
Lingua and Erasmus: circumventing the constraints



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Background to the problem

Sonia Rouve describes in an interesting article in *Vida Hispánica*, No. 7, June 1993, how she managed to overcome the constraints imposed by ERASMUS to allow her Spanish PGCE students an invaluable course-related stay in the target language country.

LINGUA AND ERASMUS have served the needs of the 16+ age range well. If only the Thatcher government had accepted the LINGUA programme in its entirety pupils who were not covered by the vocational, further and higher education umbrella would have gained financial and other support from Brussels for school exchanges, work experience and other important and worthy enterprises.

Pupils up to the age of 16 have not been the only ones to suffer. Modern linguists on PGCE courses fall between a number of stools. They cannot qualify for LINGUA funding because they are not yet teachers, officially at least. To take advantage of ERASMUS is extremely difficult because of CATE (Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) requirements and the constraints of a 36-week course which make it well nigh impossible for trainees to spend the minimum 12 weeks in the host country. Sonia describes in her article how to make the impossible possible.

The purpose of this article is to describe how all manner of barriers were overcome to enable 10 PGCE students to spend some time abroad, in this case Germany. This may be of interest not only to teacher trainers but indeed anyone planning a project-based trip abroad. What follows is the complete picture, from the birth of the idea, the preparatory visit, the planning procedure, the visit itself and the outcomes – warts and all!

In search of a solution

Business and Education Week is well established as a feature of PGCE for the initial training of teachers at the University of Leeds. As the name suggests, it is a week during which trainee teachers focus on the world of work, vocational training as well as economic and enterprise awareness. Some students join a local company for a week. Others get involved in the activities of the Youth Training Scheme or examine school business links and work experience arrangements.

In January 1991 a link was established between the School of Education, University of Leeds and the Institut für Praxis der Theorie der Schule (IPTS), for the initial and continuing education of teachers, in Kiel, Schleswig-Holstein. In September of the same year EATE (Enterprise Awareness in Teacher Education) funding was provided to facilitate a visit to Kiel to investigate the possibility of a group of Leeds students spending time there in the summer of 1992 gaining insights into the German approach to vocational training.

An extensive programme of visits to schools involved in vocational training (*Berufsschulen*), higher education institutions and the central office of the local Chamber of Commerce ensured that contracts were made and the aims and implications of the proposed stay discussed.

The response to the proposal was positive and arrangements were made to find schools and accommodation with families for the 10 Leeds students. The School of Education agreed to part fund travelling expenses to Schleswig-Holstein. A small grant was also awarded to each student by the British Council in recognition of their contribution to the teaching and learning of English within vocational schools in Schleswig-Holstein.

Preparation

The 10 participants were required to fill out a form giving personal details, whether they were smokers or non-smokers, dietary requirements etc. and an outline of their proposed project. A passport sized photograph was affixed to each form.

This information was then forwarded to the IPTS colleague in charge in Kiel and in the light of student requirements, a compatible host family and suitable vocational school were found. Three weeks in advance of the date of departure Leeds students were provided with details of their accommodation and school-base for their work. Contact was made between students and hosts to discuss needs, finalise times of arrival and clarify any problems.

Aims of the visit

The aims of the visit depended to a large extent on the interest of the individual student. The dimension common to all was vocational education and training. Projects included the following areas of investigation and activities:

- the place of the vocational element in the German secondary education
- interviews with trainees and apprentices
- interviews with teachers in vocational schools
- the nature of 'work experience' in German schools
- school-workplace links
- a week in the life of a German trainee
- training for work in tourism
- vocational education and training for the blind

Most of the above projects included material recorded on video and audio cassette. This provided resources which could be later used in teaching and also gave practice in recording skills with cross-curricular and life-skill value.

Programme of activities

It was understood by all parties that the students would put together their own programme in negotiation with staff at the host school, depending on project requirements and the facilities available. In spite of this 6 out of 10 hosts provided students with a ready-made programme of visits and interview/discussion opportunities.

What follows is a selection of activities undertaken by students in the course of the week:

- meeting with the headteacher of the school to gain an overview of the German approach to vocational education and training and the place of that particular school in the 'dual' system, which combines experience at school and the workplace
- observation and participation in business English lesson followed by discussion with pupils to gain insight into their assessment of the system as they have experienced it so far
- visit to *Lernbüro* – school-based simulation of company where pupils have the opportunity to gain experience in each department. This included informal discussion with pupils in the course of the lesson on the advantages and disadvantages of school-based as opposed to workplace-based experience
- participation in 'economics for tax officers' class – discussion with pupils on their experience of the dual system of training – in this case 1.5 days in school, 3.5 days in the workplace
- tour of *Fotofachschule* – for initial and further training of photographers, salesmen of photographic equipment and

laboratory technicians. Subsequent discussion with the director of the institution

- discussion with a class of Finns who were studying business and gaining work experience in Germany as part of their university course
- meeting with the director of the vocational training section of the Chamber of Trade and Industry in Kiel. Topics included the role of the Chamber, role of the employer in training and the effectiveness of partnership between the Chamber, employer and the school
- visit to Careers Centre which offers access to all information on the diversity of routes into vocational education and training at all levels
- interview with the advisor for the visually handicapped with special emphasis on careers advice for the blind
- visit beyond Schleswig-Holstein to Wehrda in Marburg to investigate the development of aids for the blind, including the braille mouse
- visit to a specialist School of Foreign Languages in Hamburg to observe and participate in an English class for trainees in tourism
- participation in a *Lehrprobe* - demonstration lesson given by trainee teacher and subsequently discussed and assessed by tutor, head of department, headteacher and fellow trainees.

Outcomes of the visit

Debriefing sessions and completed questionnaires provided invaluable information on the students' experience. The aims of the visit were met to a very large extent. Students returned to Leeds with projects close to completion. Presentation sessions confirmed a much clearer understanding of vocational education and training in Germany. Some students perceived elements of the German approach as transferable to the British context. A complete adoption was deemed undesirable and impracticable, given the differences in attitude to work and employer-employee and employer-trainee relationships. Some students now felt better informed about the German system than the British.

Many felt that their language competence had improved considerably in the course of the week: 'My family were keen to chat. If felt my German had got much better by the end of the visit.'

The European dimension had been well served in that insights into the German way of life had destroyed many of the stereotypes some of the students perceived: 'It was wonderful to become part of a German family and gain insight into their way of life. I never expected them to be so warm and hospitable. I was given access to whatever I needed and was made to feel very welcome'. 'I was encouraged to try Northern German specialities. Their food is so good!'

What had the German hosts gained from the visit? Similar debriefing sessions and questionnaires proved insights into their perception of the experience. Host teachers very much appreciated the opportunity to have young English speakers in their classes. Given that foreign language assistants rarely find their way to the vocational school, it was a wonderful opportunity for teachers and pupils to enhance their oral competence. Discussions gave the Germans insight into the British approach to vocational education and training.

Although the venture was an enjoyable and invaluable experience for all concerned, minor problems, however, are worthy of consideration;

- timing of the visit: the inflexibility of the PGCE course at Leeds demanded that the students visit Kiel in the second week in June. This was by no means ideal for schools in Schleswig-Holstein whose academic year finished in the middle of the third week in June. As a result students did not have as much access to pupils as they would have like, since many classes had been cancelled. In addition it was felt that this was a particularly stressful time for teachers who were extremely busy with examination related work and end of term activities.
- finance: in spite of the grant awarded students found that their budget did not cover their needs

- the programme: 6 out of the 10 students had been provided with a programme. Reaction was mixed. Some students appreciated this very much:

'Without a programme, I would have wasted time trying to decide what to do.'

Others found it rather restricting: 'I was left with little time to pursue my own activities.'

'I am not in favour of programmes organised by the hosts. Students should set the agenda otherwise they can be sucked into activities which may not be of any relevance to their interests. Students should request from vocational schools and careers information centres the opportunity to visit on specific days for specific purposes. Sufficient chunks of time should be available to do your own thing.'

Some lessons learnt

- planning can hardly start early enough
- include in any budgeting a planning visit; this is invaluable in terms of PR, making person to person contacts and investigating potential at first hand
- timing: find out well in advance of the trip the dates of any school holidays; watch out for those of the religious variety that English schools may not have e.g. timing of Whitsun
- documentation/information: the Germans love it; provide details of the students' experience on teacher training so far; provide definitions of roles; it is sometimes not understood that PGCE students are postgraduate, trainee teachers but still rather different from *Referendare* (very approximately the German equivalent)
- contact should be made with hosts well in advance of the visit to establish expectations, set targets and work out organisational details
- each student should negotiate a programme with their hosts prior to the visit; if this is neglected a programme is likely to be presented as a *fait accompli*
- equipment: it is important that the students determine in advance of the visit the availability of any video or audio recording equipment they may wish to use and the possibility of borrowing it; they should also spend some time before departure practising recording and interviewing techniques to ensure the quality of the material they produce when abroad
- even though it is agreed that accommodation is provided on a bed and breakfast basis, such is German hospitality, there is a more than even chance that other meals will be provided. Embarrassment can be avoided if a mutually acceptable charge for accommodation is arranged between the colleagues with overall responsibility.

1993 and beyond

The maiden visit was an unqualified success and as a result the exercise was repeated with a similar response from all parties in the summer term of 1993. Key to the success is the excellent working relationship between colleagues in Leeds and Kiel, the careful preparation and significantly the cooperation, diligence and diplomacy of the 10 participating students. The PGCE students, their hosts and the schools benefit enormously from the experience.

Increased financial backing in future years would allow more students to take part in the venture, especially non-linguists. A cohort of trainee teachers from Kiel has made a reciprocal visit to Leeds along similar lines and it is hoped that this might be repeated next year.

Circumstances appear to be militating against future visits, however:

1. EATE funding, without which the vital preparatory visit could not have been made in 1992, is no longer available.
2. The reforms in initial teacher training with two-thirds of the 36-week course spent in schools, may not leave time for this type of experience of the world of work within a European context.
3. With the transfer of funding from teacher-training institutions into schools, it is unlikely that grants of the kind

described will be made available. If students are to spend time abroad, they will have to cover the expense out of their own pockets.

4. It could well be the case that the enterprise has become the victim of its own success. The scheme has been discussed at various conferences and INSET events in Schleswig-Holstein and the benefits to the vocational schools of having access to a native speaker of English are widely recognised. Anecdotal evidence suggest that this has led to foreign language assistants being offered places in vocational schools as from September 1993. It would well be

the case that the FLAs meet the needs of vocational schools and as a result places on offer could be more restricted.

If the Government and DFE are genuinely committed to Europe, if initial teacher training institutions are to make more than a tokenist gesture in the preparation of students to teach the European Dimension as a cross-curricular issue, if diversification is to become a reality, if schools are to be in a position to prepare young people for competition for places in a more mobile workforce, then the 'Schleswig-Holstein experience' and similar ventures should be facilitated rather than marginalised.



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