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The MEET Project: Engaging students in pre-departure socialisation and learning for Study Abroad

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Abstract

This paper explores the aims, operation and outcomes of the MEET project (Maximise Erasmus Exchange Together), a project which commenced in the Department of Languages, DIT in the 2014/2015 academic year, and contributes to wider discussion on learning in study abroad (SA) contexts. The staff-led MEET initiative sought to engage students more effectively in their preparation for year abroad study and work placements. It brought together approximately twenty 20 students in second-year and fourth-year of BA (Hons) programmes in Languages and International Business or Tourism as well as Erasmus students from a variety of different programmes, who were studying at the Dublin Institute of Technology. Students took on group leadership roles to organise and deliver a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular social and cultural events, for which and at which particular language-learning activities were undertaken. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and empirical observations attest to the value for student learning and confidence of the interventions and actions undertaken. The findings suggest that student preparedness for work and study abroad programmes, in themselves significant transition and transformative experiences, is enhanced when students are more consciously engaged in concerted efforts to initiate and reflect on their own learning and behaviours prior to SA experiences. The research also highlights issues around student motivation and willingness to engage with non-programme related learning and reflects on individualised learning pathways. The research

will be of particular interest to those involved in language and intercultural teaching and learning, and to those preparing students for study and work placements abroad.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Language Learning, Motivation, Student Engagement, Transition, Work & Study Abroad (SA)

Introduction

The idea for the MEET project grew out a period of relatively intense discussion about the provision and role of the year abroad following the introduction of a new programme and school and programme reviews. This dovetailed with a number of years collective experience as lecturers in language (German, Spanish and EAP) and Intercultural Competence, and through experiences and insights gained as Erasmus co-ordinators, Programme Chairs etc.¹ In advance of the pilot project, considered reflection took place in three main areas:

- a) student preparation and preparedness for the year abroad in terms of linguistic and intercultural competence
- b) adaptation strategies & successful transition experiences as part of study abroad programs
- c) student expectations and interactions with Erasmus students.

This paper introduces the research through presentation and description of the MEET project and then proceeds to critical discussion of key areas of interest in the project, namely learning on study abroad and work placements; language and intercultural competence; and motivation and student engagement issues (Dragoescu, 2014; Hand *et al.*, 2011). The paper concludes with a discussion of key findings and provides a number of observations and recommendations arising from the case study.

Current research on study abroad continues to pose significant questions about key assumptions that have underpinned and may continue to underpin findings. Study abroad experiences today “in the age of Facebook are clearly very different from those taking place

¹ Further motivation for the research came from feedback from returning 4th-year students who consistently expressed the belief that they might have ‘done more’ to improve language skills or ‘made more effort’ to make friends outside of the Erasmus group within which they had very happily socialized. All participants were informed about the project, and consented to their feedback and submissions being considered for research purposes.

decades ago” (Kinging, 2013, p.6). Desire by itself to learn language and expectations that language proficiency will improve do not necessarily converge with interpretations of the experience through a ‘consumerist lens’ or as a form of leisure infotainment (Gore, 2005). While research in Second Language Acquisition continues to inform SA research, other fields of enquiry in areas such as identity construction and development (Pavlenko 2002; Pellegrino-Aveni 2005) and socialisation and acculturation (Schumann 1986; Ward 2005; Cook 2008; Coleman, 2009; Kramsch 2009) are also moving research in the direction of greater epistemological and methodological pluralism (Kinging, 2013; Ortega, 2012). The highly individualised nature of learning is another growing area of interest (Dörnyei, 2005; O’Reilly, 2013). Coleman (2013, p.28) cites the significant theoretical contributions by White (2003, p.86) to put the “learner-context interface” [] that is “the individual’s capacity to construct an effective interface with target language sources in the learning environment” at the centre of language learning, and hence research.

The MEET Project: (Maximise Erasmus Exchange Together)

Every year, the School of Languages hosts approximately two hundred Erasmus students from partner universities across Europe². The DIT students from which the project participants were drawn were students on BA (Hons) programmes in Languages and International Business or Tourism, and all are required to spend a compulsory 3rd year abroad on study and/or work placements. This is both a challenging but very rewarding experience for students and frequently cited as a major draw to the programmes as well as a distinctive

² In the current academic year (2017/2018), DIT has welcomed approx. 340 incoming exchange students, approx. 20 from European institutions. These students often spend 6 months to a year in the DIT, and do so as part of partnership arrangements with universities mostly in Europe, but also in Asia and the US. These students thus differ from international students in that their length of stay is usually shorter. They often share classes with DIT students who will in turn study at their institutions [DIT International Office data, Nov. 2017]. The potential benefits of friendship and collaboration are obvious, it would seem, but many DIT students in the project reported that they do not know native speaker ‘navigators’ in advance, and that they relied heavily on fellow outgoing DIT students during the year abroad.

feature for presentation to potential future employers. The MEET project sought to actively engage Erasmus second-year and fourth-year students in collaborative learning with each other outside of class time. The aim was to create additional structured opportunities for interaction and language learning, and comprised activities to a) raise awareness b) engage students through active participation c) create scope for critical reflection and d) build competence and confidence.

A key aspect of the MEET project was the student-led nature of organised extra-curricular activities aimed at developing student autonomy and social networking skills and creating opportunities for students to engage and interact more constructively. As the project progressed, our efforts as mediators and facilitators focussed more on directing our (and student) energies towards critical reflection, language awareness and confidence development.

The goals were as follows:

- to enhance language learning, intercultural competence and cultural awareness through extra-curricular activity and engagement;
- to facilitate more successful transition experiences for our own students and for those Erasmus students studying at DIT;
- to develop leadership, reflective, interpersonal and communication skills;
- to enhance pragmatic language and non-language competencies and demonstrate a degree of 'community' engagement through language commitment to social and cultural development.

Preparation for the MEET project

The first phase in the project began in the Summer of 2014 when approx. 50 students across all years of the BA (Honours) programmes were surveyed about their interactions with

Erasmus students, their own assessment of foreign language use outside of the classroom, and their willingness to explore more critically their own language learning and preparation for the year abroad.³ They were questioned, for example, about their anxiety or commitment to seek increased interaction with native speakers of the foreign language (FL) or in FL interactions beyond the classroom. Our own observations and discussions with students had suggested that many students often became more ‘willing’ to engage with Erasmus students towards the end of second year, when the reality and enormity of the year abroad begins to become more apparent. In 4th-year students’ accounts of interactions with foreign language speakers, many indicated challenges and anxieties they had faced in the earlier phases of their year abroad and, on reflection, their realisation that interactions with speakers of the foreign language were not as frequent as they might have expected or liked. Some reported this realisation as a significant turning point and a motivation to change their socialising patterns and seek further interactions with hosts and native speakers.

Setting up the MEET Project Team

Drawing on insights from the survey, the MEET project was launched and student willingness to engage with the initiative harnessed in the creation of a MEET team. The team had 10-12 student leaders. In follow-up weekly meetings (signalled in email communications, school website, face-to-face and classroom announcements), additional students were recruited as participants, and asked to consider for themselves the same questions and aims that had motivated us. In their organisation of extra-curricular activities such as film nights,

³ The School of Languages, Law & Social Sciences provides language teaching on a wide variety of programmes across the DIT. These include programmes in tourism and hospitality, computing and media. However, the two programmes referred to and from which participants were drawn are the BA (Hons) in International Business & Languages (a long-established programme with an average annual intake in year 1 of approx. 80 -100 students across five languages) and BA (Hons) Languages & International Tourism. The first intake for the latter was in September 2011 and current numbers in year 1 are approx. 40 students across three languages (French, German and Spanish). The survey was initially restricted to students of Spanish and German as the pilot was planned for students and lecturers in those language areas.

tapas nights, ‘speed’ meeting events to exchange information about partner universities, they were directed to consider activities that would do the following:

- enhance engagement with language learning and preparation for learning on study and work placements;
- encourage students to reflect on foreign language usage in advance of SA and preparation for greater self-regulation in SA;
- improve the confidence and ‘sense of self’ as speakers and learners as a useful, if not essential, attribute prior to study abroad.

MEET Project Outcomes and Feedback

The organised events were undertaken with varying degrees of success and enthusiasm. On occasion, participation from amongst the wider student body of classmates and additional Erasmus students was good, and the team was satisfied. At other times, the response and turnout was frustratingly disappointing and the team grappled with the impact of typical constraints competing for student time: part-time work, family and social lives, exams and study. A final team meeting to reflect on and evaluate the project allowed all participants to present critical observations and suggestions for improvement:

- If learning could be better integrated into the core curriculum, and thereby attract grades and credits, participation and commitment from a wider student body would likely improve. This did not surprise the authors, but was nevertheless a significant finding and has implications for future planning. Despite early encouragement and invitation to students to participate in the DIT-wide LEAD project, for which tuition and skills development in leadership, self-development and civic engagement is

provided, and which is also accredited, only one of the student team leads participated.⁴

- Practical and real-world constraints, such as timetabling, scheduling issues and student work commitments at weekends and evenings, impact very significantly on willingness and ability to engage in extra and co-curricular learning. For the authors this was again expected. For the student leaders, however, the impact of these constraints was striking. They consistently expressed frustration and disappointment about their fellow students' availability to take part.

All MEET team members took part in semi-formal interviews and submitted written reflections/reports in which they documented their insights and key learning moments. The data was collated and thematically coded to provide answers to questions posed at the start of the research about engagement, motivation and the preparedness of students for year-abroad learning. Positive statements communicating enthusiasm, connection, identity and control pointed to increased satisfaction and to intrinsic motivational factors. Proficiency was not explicitly 'measured' or aligned with learning outcomes within the curriculum. Instead, accounts of functional pragmatic usage and communicative competence were prioritised. Key insights from analysis of participants' reflections in the semi-structured interviews are listed below and raised in the discussion that follows:

- Satisfaction with friendships and the 'real' and 'personal' insights about the FL language and culture that they had acquired, and a belief too that these connections might help them in the future;

⁴ The LEAD module is an accredited module offered to students on all programmes through the DIT Teaching, Learning & Technology Centre & Campus Life. Further details: <http://dit.ie/lead/leadmodule/>

- Some confidence in their abilities to achieve goals, tempered by a realisation of the challenges they would likely face when abroad. This was frequently expressed in comparisons of how they viewed their own language competence vis-à-vis that of Erasmus students;
- Some recognition of the gap between their own expectations and desire to ‘speak and say more’ and their proficiency and fluency.
- A realisation of their own capacity to more consciously direct their energies and efforts in language learning, and a better understanding of the social-environmental factors that impact on their language use and confidence.

Discussion: Study Abroad and Factors for Success

The project contributes to a growing body of work on language learning and study abroad experiences. It is student-centred and context-bound, but nonetheless addresses gaps in the research by providing data specific to the Irish education context. It also addresses calls for more critical and precise evaluation of SA experiences and their impact on students’ language competence, proficiency and their sense of selves as learners and speakers of a language (Aveni, 2005; Kinginger, 2009).

The contrast between learning environments limited to classroom settings and those where students can also interact and participate in wider FL social and cultural contexts is immense. Wang (2010, p.50) suggests how difficult it is to capture the “reality of study abroad and immersion contexts”; her review of literature suggests a persistence of general inconsistencies and inconclusiveness on certain issues. Coleman (2006) highlights, for example, the many nomenclatures for ‘study abroad’ in the literature and the multiple types

of experience that might be implied, as well as the very broad range of assumptions, values and expectations that underpin those experiences.

Learning in SA contexts is most certainly complex, non-linear and highly individualised; and improving FL language proficiency and fluency is neither osmotic nor automatic, neither inevitable nor effortless. Students' participation in study and learning abroad programmes are significant transition experiences presenting them with many challenges; students confront considerable personal and academic change and unfamiliar modes of learning and assessment in 'complex and multidimensional settings' (Wilkinson, 1998). Their learning environments are constructed by "locally negotiated social, cultural and political dimensions" (Churchhill, 2006, p.204). Their participation in those environments is thus very varied and characterised by complex processes of self-construction, themselves determined by both 'social-environmental and learner-internal cues' (Aveni, 2005). The recognition by some researchers of the instability of both environmental and individual factors has led to developments in complexity theory and its application to language learning (Mercer, 2011, p.337 in Kinginger, 2013).

Complexity theory replaces cause and effect, replaces linear models with organic, complex, holistic models...in which the emergent properties of a system as a whole represent more than merely the sum of its parts [...] In a complex system context or environment is seen as an integral part of the system rather than as an external variable. [...] Everything within the system is considered to be in a constant state of flux, which can lead to changes in the system as a whole and to the ways in which the components of the system interact with each other (Mercer, 2011, p.337).

Within this complex, fluid environment students are called upon to manage their affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to adaptation (Ward, 2004) and to maintain and sustain new and existing relationships. The expectation that study abroad experiences be *transformative* is almost universally shared by students, educators and programme designers alike. The nature and quality of that transformation is, however, contested and controversial.

Striking individual differences in terms of motivation, attitude and access to real learning opportunities abound. Calls for more “differentiated studies and an expansion of the evidence-based knowledge base” persist (Kington, 2009, p.206).

Measuring Success

Mckeown (2009, p.106) points to continued efforts to classify and organise the learning in study abroad settings in systematically observable ways, as evidence of a lack of consensus about how best to study and measure the effects and outcomes of learning. The learning *and assessment* or measurement of foreign language competence during study abroad experiences is perhaps one of the most significant and contested areas of discussion. Some measure of improvement and progression in the second language is expected. The foreign language however into which the learner has been thrown, is no longer the “bloodless [classroom-bound] academic object severed from its cultural origins and habitat” (Lantolf, 2007, p.208 in Kington, 2009). It is instead a medium of self-expression in a world of contrasts, a prerequisite for intercultural communicative competence, a key to transformation and the “personal stake that extends one’s identity” (Murphy-LeJeune, 2002, p.104)⁵. Contributors to Kington’s 2013 volume suggest that language learning in study abroad contexts and hence any assessment of it must be ‘framed as a dialogic, situated affair that unfolds in intercultural contexts and which has significant subjective dimensions’ (2013, p.5).

In addressing the complexity of measurement Coleman (2013, p.26) lists the deficiencies of many studies; he points to blunt test instruments that do little to assess changes in sociolinguistic and morpho-syntactic competence, over-reliance on classroom-based skills

⁵ In this project, no formal ‘measurement’ of student language competence was undertaken. An exploration of student ‘readiness’ and ‘willingness’, albeit self-professed, was however, a key aspect of the project.

such as syntax, fluency or vocabulary and too little examination of pragmatic or prosodic competencies. He cites fuzzy definition and poor articulation of what constitutes different levels of proficiency.⁶

Insights from research on intercultural adaptation and adjustment highlight how varied and multifaceted any notion of ‘success’ might be (Ward, 2004). When applied to questions about language learning, such broader interpretations of ‘success’ can be thought-provoking and instructive. A positive sense of wellbeing, healthy relationships, satisfactory participation and performance in study environment, and the ability to seek help when needed, all constitute measures of success. If the language learning process is considered an integral part of an adaptation process, then those interpretations of success are useful frameworks within which the affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions of students’ *language learning* might also be addressed.

Individual Variables

The significance of personal variables such as identity constructs (Aveni 2005), access to meaningful learning opportunities, self-regulation and autonomy, and student motivation and attitude, all continue to be substantial (Churchhill, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005). Individual variables often complicate research efforts that may seek to converge and find patterns. “Individual trajectories are in fact the essence of recent study abroad research, in which the focus has shifted from quantitative to qualitative, from product to process and [] to a recognition of

⁶ Measuring proficiency in second language acquisition has always been challenging. Some of the instruments developed and produced over a long period of time within the Council of Europe have played a decisive role in the teaching of foreign languages by promoting methodological innovations and new approaches to the design and delivery of teaching. They also pinpoint the knowledge and know-how required for attaining a progressively-scaled range of thresholds or proficiency levels which are mapped against ‘can-do’ statements expected of basic, independent and proficient users. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

complexity and variation (Kinging, 2013, p.25). Other recent literature of this nature includes the work of Murphy-LeJeune (2002), Ehrenreich (2004), Kinginger (2009) Jackson (2008) Pellegrino Aveni (2005).

Students' socialisation patterns and the networks of friends, mentors, 'navigators', native speakers etc. within which they function are extremely significant variables in study abroad experiences. These represent a variety of opportunities for meaningful interaction, authentic communication (in the foreign language) and instances of validation and affirmation. De Federico de la Rúa (2008) draws on Allport's 'contact hypothesis' and refers to a variety of 'friendship ties' that foster understanding and solidarity. Coleman (2013, p.41) cites extensive interest in social networks and their position within wider research on Study Abroad. He argues that social networks are crucial to the learning outcomes of study abroad, and although they may be "formed early and subsequently either fossilize or develop", they constitute a major influence on the variability of experiences. Institutional efforts to foster meaningful connections with locals and hosts, for example, in 'buddy' programs, host-family accommodation arrangements and pre-departure group networking initiatives, point to wider awareness of how social networks can influence and determine the nature and extent of social and hence linguistic integration. Coleman refers to Granovetter's (1973, p.1378) elaboration of the concept and strength of 'weak ties'; the links that are created with new acquaintances which are required to temporarily supplant or supplement existing stronger ties with friends and family. The strength of interpersonal ties are a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p.1361). The existence of such ties and their development over the study abroad sojourn allow for integration and adaptation; in

establishing and maintaining such ties, sojourners develop as individuals both capable and willing to engage in self-construction and reinvention.

Nurturing new attitudes through new activities and new perspectives is a fundamental basis for learning through mobility. However, Coleman cautions against too loose an understanding of the centrality of learning, and cites Ana Beaven's notion of 'Erasmus Orgasmus'. In this imagined (online) community, aspirations to mobility, educational enrichment and linguistic diversity sometimes appear to have been replaced by an "infamous international social party network that allows European students to live a lavish lifestyle abroad under the pretext of studying" (Coleman, 2013, p.23).

For the current discussion however, Coleman's model of concentric circles representing typical social networks abroad is instructive (2013, p.31). Drawing on twenty-five years of research and administration of study abroad programs, the model implies an additive process whereby students establish networks over time initially with co-nationals, then with other outsiders (and other language learners), and only later on with locals and hosts. Such an understanding of socialisation patterns and network formation informs linguistic interactions and has significant implications for how we prepare and instruct students for study abroad. Coleman (2013) and Kinginger (2009; 2013) converge in their assertion that learners need to de-essentialise notions of culture and context, and accept that fluidity, situatedness and reconstruction (through interaction) are at the heart of the learning process. From a social constructivist perspective, individuals have "no choice but to construct meaning and knowledge through participation in the interpersonal, intersubjective interaction" that the philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) has called the "conversation of mankind" (Kiraly, 2000, p.4). Hence motivation, agency and identity are key explanatory concepts in a commitment to

“whole people, whole lives and whole beings” (Coleman, 2013, p.24) rather than to fragmented and fragmentable language learners.

Motivation is inextricably linked to emotion, and the year-abroad experience is a highly emotive preoccupation for students. Passion, excitement, anxiety and self-esteem etc. all featured in student reflections. The MEET project provided scope for some processing of such emotions and their impact on learning and self-perception. The findings of this study confirm that student confidence and positive anticipation of the year abroad grew as friendships and collaboration with Erasmus students and peers developed, as did satisfaction when able to encourage and engage others. Extrinsic motivation was also considered in the MEET project, although participants’ uptake of the DIT-LEAD module was not as hoped. Nonetheless, participants did differentiate themselves from fellow students in demonstrating and documenting their engagement beyond the curriculum.

Identity

Learner identity and learner (self) construction is central in the work of Pellegrino-Aveni (2005) and Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000). Many language learners in the classroom, but more acutely in study abroad settings, report at some point a sense of loss; loss in terms of the words at their disposal, loss of frames of references and linguistic identity and loss of an inner voice or subjectivity (Aveni, 2005). Over time however, and as competence and confidence grows, learners can expect in the ‘phase of recovery’ to effectively emulate and appropriate others’ voices, experience their own FL voices emerging more strongly, and in so doing, reconstruct themselves as speakers and agents, and crucially, reconstruct *themselves* as ‘whole people’ in the foreign language. The language classroom serves, of course, as a starting point for that invention and experimentation. Yet so too can extra-curricular

environments: providing participants with opportunity to practise and extend that self-directed invention and creativity beyond the classroom was a key feature of the MEET project, and a useful introduction to the behavioural shifts that are necessary when fully immersed in foreign language and culture.

This project to some extent was an effort to introduce participants to language learning as a commitment to self, described by English language educator Linda Librande (1998, p.170 in Kinginger, 2009, p.114) as “a search for a real soul-melding transcendent experience that comes from wrapping yourself up in another language”. That recognition or desire is not necessarily how students perceive the process, but student reflections and reports from the MEET project do confirm a shift in how they feel about their language usage, and how they see themselves as users.

That language learning in study abroad contexts is neither effortless nor unconscious. Outside of the formal learning environment, student encounters are more complex, and multidimensional than classroom learning has often prepared them for (Wilkinson, 1998, p.132). Educational institutions and classrooms, places of residence, and service encounters or interactions with expert speakers are further key areas of interest for SA researchers. As classroom practitioners, we are obliged to explore and question students’ perceptions about instruction and formal learning and the relationship of that learning with the wider social world in which can and will operate. Studies which document students’ recognition of changes in their own ethnocentric attitudes and their own FL deficiencies in SA settings (Kinger, 2009) often attribute such realisation to the interaction and interplay between new and challenging academic environments and the social spheres in which students function. Learners’ sense of self in social settings is inextricably linked to the language they

use and self-construction in the foreign society is “a carefully orchestrated spectacle” in which the learners “play to the audience [] and look to the audience for a measure of his or her performance” (Aveni, 2005, p.36). Dornyei (1998; p.2005) stresses that “social perception”, namely our impressions of others and the value we assign such impressions, are contextual and conditioned through the perceiver’s ‘filters’. Biographical backgrounds, prior experience and individual dispositions all influence these filters and impact on first-order perceptions (how we see others), second-order perceptions (how we think others see us), and even third-order perceptions (how we think others react to our perceptions).

Aveni (2004) also suggests that learner anxiety, traditionally considered to be a learner-internal factor inhibiting use and proficiency development in the second language, is to some extent social, and a physiological and psychological response to the disparity between the ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ self (Dornyei, 2005). Learners in study abroad contexts sometimes, unfortunately, reduce their use of the foreign language in efforts to reduce this anxiety. However, if learners are better equipped to maintain their sense of control, status and validation in their interactions in a foreign language and environment, and if their own attitudes about their language competence, themselves and their place in the foreign culture can converge, they are more likely to positively influence their performance and their own construction of ‘real’ selves. Thus when *social-environmental* cues and *learner-internal* cues can converge, such as when there is familiarity and some degree of ease with interaction contexts, learners can better master the disparity between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ selves and construct themselves more consciously as ‘real’ users and ‘whole’ people.

This project presented participants with real and concrete opportunities to encounter and recognise themselves as learners, in real interactions with native speakers (Erasmus students);

they were tasked with aims and objectives that required them to *be* themselves in the foreign language. This self-directed, self-regulated learning, reflection and introspection, more typical perhaps of students abroad, is clearly a useful aspect of language learning at any level, in any setting. Participants' assertions in their reflections that they *'felt better'*, had *'surprised themselves'* or *'found ways to get it done'* attest to the value of such experiences, given the shift learners can expect when they go abroad. Their self-concept improved and they were less concerned with *'making mistakes'*, seeing in their interactions that they could overcome challenges and meet their social communication goals. Their sense of achievement and their relationships with (native-speaker) peers had contributed to a sense of satisfaction, more positive anticipation of their learning experience abroad, and of themselves as learners in a dynamic, ongoing self-construction process.

The very wide range of individual variables that student participants in this project reflected on in their interviews, points to the complexity and variability that has long been attested to in the literature (Coleman, 2013; O'Reilly, 2014; Wang, 2010; Churchhill, 2006). Several such works explore detailed individual accounts of experiences and 'authentic learning'. Much recent work to develop resources and tools to support students abroad and help them navigate individualised learning pathways affirms a commitment to address such variables.⁷ Authentic learning moments, 'maps' and 'bridges' based around key constructs such as proficiency, fluency or communicative competence feature in initiatives to develop multiple methods by which students can become more proficient speakers, more precise in their usage and more capable of drawing on wider repertoires of competence. Qualitative analysis of

⁷ Examples include 'Mapping Milestones' project (O'Reilly, Spencer, Leahy & Borge); Project funded by National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. Also [Digi-Languages: Language Learning in a Digital World](#); The move-me project Moocs for for uniVersity students on the move in Europe <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/english-for-academic-purposes/1> and Clipflair: Language Learning through Captioning and revoicing of video clips.

subjective accounts of learning are utilised to develop frameworks, guides and resources for both learning and assessment.

Conclusion

Both pilot research for the MEET project and a wide body of research suggest that more ‘real’ interactions between learners and native speakers and ‘hosts’ are desirable, achievable and useful in contributing to learners’ development as confident speakers and users and satisfied individuals. The research presented here thus contributes to international scholarship in the complex field of study abroad and language learning, and as such also areas of expertise and development identified, for example, by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.⁸ The research also acknowledges the strategic importance and growth potential of internationalisation as a higher education policy objective in general; insights presented here can contribute specifically to the knowledge and expertise integral to the successful design, delivery and implementation of study abroad programmes.

The MEET project was student-centred and context-dependent, but poses questions for us as educators and practitioners about how best to prepare, guide and assess students for, during and after study abroad experiences. ‘Bridges’, ‘maps’ and ‘pathways’ point to useful avenues for further exploration and understanding of individualised learning. Learners’ belief and confidence in their own capacity to find a way, might well be enhanced by our own confidence in them; a confidence that students “can learn [] - and if felt by students, we can help them develop a personal and individual culture of success” (Willie, 2000, p.196).

⁸<https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/teaching-learning-languages-ireland/>

Proficiency was not evaluated in this project. A narrower specification of aims and questions would be required to refine the research, as would the collection of longitudinal data to better explore the impact of pre-departure practice on pragmatic use and communicative competence in subsequent years of study abroad. Students' own assessment of their confidence and competence in their reflections must thus be acknowledged as such, but not confused with more notionally objective evaluations of proficiency. The project did highlight, however, that student readiness to engage, to reflect and to take responsibility outside of the classroom were key indicators of autonomy and self-direction, contributing to greater sense of confidence and competence for learners. The documented 'holistic' impacts in terms of how they viewed themselves as a result of these more authentic and task-driven learning experiences gives us hope that students may, as a result, be more strategic about their transition and the potentially transformative learning experiences that a year abroad offers them.

The value of study abroad in both documented accounts of unexpected change and learner insights into usage, as well as the anecdotal accounts of satisfaction rarely, if ever, focus exclusively on enhanced lexical or grammatical proficiency. In highlighting that learning for and during study abroad is usefully viewed as an individualised trajectory towards self-discovery, this research has also acknowledged the centrality of social networks and how they can facilitate access to linguistic and cultural resources. Project participants' reflections also affirm that study abroad preparation can be enhanced if more consciously embedded in the 'whole' lives of students, and positioning centre-stage their agency as thinking, feeling individuals with unique histories, identities, motivations and backgrounds (Ushioda, 2009).

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