company. Also significant for the current generation of students is the fact that not one of the interns complained about not being paid for his or her work. Only two of 32 student apprentices were paid, namely one au-pair and one intern in a company. Either most of the students do definitely not feel exploited and consider unpaid mandatory internships as a normal condition or they are reluctant to mention this rather delicate issue in their written report. Apart from some au-pairs who were unhappy in their host families, the students' reports suggest that most of the current students do not feel uneasy with their status of unpaid workers as one of the interns in a hotel writes. "I was positively surprised how pleasant the working atmosphere was and although I was doing unpaid work I didn't feel exploited."

One of the main interests in doing this small study was to find out if the expectations towards the bachelor students were fully met, but also if their own expectations and hopes regarding their internship were fulfilled. The next chapters will focus on these two questions.

3. Learning outcomes from the students' perspective

The analysis of the students' reports written on their return from abroad indicates two different conclusions they personally draw. One is great enthusiasm along with a strong sense of encouragement for a career as a culturally sensitive mediator and expert in cross-cultural communication in any area whatsoever, respectively a great encouragement for a career as a translator or interpreter. The other conclusion they arrive at is that they want to change their course of study because of the loneliness they experienced when creating translations. The data suggest that the best way for them to gain a realistic impression of their future job requirements is completing an internship in a company or a public/private institution. Some students reporting on their au-pair-job or their work placement in a hotel regret not having had the opportunity to challenge themselves because of tasks that had little to do with their course of study or their career aspirations.

There are students who convincingly articulate different key moments when they experience firsthand that they become more independent from teacher's feedback on their language and cultural competence. Instead of good grades at university, they get positive feedback from their interaction partners and consciously recognize their enhanced cultural communication skills. When speaking of autonomous and self-regulated language learning, we find many different strategies applied by the students to improve their receptive and productive language skills in the reports: reading as much as possible, talking without fear of making mistakes, carrying a notebook to take notes of new words and phrases, listening to the radio and watching TV more consciously focusing on new words etc. As for the students' self-assessment, they describe several improvements concerning listening and reading skills, active vocabulary and pronunciation, higher intrinsic motivation as well as consistency and appropriateness of language register and style. After having discussed their own perspective I want to focus now on the teacher's view when reading their reports.

4. Assessment of learning outcomes and conclusion

Generally speaking, the differences between the students' reports are significant in terms of considerably different levels of willingness and ability to reflect as well as highly differentiated literacy skills. Moreover, it is important to note that more often than not reports on internships are quite positive, as most people avoid a negative description of their study-related stay abroad because it could be interpreted as a personal failure. What some students describe as a painful experience are key moments when they unintentionally appear impolite, too direct or even aggressive because of a lack of intercultural communicative competence. In the sample of 32 reports culturally sensitive descriptions do prevail but there are also recounts with cultural stereotypes and clichés revealing an



unreflective attitude. Most of the expressly reflective statements come from interns in companies or public/private institutions. This finding suggests that these two kind of internships offer the greatest potential for a cultural sensitization with respect to foreign culture and your own.

As for personal, intellectual, emotional and social growth, all 32 students highlight the positive impact on their self-esteem because they have managed the challenge of living and working in a foreign environment. This increased confidence level in most of the cases comes along with a higher level of motivation to engage in their course of study. It is up to their teachers not to demotivate them and to show genuine interest in their experience abroad.

References

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