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We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning: Capacity Building Using Student Diary Pro to Enhance the Mobility Experience

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“We had the experience but missed the meaning”: capacity building using *Student Diary Pro* to enhance the mobility experience

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Abstract⁸

The mobility experience is not confined to the sphere of upward social and economic mobility but, in equal measure, to geographical, linguistic and cultural mobility as a function of the public role of the university. Effects of mobility can be registered in terms of their impact on the university directly, the impact of such mobility on society generally, and its impact on those who participate in mobility opportunities in particular. The paper begins with a general overview of ideas and intentions underpinning mobility which in turn inform and are informed by policy considerations in a European Union context. Since mobility is essentially a developmental experience for students the paper discusses ideas which underpin their use of Student Diary Pro to track their learning development by measuring their learning against agreed competencies. In the third section of this paper, the authors make observations based on samples drawn from student entries in Student Diary Pro while abroad.

CITIZENSHIP CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH MOBILITY

The Commission of the European Communities has articulated a policy-view perspective of transnational mobility as providing ‘a brighter future for all those who avail themselves of the opportunity, helping them to adapt to the changing needs of the labour market within the Community’ (Commission of the European Communities, 1996, 1). Another aspect of mobility, as an expression of one of the four freedoms of the European Union, lies in its capacity to provide opportunities for breaking with routine, to be adaptable, flexible and to confer upon the individual personal responsibility to ‘exercise freedom and thus choice within a new environment that provides greater scope and opportunities for self-realization’ (Papatsiba, 2009, 190-1). The Commission characterises such mobility as the catalyst to spawn ‘[a] heightened sense of creativity, initiative and entrepreneurial spirit’ (Commission, 1). Additionally, participants derive significant competence as a result of their “international experience” such as enhanced abilities to learn and converse in languages other than their mother tongue, as well as heightened appreciation and sensitivity to matters of an intercultural nature. On a personal developmental level participants gain invaluable skills of self-confidence, autonomy, initiative and resilience. All in all such personal transformation gained through the mobility experience coupled with formal qualifications challenges graduates to respond to economic uncertainty by empowering them to have confidence to seize opportunities, to become more innovative, and to be more entrepreneurial and less risk-averse. Peters (2001) stylises the positive transformation as “responsibilizing” the individual to adapt to the open marketplace of ideas and opportunities.

Clearly the benefit to the individual participant is immense; equally, the benefit to society is no less so because mobility encourages the enhancement of knowledge which in turn enriches the economy to compete on the global stage. Aside from the obvious economic opportunity mobility signifies, there is

⁸ T. S. Eliot, T.S. (1943), *The Four Quartets*

an equally positive aspect to mobility in furthering an “identitarian” dimension to active citizenry that promotes the potential for societal transformation as a public good in itself (Nóvoa & Dejong-Lambert, 2003, 48).

An equally compelling interpretation of the relationship between mobility and citizenship beyond the economic paradigm is that of citizenship as a juridico-political construction which is reconfigured and reconceived as conceptions of citizenship evolve.

Drawing this offering of a citizen ideal further Ong (1999) characterises the effective European- a construct of the mobility experience- as one exhibiting flexible citizenship in reference ‘to the cultural logics of capitalistic accumulation, gravel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions’ (6). It is in this context that the student-as-citizen becomes a calculative and flexible self who connects ‘the spheres of the private with those of the public, where individual promotion, generation of freedom and collective progress and wealth are said to go hand in hand and to mutually reinforce each other’ (Papatsiba, 198). Thus the realities which underpin mobility are grounded in a neo-liberal paradigm of empowerment and enterprise which endow the student-as-citizen with the capacity to be self-motivated and self-directed as positional goods for personal as well as societal agency. This is a particularly important consideration as the contribution of students to the public sphere can be achieved through their active identification of the experiences of mobility to open-up ‘closed meaning systems [to facilitate] cross-cultural communication and interchange’ (Trenz, 2008, 3). While access to mobility does not exist in a social vacuum, the challenge is to resource opportunities for engagement in mobility in an appropriate manner while recognising that challenges presented by social constraints and structural limitations do exist as challenges to be overcome (Papatsiba, 2005; Brannen & Nielson, 2005).

ARTICULATING MOBILITY USING STUDENT DIARY PRO

Students who take the step to travel abroad to study or work on a mobility programme as part of their third level experience are on a personal and academic trajectory. These students have a real opportunity to apply their academic knowledge to the many real-life situations in which they find themselves. Engaging these students in a reflection exercise through *Student Diary Pro* aims to support these students, engage them in their learning and allow them to reflect on how they are learning and ultimately improve their overall experience. With excellent knowledge of technology, students are very comfortable with producing more digital evidence of learning than paper. The multimedia nature of *Student Diary Pro* allows students to express themselves through text, video, photos and sound files. It allows lecturers to monitor and track their learning against agreed competencies and learning goals. The objective is to engage students in a reflective exercise that informs their learning and enhances the overall experience of studying or working abroad as part of their academic programme of study (Fig. 1).

In higher education, we often speak about the value of reflective practice. Real and meaningful reflective practice comes from the student “...*taking ownership and taking responsibility for their own learning.*” (Stiggins & Chappaus, 2008). Absolum (2006) uses the phrase ‘active reflection’ to describe the goal-focused evidence based thinking that is ongoing. Simple reflection strategies such as the *What?, So What?, Now What?* processes involve students in reflecting upon what they have done, what they have learnt and what they need to focus on.

A reflective learner is one who understands the difference between simply knowing theories and effectively using them in practice. Reflective practice requires valuing inquiry, knowing how to structure opportunities for discovery and sense making as well as having the willingness to engage in it. Reflection involves “a continual interweaving of thinking and doing” (Schön, D. 1989), The objective being to “integrate the understanding gained into one’s experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as enhance one’s overall effectiveness” (Rogers 2001).

Clarke, Hattie and Timperley (2003), discuss how studies have shown that by involving students in reflective learning significant progress can be made. If learners are constantly asking themselves as Absolum (2006) writes, “*What does this tell me about how well I’ve learnt and what I need to do to close the gap?*” the outcomes of reflective learning can be far reaching and not just academic. *Student Diary Pro* allows the students to upload their learning events in multiple formats, it is therefore particularly suited to the experience of a student on a linguistic and cultural learning experience. For instance, a student can record her/his voice in the target language and Fox (2008) emphasises the importance of capturing this learning strategy. The power of ‘student voice’ should not be underestimated. To hear students on their own work, in their own voice, with their own intonations and expressions, conveys meaning in a manner that is simply not possible in written form. Voice adds depth to the work, allowing the author’s personality to come through. It enables the author to communicate in a more direct manner. This is one of the most immediate advantages of the digital format; embedding videos, podcasts, virtual reality scenes, slideshows and presentations. This very real display enables real and authentic learning to be shared in a way that it could not be produced in a paper version.

As students develop their critical reflective ability during their mobility experience, feedback from lecturers and mentors is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. Good feedback depends on the quality and clarity of the learning objectives, competencies and exemplars of learning, all necessary to better support learning. In order for feedback to be effective, it needs to cause thinking. According to Leahy, Lyon, Thompson and William (2005), what causes thinking is a comment that addresses what the student needs to do to improve. Absolum (2006) adds to this by stating that effective, learning based feedback focuses on the learning intentions and the success criteria and confirms what has been learnt and supports the next step in learning.

In *Student Diary Pro* such feedback is an integral part of the communication process between the students and the lecturer. A reminder comment from the lecturer reminds the student of what can be improved and is a simple reminder of the learning objectives or competency tracking, “Don’t forget to consider competency number three” or “perhaps you could add something about how you feel you are getting on”. Absolum (2006) states that feedback “points to their next steps in learning”. In the reflective diary an email notification is sent to the students letting them know that a comment by their lecturer has been added to their recent diary entry. As the next section in this paper demonstrates the case studies show how the students engage with the reflective diary.

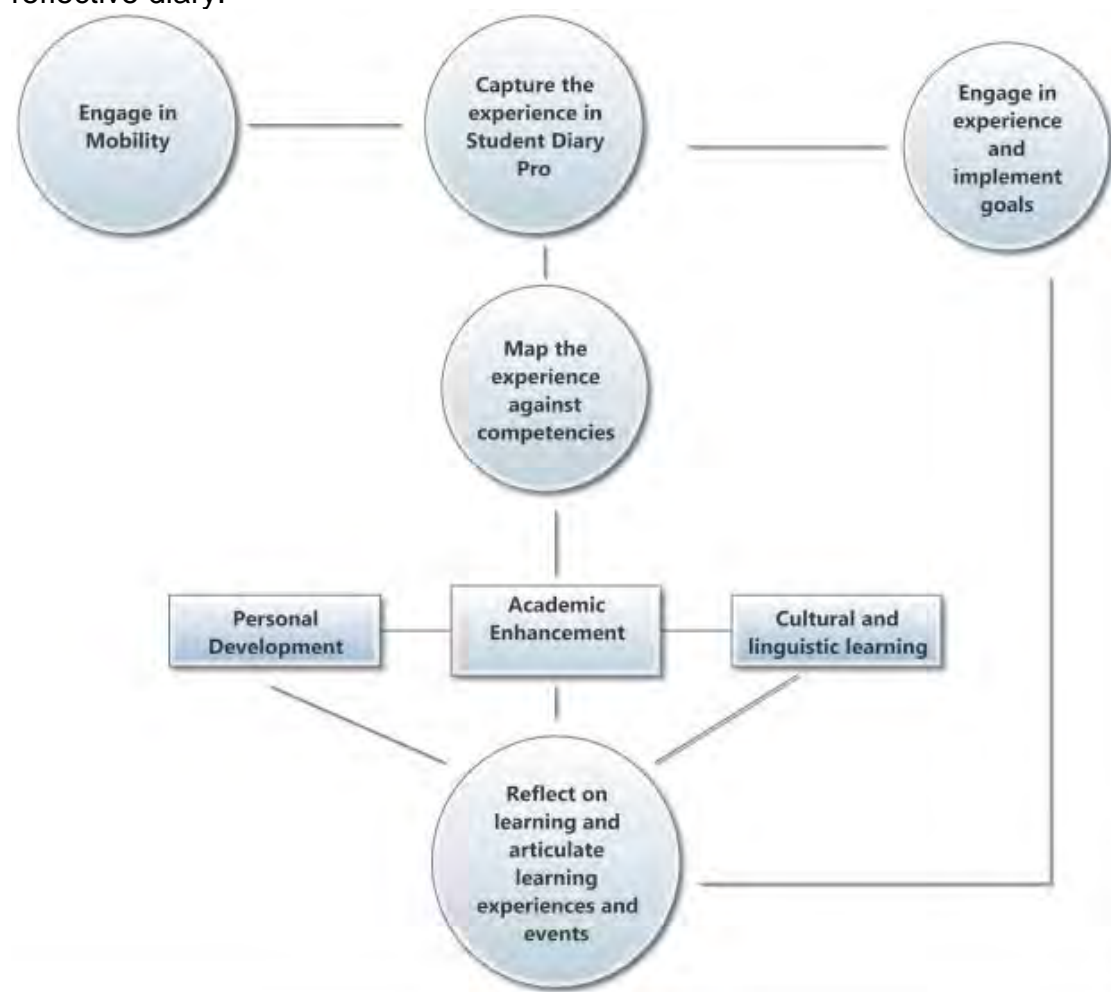


Fig.1 Reflective Practice using the *Student Diary Pro* tool

WHY THE REFLECTIVE DIARY?

The notion of language use bringing about language learning is well established (Argondizzo 2004). The diary offers a dual learning opportunity; improving writing skills by actually practicing writing, whilst at the same time honing various other skills associated with effective learning strategy by forcing the learner to reflect on everyday target language (TL) experiences. The desired outcome is that learners not only consolidate their knowledge of the TL through writing it, but also hone their learning strategies through reflection, which in turn helps them become more effective TL learners. Thus the reflective diary is both simultaneously a learning aid and a TL resource

tool. This diary remains private between the tutor and the learner, it is written in the student's own time and space, and is not evaluated or graded for grammatical accuracy. In their discussion on cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies O'Malley & Chamot (1990: 143-4) discuss how successful language learners make use of a number of learning strategies to further their TL knowledge.

Meta-cognitive strategies include time management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. Clearly, regular use of the diary can assist the learner in the development of such strategies. Meeting the weekly entry requirement demands time management. It also requires the student user to reflect and comment within the diary entry on their use of language. This in turn permits the student to self-evaluate and add new words to their word bank which in turn permits a degree of self-monitoring as far as their language learning is concerned. O'Malley, J.M., et al (1985) propose a maximal list of cognitive strategies essential to successful second language learning. These include:

- (i) the learner's observation of others' language use,
- (ii) noting of new words and preparing for future effective TL usage, and
- (iii) reflecting on the effectiveness of the learner's own actual language usage.

In a reflective diary, students record their experiences and goals, writing in the TL under specified headings, and adding other media that support their written input. It is hoped that the students' effectiveness as learners can increase if they adopt a proactive approach to their language learning, and regularly focus on opportunities for learning in a new learning environment. Clearly, regular use of the diary can assist the learner in the development of such strategies. Meeting the weekly entry requirement demands time management. It also requires the student to reflect and comment within the diary entry on their use of language.

STUDENT PROFILE:

Ordinarily students have attained A1 /B 1 level of language competence based on the Common European Framework.⁹ In addition, not alone is it the first time for many students to go on mobility and live in another country, it is also their first time to live outside the family home. The diary completion can therefore be regarded as the medium that permits a glimpse into the personal, social and academic development of the student whilst on mobility.

THE PROCEDURE:

The digital diary is set up in MOODLE, an open source e-learning management system. Within this environment the add-on application *Student Diary Pro* has been installed. This diary application is user-friendly; users enter text, images and video, and can view feedback given by supervisors. Students attend appropriate information sessions, learning about what is required and looking at examples of diary entries made by students who have previously completed periods of mobility. As an incentive students can earn

⁹ A detailed explanation about the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages can be found at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp

up to 5 ECTS for successful completion of the diary. This is achieved by demonstrating compliance with the guidelines in completing diary entries based on a minimum number of 10 weekly diary entries within a given 15 week period.

DIARY REQUIREMENTS:

In the year before departure students undertake a preparatory module during which they plan their programme of study. This module offers information sessions on diary completion. Students can access these completion requirements on the Moodle page throughout their engagement with the diary (Fig. 2).

Each week requires a written diary entry in the TL, plus an attachment of a supporting medium or document (the file can be any format). The written component should not exceed 250 words. The accompanying attachment can be a brochure, an image relevant to that week's diary entry, an event programme, video clip, etc. etc. Not permitted: images of buildings or people unrelated to the diary that week, no more than 2 'selfies' over the course of the entire diary. Concrete examples of personal linguistic achievement will be required. The diary focuses specifically on Linguistic Development, with 5 broad areas of competency to focus on;

*Consolidation of concrete existing language skills
Register in language
Acquisition of written language skills
Acquisition of speaking skills
Evidence of activity/integration in the environment*

Simply recount events from your own experience, being careful to quote what you have said or heard, then tick the relevant competency.

Fig. 2 Instructions for Diary Completion (abridged)

EXAMPLES OF REFLECTIVE DIARY USAGE:

A screenshot of a typical diary entry from student A can be seen in Fig. 3 below. The student comments on the Saxon accent that has come to their attention, and reflects on their improved ability to write emails to their lecturers. The student then reports on their use of formal versus informal types of address in German, as well as their planned meeting with a lecturer in the TL using a form of dialogue that the student has prepared in advance.

The screenshot in Fig. 4 below shows feedback sent to the student by their tutor on their entry, requesting that the student follow submission guidelines more closely, i.e. submit the text as a paragraph, and not divide it into smaller pieces of text under specific headings.

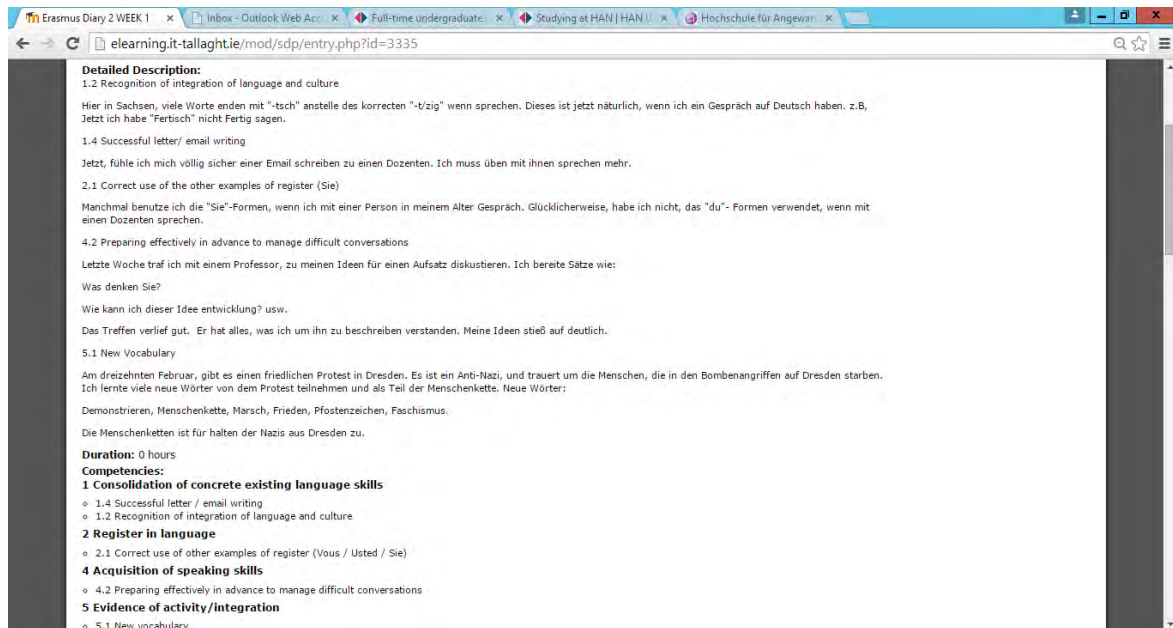


Fig 3. Example 1 of Reflective Diary Entry, Student A.

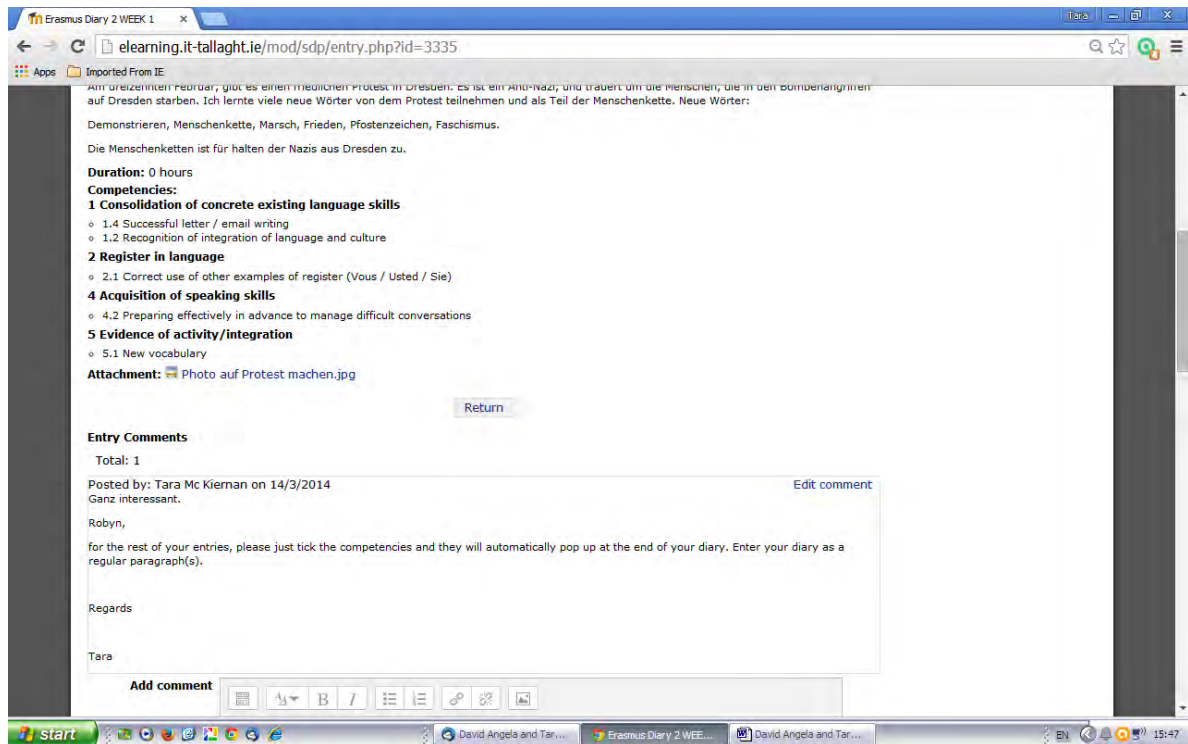


Fig 4. Tutor Feedback on Reflective Diary Entry, Student A.

A second diary entry from student A can be seen in Fig. 5 below, shows how the student has engaged with the tutor to follow the feedback advice given following their previous entry. The student has entered a body of text in German, recounting some personal experiences dealing with social, academic and cultural events during a particular week in their semester at the university in Dresden, Germany. She has then ticked various competencies that she believes she has addressed through the events written about. She has also attached two photographs taken during the BBQ on the banks of the river Elbe.

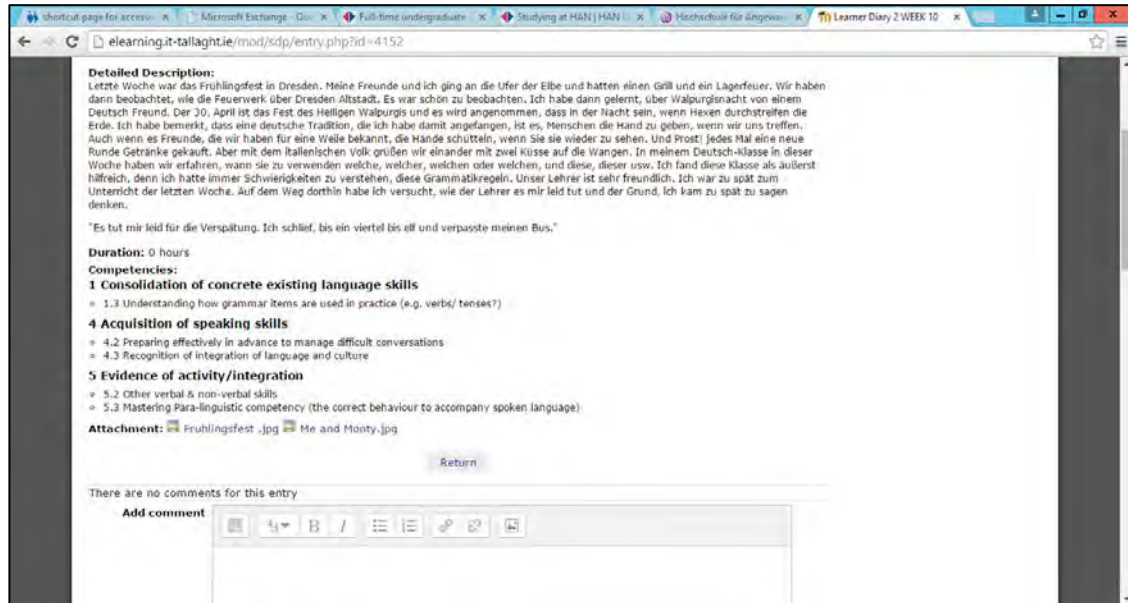


Fig 5. Example 2 of Reflective Diary Entry, Student A.

In another diary, Student B recounts his satisfaction as he gets to grips with a difficult aspect of French grammar (the subjunctive mood).

“Cette semaine j’avais développé la subjonctive en mon cours français (CIRFFE). Avant la j’essaye pour éviter cette conjonction mais c’est vraiment important. Si on exprime un doute, souhaite, opinion, émotion dans la premier partie du verbe il faut suivre avec la subjonctive. Par exemple je crois qu’elle soit nerveuse à son examen. Je doute qu’ils aient allé sans nous. J’ai appris aussi qu’on ne peut pas se souhaiter pas sur vous-même.”

The student writes of his difficulty in understanding spoken French in a situation where he is tired and unprepared.

“Cette semaine j’étais dans mon cours et un résidence m’approchait et a dit que j’habite sur le même étage de lui. Nous ne nous sommes jamais parlé déjà mais j’étais content qu’il ait fait un effort. Aussi il parlait plutôt rapidement mais j’ai compris la plupart de qu’est-ce qu’il a dit. C’est difficile parfois de concentrer en français quand on est fatigued. Au début a ce moment-là me levais je ne pense pas en français, mais comme l’année a avancée je peux penser plus vite.”

Having viewed a film the student presents an account and notes memorable phrases remembered from the screening:

“L’autre jour j’ai téléchargé un film en français ‘les intouchables’ il s’agit un homme riche qu’il a un déshabilite. Il embauchait un homme Afrique qui est pauvre pour s’occuper de lui. Tous les deux viennent des milieux diffèrent mais ont devenu des amis. j’ai entendu les expression

« il a quelques difficultés de souffle » et « il n'est pas une personne méchant.»

In the final diary illustration, student C provides an insight into non-verbal communication that he has witnessed and now in turn attempts to practise. The student reports on the facial expression and gesture that might be appropriate when making way for a stranger on the footpath.

“J'appris quand vous êtes dans la rue ou dans un quartier animé, vous devez adhérer au séjour sur le droit de courtoisie, et validez avec un sourire ou un signe de la tête quand quelqu'un se déplace hors de votre chemin, aussi vous ne suivez pas cette courtoisie, vous devez préparer pour froncements de sourcils des autres.”

This student also recounts an incident where he successfully negotiated his way onto a bus without the right form of identity.

“Nous sommes allés en bus où j'ai eu un petit problème avec le pilote, il a demandé une carte d'identité nationale, donc j'ai donné il ma carte identité irlandais, il m'a dit que il est pas suffi parce il n'est pas un français carte, donc j'ai expliqué que je suis un étudiante Erasmus et je n'ai pas un français carte d'identité, Il a ensuite demandé à un autre ID je lui ai donné ma carte d'étudiant et permis de conduire, alors il m'a permis de monter dans le bus.”

CONCLUSION

After their year of study and residence abroad students attended an 'Exit meeting' which is an individual de-briefing interview where they are invited to comment on their overall academic and social experiences, including reference to individual modules they may have studied while on mobility. All students who had undertaken the reflective diary writing declared it to have been a positive and useful exercise on their language learning journey, as it required them to engage regularly in the process of writing their TL as well as reflecting on their learning. Many also found that they had become better at identifying TL learning opportunities, and had resolved to continue the practice of maintaining written accounts of their learning. One particular response made by students who had completed their mobility was how beneficial each found the reflective diary because it had helped them to assimilate language faster and to remember better. Some students even attributed their perceived improved competence in tackling everyday writing tasks to the discipline of having kept their diary for so many weeks.

From a tutor's perspective the desired outcome was that learners not only increased their knowledge of the TL by writing in it, but that they also developed strategies for more effective TL use. The learners adapted easily and successfully to completing the weekly entries within the required time frame (time management strategy), and as the weeks progressed they became more precise in their accounts of how they would plan and use the TL (self-monitoring & self evaluation). In terms of cognitive strategy development learners demonstrated through their diary entries that they had become astute at observing others' language, noting new words for their own future usage in

particular, and reflecting on TL usage in general. While the extent to which any individual claimed to have benefitted from the experience depended largely on how conscientious and dedicated they had been to the completion of the diary tasks, excerpts from learners' entries above illustrate an awareness of newly acquired language as well as evidence of their social and personal development acquired through the mobility experience.

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