EBL for the Year Abroad: A First Review

Catherine Franc and Floriane Place-Vergnes, School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture

Abstract

In 2008-9, French Studies piloted a project aimed at encouraging students to gain linguistic and cultural knowledge during their compulsory period abroad. With a small group of nine volunteers, we proposed to work on socio-cultural topics using Enquiry-Based Learning methods to encourage students, not only to observe their linguistic environment, but to engage with native speakers. However, we encountered problems of motivation and communication for which we propose future recommendations in order to prepare our students for the tasks proposed.

Background

The year abroad is an opportunity unique to UK universities, as it rarely forms part of the European language student curriculum. It usually takes place during the third year of a degree programme. One should, therefore, expect students to make the most of this opportunity, which can enable students to develop language skills and cultural knowledge directly applicable to their final year degree programme. Moreover, it is also a life-changing experience, in terms of transferable skills and employability, as well as personal development. However, this process is not always as rewarding as one would envisage for such a linguistic immersion, and students often need to be encouraged to develop their language and intercultural skills during this period.

In this paper, we propose that Enquiry-Based Learning is highly adaptable to and appropriate for year-abroad language projects, because it necessitates students to engage linguistically with the world and society around them during their period of residence abroad. We will first introduce the overall background and difficulties of the year abroad. This particular EBL project
will then be presented with specific references to the link between the linguistic and intercultural development of our students. Employability will also be touched upon, as EBL and the very nature of spending time abroad are both excellent ways to develop transferable skills favoured by employers. We will conclude with the future modifications to be made in the light of this year’s experience.

During their four-year language degree, our students are required to spend a minimum of 32 weeks in the country(ies) of their target language(s) in order to improve their language skills. The length of stay in each country varies according to the programme followed and the students’ choices. For instance, a student taking French and German can choose to split his/her time equally between the two countries, or to spend more time in the country for which his/her language proficiency is the weaker. Students are required to stay a minimum of eight weeks in each country.

In addition, students can choose (with some restrictions according to the programme of study) to undertake different activities during this period. They can study in a language school; undertake research for their final-year dissertation (these options are favoured by those on shorter stays); teach as school language assistants (approximately 20%); study in a foreign university (Erasmus or Socrates: approximately 40%); or find a work placement (approximately 40%).

Prior to September 2009, outgoing Erasmus students had only to prove that they had attended university and attempted the exams by providing a transcript of marks, and in some litigious cases, lectures and seminar notes. Since September 2009, they are required to pass their exams. In addition, we also ask students to complete one compulsory questionnaire per semester spent abroad, which relates to practical aspects of their stay. The questionnaires will provide useful information which can be relayed to the next cohort of students studying abroad. Students can also opt to complete a 500-word essays in French on either their general experience abroad or on a cultural topic of their choice. However, this opportunity is taken on by very few students. Furthermore, the academics and language tutors marking them contend that the exercises are not challenging enough, either linguistically or culturally.

Students are also encouraged to gather information (articles, pictures, etc.) that could be useful for their final-year essay (see School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture 2008). This approach, again, does not fully encourage students to make substantial progress during their stay. Indeed, the results our students are supposed to experience, through the ‘bain linguistique’, varies greatly from one individual to the next.
Various studies have shown that periods spent in a location, where the target language is spoken, tend to have a positive impact on a student’s linguistic skills (Coleman 1995). However, it can be difficult to measure the full impact on a student as complex variables such as personality, length of stay, location and activities undertaken while abroad come into the equation.

It is generally acknowledged that extensive and intensive interaction with native speakers when abroad will develop language skills (see Coleman 1995, 30-31). However, language skills seem to develop differently when abroad: oral fluency and aural skills develop to a higher standard than written abilities (Milton and Meara 1998). It is worthy of note that this situation happens mostly with lower registers, as non-standard French will be encountered daily by most students – in other words, they might merely sound ‘more French’ after being abroad. However, a recent study has suggested that some students do not improve their fluency, even after three months in the target country (Morley 2009). Moreover, vocabulary generally expands, but grammar improves only marginally. Nonetheless, sociolinguistics skills are gained (Coleman 1995).

The type of activity undertaken while abroad can influence the acquisition of language. Students on work placements generally gain more language proficiency than students who follow courses at the local university or work as language assistants. However, a student’s personality and attitude towards language learning needs to be considered, as these factors are what will ultimately influence how a student chooses to spend his/her year abroad (Coleman 1995). Motivation is, therefore, crucial to the success of language learning (see Weseley 2009 and Gardner 1985).

As Lillie states (quoted in Coleman 1995, p. 29), one must also take into account the culture shock (the term ‘culture shock’ was first used by Oberg 1960) experienced by many students:

*The mismatch between expectation and reality quickly leads to disillusionment which all too easily engenders negative symptoms of withdrawal and alienation from the foreign environment and the emergence of an ‘us against the world’ mentality, often based on national identity.*

In short, many factors influence the linguistic success of the year abroad (see Coleman 1995, p. 33 for a list of the factors influencing individual language progress). These variations lead to some students developing an ‘expatriate life-style’ (Milton and Meara 1995) and engaging very little with the L2 Learners around them and therefore making little language progress.
Is EBL a solution?

First of all, our existing use of the EBL method for languages at the University of Manchester (see Franc, Lawton and Morton 2007; Franc forthcoming; Lorenzo forthcoming) has demonstrated that setting research tasks can be beneficial to students, in terms of the quality of their outputs and the experience of going through the research process. Moreover, as EBL contains a research element, it develops our students’ learner autonomy, thus preparing them better for their final year (Race 2009). Thus, increasingly, EBL is being used in universities worldwide to teach languages (see the proceedings of the ‘EBL and Languages’ conference held at CEEBL, Manchester on the 26th September 2008 [http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceebl/events/archive/] and the summary of a Workshop held in Durham in June 2009 on the same topic [http://www.llas.ac.uk/events/archive/321).

The present project was prepared in consultation with Dr Darren Waldron and Mr Dan Herman, who form part of the Residence Abroad Committee of the School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture (SLLC). As this project could eventually be used by the whole School, we were asked to find research areas that could be easily adapted for all the languages taught at Manchester. We wanted all language students not only to be able to speak, read and write well, but to get a deeper understanding of their target language.

Kramsch (1993, p. 8) highlights the importance of engaging in the culture of the target language in order to learn the language successfully:

*If […] language is seen as a social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency.*

The Common European Framework of Reference for languages underlines the need for cultural engagement by language learners so that they can communicate effectively in the target language (Rosen 2006). One of our goals is intercultural communicative competence for which students need to develop ‘critical cultural awareness’ (Roberts 2001). This awareness is developed by adding an ethnographic point of view to language studies. This means that students will not only observe the language and culture but also participate in them, and, thus, be better able to provide in-depth analysis of the language points raised in the EBL project. Linguistic anthropology will look at the ‘language use’, and also at the language ‘as a symbolic resource and means of representation’ (Roberts *et al.*, 2001, p. 24). The students will, therefore, become ‘intercultural speakers’, discovering sociolinguistics, while also improving their L2 skills.
An application of this idea is the course on ethnography created by Ian Pople and Elizabeth Cain in 2007 at the University of Manchester’s Language Centre for International Students Learning English (Cain and Pople 2009). This course aims to help foreign students to ‘engage with British culture, and thereby improve their level of English’ (Cain and Pople 2009, p. 3). Students are, therefore, invited to participate in Mancunian life, not just observe it from the outside.

Approach

To help our students become ‘intercultural speakers’, we established general project themes, but gave the students the freedom to choose a specific topic, the groups to be observed, the context and length of their project. We wanted them to feel some ownership towards this project, as personal engagement was crucial for motivation (see Lantolf 2000 for students’ engagement with a task).

Topic 1: Anglicisms

Many British or American words are now used in French, as indeed they are in other languages. This phenomenon can be observed in spoken and written French and affects the whole of French society in some way (for example, knee-jerk judgements and reactions regarding age or social status). This topic could be worked on by all students during their period abroad, whether they were working or studying. We also wanted our students to learn to avoid ‘faux-amis’ or ‘false-friends’ (words which are similar in French and English but have a different meaning), and therefore acquire knowledge in this domain. Moreover, the French government has endeavoured to influence language development by limiting American imports, although popular culture and a certain kind of linguistic snobbism have, in practice, meant an increase in the use of American terms.

Topic 2: Slang

This theme is usually close to our students’ hearts as many of them come back from a French-speaking country unable to differentiate between registers, inappropriately mixing slang with a more formal discourse. There is also a fascination with underground and controversial forms of language, which often form a type of sociolect (for example amongst young people). As our students mainly meet people within their own age range (e.g. students at university, teenagers in schools), we thought that this would be an ideal topic for all. This topic involves issues of popular culture; the politics of education; the development of the French language; and the lexis, grammar and syntax of popular French.
Topic 3: Regionalisms

Again, this topic is very flexible as we were aware of the variety of French our students encounter when abroad: southern French, with its particular accents and expressions; Canadian French for those visiting Quebec; or even forms of African French, as some of our students go to French speaking African countries. Indeed the diversity of our placements and exchanges means that this topic is adaptable to many situations. Again, we wanted our students to differentiate regionalisms from the Parisian norm usually taught in schools and universities. This topic raises issues of centralisation and decentralisation; perceptions of accents; post-colonial and regional identities; and touches on the political domain. It is important that these three topics are linked to several final year modules, as well as to the general language course all students must follow.

Finally, these topics have similar goals. We expect our students: to observe their linguistic environment by reading, listening to people and the media; to communicate directly with native speakers through dialogue, and eventually through interviews (oral and communication skills); to make (full or partial) transcriptions of these to develop their aural and written skills (grammar and spelling); to back up their findings with further academic research either Internet or book-based (research skills, but we proposed a bibliography to get them started); and to prepare a presentation for when they return to Manchester (creativity and presentation skills). This pilot project was not assessed and was carried out on a small scale, as only nine students volunteered.

Those who participated represented the diversity of the activities taken on by students when abroad: one was studying in a language school for eight weeks; two were language assistants; and the others were either studying or working.

A first draft of the scenarios was written in the summer of 2008 and sent to our first student who was only staying in France for two months. She chose to work on ‘les anglicismes’ and presented her findings in early September 2008. This first presentation of the project was extremely positive. During her short stay, she had significantly engaged with native speakers; as well, she had made acute observations, interviewed people, questioned others and transcribed conversations. She had also made lists of the ‘anglicismes’ she had found and the circumstances of their use. From this, she was capable of analysing the use of English words by French people, and therefore was able to respond to the problem set in the scenario. In fact, she found much more than we had anticipated and greatly enjoyed the project.

From this first rewarding experience, we perfected the scenarios and sent them to the rest of the volunteers by November 2008. The revised scenarios also included specific technical instructions on the different recording possibilities and interview ethics, as well as a large
Another call for volunteers was launched with two positive responses in January 2009, but both students later said they would prefer not to take part. With our three remaining students, regular communication was maintained to give them guidance as and when needed. A visit to France was also planned, but this was cancelled due to a lack of response from the students. They will present their findings on their return to Manchester in September 2009.

This first project has, therefore, been marred by a major obstacle –students’ lack of engagement- but it gave us the opportunity to prepare specific scenarios and instructions and to reflect on the problem of communication (Are emails sufficient? Should we use Skype? What other equipment would be needed for us and our students, since not all of them have constant Internet access when abroad? Is a student-only forum worthwhile when the existing Blackboard site is barely used? Do students prefer a non-official Facebook page to communicate on year abroad matters?). The problem of student motivation would be resolved if this project was adopted by the School and made compulsory.

**Assessment**

The difficulty of assessing work such as this course is one of the aspects considered this year, as we have to take a number of parameters into account:

**Numbers:** around 200 students from the French department go abroad every year and this high number must be taken into account when deciding on how to assess this EBL project. Our preferred mode of assessment would be through presentation, enabling us to evaluate oral proficiency gained whilst abroad. School regulations necessitate the presence of two examiners when presentations count for more than 20% of the overall course mark, which would mean at least two full days for all French staff. Another solution would be to lower the percentage of this project to 15 or 10%; however, doing so could mean lowering the student motivation to work throughout the year. One last solution would be to have this project count as a whole course in itself, worth 20 credits. However, this would need to fit with the new European Credit Transfer (ECT) regulations put in place at Manchester in September 2009. Moreover, we would need to consider the different lengths of time students spend abroad, as
those spending only eight weeks would be disadvantaged. Perhaps, this course could be compulsory only for students who spend a minimum of 16 weeks abroad.

**Timing**: we must also decide whether it would be better to have an assessment as soon as students return to Manchester in October, when their experiences are still fresh, or to ask them to pursue further research, perhaps setting a further EBL project done in groups of students having worked on similar topics when abroad. In this way, knowledge would be broadened and become more academic; experience would be shared; and group work promoted. This additional project could be assessed through a group presentation in the final-year oral class or in front of second-year students as a way to inspire them before they set off abroad. This could happen during special sessions, for instance on Wednesday afternoons or in second-year oral classes. This second solution could be more difficult to organise because of already very full and varied timetables. One final solution would be to ask students to present their findings during their final individual oral exam in May, but after nine months their experience and motivation may well have worn off.

In short, the assessment of such a project still needs to be devised, but with the above proposals the SLLC’s residence abroad committee should be able to narrow down possibilities.

**Employability**: we must examine ways in which the project enhances employability, through a combination of experience gained while abroad and through EBL practices. The year abroad already has a positive impact on graduate employability as it develops vital skills valued by employers. Appleton (2009) underlines the general soft skills listed by the QAA (2007) subject benchmark and the Association for Graduate Recruiters (www.agr.org.uk) about the year abroad: self-reliance; team work; good communication; flexibility and adaptability; problem solving; motivation; initiative; and willingness to learn. Appleton (*ibid.*) argues that these soft skills are just as valuable in a global job market as the language skills gained.

Moreover, EBL clearly enhances employability for undergraduate students (Franc and Lawton 2009 and Franc forthcoming) as employers favour soft (transferable) skills, which are intrinsic to the EBL methods. Indeed, graduates are expected to have strong communication and team working skills; self-management; analysis and decision-making skills; and planning and organisational skills. However, these skills are not always found by employers (Archer and Davidson 2008). Therefore, the skills gained while abroad can be reinforced by EBL, making already highly-employable language students (Kelly 2007) better equipped for the world of work and academic research.
Further Development

The following ideas will be developed from our present experience:

- Produce regular entries in a learning log, such as the ‘journal d’étonnement’, proposed by Marie-José Bardot (University of Lille III, France);

- Improve communication between students: to enhance the importance of sharing knowledge through discussions; and to create a supportive environment, and shared exploration of cultural particularities of L2 speakers. As Lange and Paige (2003, p. x) state, ‘any discussion of cultural differences could cause language learners to change their own ways of thinking and behaving’;

- Prepare students to go abroad: we need to prepare them to become effective observers/researchers. This can be done through taught sessions and group discussions (perhaps with Erasmus students) to help them become ethnographers as proposed by Cain and Pople (2009) for their own course. This would also help our students become more aware of the diversities of cultures and identities, and therefore less prone to culture shock (see Lange 2003).

Finally, the danger of students returning to Britain after their period abroad is that their language skills tend to degenerate rapidly in terms of communicative proficiency (with less accuracy, increased errors, less coherence and cohesion) (Coleman1995). This may be because their overall progress in L2 has remained superficial. Students have acquired ‘the camouflage of a native speaker rather than the identity’ (ibid., p. 32) and whilst they manage to ‘sound good’ for a short time they have not acquired long-term correctness. We hope that EBL will avoid this post-residence fossilisation as our method requires an active involvement from the students, inviting them to discover the French language and culture from an inside point of view.
References


Franc, C. EBL and Employability. (Forthcoming).


