

Traineeships abroad as spaces for shaping language teachers' identity. The case of English-speaking teacher trainees in a Spanish context

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Resum. Les practiques a l'estranger com a espais per a la formació de les identitats del professorat de llengües estrangeres. El cas del professorat angloparlant en un context espanyol. Aquest article explora l'impacte de les pràctiques a l'estranger sobre les identitats personals i professionals de futures docents d'espanyol que tenen l'anglès com a primera llengua, així com les implicacions de les absents-ementades pràctiques per a les docents de llengües estrangeres. S'analitzen dades d'un estudi qualitatiu basat en entrevistes semiestructurades amb dues professores d'Irlanda i el Regne Unit que estaven realitzant pràctiques com a assistents de docència en una universitat espanyola. Els resultats mostren una correlació entre les pràctiques a l'estranger i: 1) la reestructuració de les identitats personals i 2) el desenvolupament de les identitats professionals de docents. En relació a les identitats personals, la confrontació amb diferències lingüístiques i culturals incrementa el sentit de pertinença a l'estat-nació, mentre en relació al desenvolupament de les identitats professionals, les pràctiques a l'estranger impacten positivament la disposició d'esdevenir docents.

Paraules clau: identitat del professorat, pràctiques a l'estranger, professorat en pràctiques, ensenyament de segones llengües, formació del professorat.

Abstract. Traineeships abroad as spaces for shaping language teachers' identity. The case of English-speaking teacher trainees in a Spanish context. This article explores the impact of a traineeship abroad on the personal and the professional identities of prospective Spanish

teachers whose L1 is English and its implications for language educators. We examine data from a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with two teacher trainees from Ireland and the United Kingdom undergoing a traineeship abroad as language assistants at a Spanish university. The results show a positive correlation between a traineeship abroad and: 1) the restructuring of personal identities and 2) the further development of emerging language teacher identities. In relation to personal identities, confrontation with cultural and linguistic difference increases a sense of belonging to the nation state while in relation to professional identity development, a reinforcement of the willingness to become a language teacher is positively impacted by the experience abroad.

Keywords: teacher identity, traineeship abroad, pre-service language teacher, second language teaching, teacher education.

1. Introduction

Sojourns abroad for foreign language learners have been encouraged by international mobility programs such as Erasmus+ (Van Mol, 2018; Llanes, 2019; Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022). These schemes allow language learners to develop socially and personally, obtain more suitable professional options, re-evaluate their prospects for the future, improve their cultural understanding, and learn the target language faster (Hopkins et al., 2006; Moskal, 2020).

Moving abroad also entails that a person will encounter new social rules and power relationships in which their symbolic and material resources can gain or lose value (Darvin & Norton, 2015). In order to adapt to or integrate in the new sociocultural context, mobile language learners will require a high level of investment in the target language, and a reconstitution of their “social and psychological tools” (Severino et al., 2014, p. 92). In accordance, sojourns abroad might trigger changes in the identities of the participants. An alteration or modification of the self, due to sojourns abroad has been pointed out by several studies (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Jackson, 2008) while others remarked that they might not be a long and destabilizing enough type of mobility having a direct impact on the identities of the participants (Block, 2014).

In this article, identity is understood as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured within time and space and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p.45).

Globalization has brought about an increased heterogenization of the world (Blommaert, 2010). The mixing of cultures and people has germinated into multilingual identities, which are progressively more common because of migration and the increasing popularity of second language learning. Learning multiple languages usually entails learning about the cultures ingrained in those languages (Dervin, 2009). Therefore, in

the process of foreign language learning, “intercultural sensitivity” is developed, which might lead to ‘intercultural competence’ (Byram, 2008).

According to Hammer et al. (2003, p. 422), intercultural competence alludes to “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways”, while intercultural sensitivity refers to “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences”. Multilinguals often develop these abilities which allow them to take into consideration not only one’s own view, but also the receiver’s view, which would guarantee an effective interaction (Cots & Llurda, 2010). In relation to multilingualism, intercultural sensitivity equals understanding the cultural values that each language carries and being aware of and respecting these cultural differences when communicating with individuals who do not share the same culture.

Developing intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence is particularly important in language learning processes through temporary residence abroad, as it can help to ease the process of acculturation and facilitate access to the social network of the target language community. Osler (1998) demonstrates how living in a foreign country and among people with a different culture encourages pre-service teachers to analyse their own “values and way of thought” (p. 86). Therefore, being interculturally-aware also involves self-awareness, that is, a re-evaluation of one’s own cultural identity: there is a ‘need for learners to become aware of the culturally based norms, beliefs, and behaviours of their own culture and other cultures’ (Baker, 2012, p. 65).

The increasing diversity of our world implies a need for language teachers capable of educating students in such a way that they “develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary for decision-making and effective participation in a world characterized by interconnectedness, cultural pluralism, and increasing competition for resources” (Merryfield, 1995, p.1). In this context, international experiences of pre-service teachers should equip them with the necessary pedagogical skills to teach students to adopt the multiple points of view, attitudes, and skills that our interconnected world requires. When prospective teachers move abroad, they not only have to re-establish their identity but also “restructure themselves in a new political, social and institutional environment” (Erduyan et al., 2018, p.357). Teacher trainees face a reconsideration of their own identity due to the need to adapt to the new cultural, geographical, and linguistic context of the host country.

Research on the impact of teachers’ pre-service study abroad experiences (Cushner & Chang, 2015; Marshall & Spracklin, 2022; Zhao et al., 2009) has delved into the development of intercultural competence and pedagogical beliefs and practices (Ye et al., 2017), as well as into attitudinal changes and personal growth in relation to empathy, tolerance, flexibility, patience, and self-confidence (Willard-Holt, 2001; Zhao et al., 2009). A positive impact on pedagogical beliefs of an international stay has been demonstrated by a few studies (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Marshall & Spracklin, 2022). However, a few other studies indicate that while a pre-service immersion abroad is

a unique opportunity for prospective teachers to improve their intercultural competence and teaching beliefs, the experience should be thought and shaped in an intentional way so that the participants can profit from it (Ye et al., 2017).

Drawing on the above, the present study examines in what ways a traineeship abroad as a language teacher assistant contributes to the personal and professional identities of the participants. It delves into the personal, sociocultural, and linguistic determinants that are declared to impact the experience of the prospective teachers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and Context

The participants in this project were: Avril, a 22-year-old female language teaching assistant from Ireland and Jade, a 20-year-old female language teaching assistant from the United Kingdom (these are pseudonyms to guarantee the anonymity of the participants). Jade described her identity as hybrid because her mother is French and she had spent extended periods of time in France. Both of them were undergoing a traineeship as language assistants in Salamanca, Spain and they appeared to be enthusiastic and predisposed to share their personal experiences, a cooperative attitude that was maintained throughout the entirety of the interviews.

Avril had finished her degree in Spanish and being a language teacher assistant was her first job related to education. She could speak English (L1), Irish (L1), and Spanish, and she had studied German in secondary school but could no longer consider herself proficient in the language. This was Jade's first job as an educator, too but she had not yet finished her degree (in Portuguese, Catalan and Spanish; the three languages that she was proficient in, apart from English as her L1). She was staying in Salamanca for a semester, while Avril was expected to reside in Salamanca for the whole academic year.

Even though both participants were sufficiently fluent in the target language because of their degrees, differently to Jade, Avril had previously had a professional experience in Spain in which she had worked as an Au Pair for two months. Though short, this previous contact with the target country and culture, could have also eased her integration within the target community which will be analysed in the following part of this study.

The traineeship, financed by the Erasmus+ program, had as a main goal the integration of two prospective Spanish teachers in a work environment that had language teaching as the main aim. The participants engaged in part-time work as English teacher assistants, participating in the teaching process from beginning to end: designing teaching materials, delivering lessons, and assessing the results. The work was guided and supervised by the teachers that were responsible for the subjects.

2.2. Setting

To create a safe environment in which the participants could talk freely and openly about their experiences, the interviews were carried out in a quiet and private office at the University of Salamanca. The participants were seated either, on the opposite side of the table, facing the main interviewer, in the case of Jade; or next to the interviewer in the case of Avril. Both of the interviews were recorded, with the previous knowledge of the participants. The recording device remained on the table from beginning to end, and was only turned on once the participants were asked for their explicit consent.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected by means of one 30-40 minutes, semi-structured interview (Appendix A) conducted in English with each participant, one month and a half after their arrival. The participants were required to report their experience abroad in terms of: 1) implications of the traineeship abroad for their sense of belonging; 2) integration within the target language community, and 3) the perceived impact of the traineeship abroad on their professional and personal identities.

2.5. Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed to analyse the data once transcribed. The transcriptions were verbatim to what the participants had enunciated, being especially careful not to omit the non-verbal communicative cues, which could also help with the interpretation of their words, such as facial expressions or certain gestures with which they communicated signs of discomfort or excitement with certain topics.

Following the phases of the reflexive thematic analysis explained by Braun and Clarke (2019), one of the researchers started by reading and familiarizing herself with the data, extracting the first hypothetic approximations. After an extensive evaluation, the researcher started to extract and organize repeating patterns. The repeated revision of the data led to the identification of initial themes and codes. These themes were summated and translated into more concise codes and themes, arranged in a thematic analysis map.

3. Results

Two outstanding themes appear as both determinants and outcomes of traineeships abroad in the discourses of the participants: 1) a necessity to establish a professional identity as both a proficient speaker of Spanish and as a prospective Spanish teacher, and 2) the participants' willingness to reshape their personal identities by means of living

with language and cultural differences. These themes intermesh with and influence each other and linguistic and cultural learning are characterized as the keys to shape both.

3.1. Linguistic and cultural learning through traineeships abroad

Linguistic and cultural learning appear to be the factors expected to have the most significant impact on the participants' identities. Both participants emphasize the fact that improving their Spanish proficiency was at the forefront of their traineeship abroad. They already perceived significant gains in the target language which Jade confidently states as "my Spanish is obviously getting better" (Jade, extract 1). Avril emphasizes the dichotomy between formal and immersive language learning, an important asset for a prospective language teacher: "I think I've learnt a lot in the last little while, so thankfully (...) it's so important to see how people actually speak and not just how they speak in textbooks; that's been a huge one" (Avril, extract 2).

Regarding cultural learning, the participants' confrontation with cultural difference has enabled them to identify the differences between their own cultures and Spanish culture. Jade can name differences in work culture, as well as in clothing, while Avril reflects upon what seems to be an exhaustive formal learning programme in Spanish language and culture that she took in her home country as different from her experience within the target language community. She refers to the need for educational programs to take onboard the type of immersive experience she is undertaking as indispensable for students:

I guess for me it's definitely a difference in culture, specifically, work culture. (...) clothing; clothing is a big part (...). It's that the pride of the patriarchy, who knows... (...) I noticed in myself I dress a lot better since I've been here. (...) It's very different in that cultural sense, the way you present yourself, that's different. (Jade, extract 3).

I think it is very different to read Cervantes and then never see the kind of culture he was living in, the kind of culture he was writing about. (...) Just like you can see what is actually happening rather than just the statistics of it. (Avril, extract 4)

One aspect of their stay is determinant when it comes to their relationship with the target language culture: the legal and bureaucratic facet of their traineeship. For the Irish participant, the smoothness of the process eased her way into the placement while for the British participant, the considerable number of Brexit-related legal obstacles led to a feeling of being unwanted by Spanish society and the decision to detract from considering Spain as a possible place to live in the future:

Let's not forget Brexit. That has just made the whole thing so much harder. (...) I've always thought that I wanted to live in Spain for the rest of my life but since being here, I no longer feel the need that I desperately had to live in Spain. (Jade, extract 5)

I don't think I would have gone outside of the EU because it's so easy and because I didn't want to add any extra pressure to me moving out. (Avril, extract 6).

Jade was aware of the little legal opposition faced by those who came from European countries, such as Avril. This dichotomy in the treatment administered by the Spanish government regarding the nationalities of the incomers, led Jade to second guess her decision of the destination which she had previously seen as the most advantageous, as she was met with feelings of rejection and discrimination against her national identity as a British person.

Length of stay is another factor that contributed in different ways to the participants' acculturation and integration. Jade, whose stay was no longer than three months, emphasized that the brevity of her placement, together with the impossibility of establishing a personal rapport with her students prevented her from building meaningful relationships with local people:

I haven't socialized with a lot of Spanish people and that really upsets me because I'll be here for a certain amount of time so the people don't really want us to be like, what's like having a friend that is going to be here for like three months? And also, because I'm a teacher, I can't have a relationship with my students. (...) So because of that, my friends have been mainly English. (Jade, extract 7).

Her interest in befriending her students was based on their closeness in age and the initial friendliness shown by the students which made her assume that a possible friendship could have been accomplished in normal circumstances; that is, outside of the workplace and without her being in a position of power over them. Having assumed that the length of her stay was an undesirable circumstance which made her unworthy of integrating with the target community, Jade saw her students (only part of the Spanish community she was in closer contact with) as the only hypothetical possibility of said integration.

On a different note, Avril, who was undergoing a one academic year long traineeship, has been able to access the community of Spanish speakers and she deliberately withdrew from an international community whose means of communication was English, in an attempt to fulfil her goal to increase her Spanish proficiency:

I've been hanging out more with Spanish people. (...) I've met up with a couple of people from Erasmus. (...) They already found their group and I found myself my own as well, and I'm here to learn Spanish, not to speak English. (Avril, extract 8).

The previous contact that Avril had with the target community could justify her positive attitude and a possible initial degree of acculturation which provided her with the reassurance to actively look for establishing rapport with those who belonged to the Spanish community. Without this previous cultural knowledge of the target community, Jade made the assumption that the length of her stay would be an impediment to integrate or be accepted. These complications in the acculturation and integration processes together with the legal difficulties may have negatively impacted her identity both as a foreigner and as a teacher as she was faced with feelings of rejection and inadequacy to reach the target community.

3.2. Implications of the traineeship abroad for the construction of personal identities

At the personal level, the participants highlight the importance of the traineeship for building up social, psychological, and decisional maturity, because of going out of one's comfort zone and dealing with the challenges of residing in a foreign country. In Jade's account, the traineeship appears as a rite of passage which shaped her individuality in a holistic way. Avril emphasizes the paramount importance of the fact that this was the first time that she had to live outside her family's home:

I already feel myself so much more mature. (...) You grow up so much when you have to live abroad. (...) And you learn so much, so I think, personally I've developed a lot more. (...) the whole changing countries, there's so much that comes into play: understanding the laws, understanding cultures and things like that. (...) It's so important to meet people who have experienced different things because it shapes the way your mind works, totally, totally changes everything. (Jade, extract 9).

I've always lived with my parents, at home in Ireland, but here, living away from home for the first time, it's an interesting way to meet people and go out of my comfort zone. (Avril, extract 10).

However, the cultural differences that the participants encounter led to an increased identification with and sense of belonging to their place of origin. In an emotional discourse, Avril remarks her need to reconnect with Irish culture upon her return

(Extract 11) even though she states that she has never actually been connected to it in the first place. It is the actual experience abroad that increased Avril's Irish identity and spurred her on to engage with Ireland. On a similar note, Jade ascertains she has come to substantiate that she is "a Bristol girl" and she gives voice to the good fortune of having been born in Bristol. However, this is not only a hint to her sense of belonging, but also an allusion to what she considers to be a misfortune for those who do not share her place of origin (Extract 12):

I have never felt really connected to Irish culture. (...) But I've found, being in Spain, being in a foreign country, I feel more connected to my Irish roots and I feel more proud of it and I feel more inclined to try those things when I go back home and try to reconnect with this. (...) I definitely, I feel a little more connected in terms of wanting people to know that I'm Irish and wanting people to like my culture. (Avril, extract 11).

I know now that I'm a Bristol girl. (...) For the first time I realized how lucky, sorry, I'm getting emotional, I realized how lucky I was to live in England and to have the bringing up that I have because it makes you aware that not everyone has had the education I've had. (Jade, extract 12).

4. Relevance of the traineeship abroad for language teacher identities

Both trainees refer to the considerable influence of the training program on strengthening their idea to become language educators in the future.

Jade (Extract 13) ascertains that the traineeship is a unique opportunity to get involved in a work environment without the preoccupations of the outcomes of her work. She knows her traineeship is playing an important part in shaping her decision to be a teacher in spite of social expectations that put material earnings at the forefront and the hardships of the teaching job in the UK:

Since coming here, and planning the lessons and marking and being the teacher, it's like, yeah, this is what I should be doing. Like it reaffirms the direction I'm going in (...) you get to have work experience in an actual professional environment and not have to worry about the outcome. (...) There is always a part of my brain that is like what am I going to do? and also the social expectations that you need to make lots of money plays into it because as much as I love teaching (...) in England, teachers are not respected. (Jade, extract 13).

In this excerpt, the reaffirmation of the professional prospect of the participant and her personal attitude towards the occupation of educators is contrasted with the social expectations and the monetary value associated to the degree of respect deserved by the profession. Jade addresses directly her native country's society and denounces its discriminatory treatment toward the educational workforce. In spite of previously defining herself as a "Bristol girl" (extract 12), that is, defining her identity as closely connected to her homeland and, therefore, its society, in this instance she takes a stand against said society in order to defend her identity as a teacher. Even though her identity as a teacher may be regarded as not worthy of respect in her motherland, Jade feels reassured of her professional prospects because of the professional experiences lived in the host country.

Avril (Extract 14) emphasizes that even if teaching has always been among her first job options, she has never set her mind on it. Her participation in the traineeship confers the participant some support for the resolution of her choice to opt for the language teacher job:

In terms of careers, I've always thought teaching was pretty high up there because I really like languages. (...) So that's always been an option, but nothing is concrete for me (...) I think this is helping me with that. (Avril, extract 14).

5. Discussion

As a position that may help with the transition between the professional and student life, traineeships abroad not only have an impact on the prospective language teachers' personal development but also on their professional prospects by shaping the way individuals understand their relationship to the world, how they structure this relationship across time and space, and the possibilities they understand for the future (Norton, 2013).

In relation to the above, this study shows that a traineeship abroad could increase participants' sense of belonging and degree of identification with their national identity. This outcome was encouraged by two factors: 1) contact with cultural differences contributed to a need to ascertain one's position in the world, in an attempt to be recognized by the others; and 2) the encounter with cultural differences that lead to adversity seems to trigger a certain feeling of pride in their national identities.

The present study also shows two contributing factors that hinder the outcomes of the experience, in relation to both the development of intercultural sensitivity and second language learning: 1) the bureaucratic, legal adversities of entering the target country, and 2) the length of the traineeship. In the case of the former, it leads to one of the participants feeling discriminated or unwanted by the host country, detrimental to her willingness to get involved with the target language community. On the contrary, the

smoothness of the legal process that the other participant experienced encouraged her with the choice of her destination. The length of the sojourn indicates that a traineeship abroad which is shorter than three months negatively affects engagement with the host community. Since a proper acculturation and integration into the target language community can help to acquire a higher proficiency in the target language, the fact that one of the participants felt a sense of inadequacy that hindered her integration within the Spanish society alludes to what Norton (2013) defines as relations of power between language learners and the local community. In this case, the teacher trainee prefers to keep the position of an outsider and she actually detracts from any previous plan to build a life in the host country in the future.

This outcome points to a need to identify and transform power relations in an attempt to smooth the integration of language learners. Pre-departure training courses focused on the development of strategies to cope with cultural and linguistic difference are needed and legal guidance might reduce a feeling of alienation, displacement, and eventual animosity towards the host culture. The previous experience in the host country of one of the participants served as a pre-departure training course, and it demonstrates how different the experiences abroad can be when the participants are prepared for those difficulties that may appear. In this light, the present study recommends to strategically design traineeship programs that smooth the integration and acculturation process of teacher trainees in their host countries. If what our world needs is teachers that can show their students ways to navigate cultural and linguistic difference, we ought to make sure that future teachers are equipped with the necessary tools to do so themselves in the first place.

The results related to the development of professional identities as future language teachers show a positive relationship between the traineeship abroad and the blossoming of teacher identities that were in their infancy at the beginning of the sojourn, regardless of the circumstances of the experience abroad. This outcome signals that traineeships abroad ought to be included in educational programs for prospective teachers and for individuals who have the teaching job as a career option.

When it comes to language learning and living or/and working abroad, the power dynamics that may arise in the context of the sojourns play an important role in determining whether the experiences would be beneficial, whether the participants may feel discouraged or whether they may overcome the cultural, professional, and social difficulties they will be faced with. A general view of the results show how these relations of power shape and require a development or questioning of the participant's identities. Norton (2013) refers to the socially constructed relations between individuals, institutions or communities through which symbolic (language, education, friendship, etc.) and material capital (goods, real estate and money) are created and distributed. The possibility to access those material or symbolic resources may entail the acceptance of a person's identity in the target language community.

The acculturation process and the access to the symbolic capital of friendship with the target community is crucial for the participants to feel that their identities are accepted. In this acceptance, feelings of pride arise when the participants are allowed to talk about their national identities or when they witness cultural differences that are more advantageous to their homeland. In like manner, the material resource of time seems to be a drawback in that acculturation and integration process as it is detrimental when it comes to building significant relationships with the target language community. In relation to their professional identities, one of the participants refers to the material resource of money as an indication of the respect the profession is worth in the eyes of society. Despite recognizing the unfavourable opinion of society when it comes to her professional identity as a teacher, the participant chooses to pursue said career and positions herself against societal expectations.

The power relations that are created in the context of living abroad pushes the participants to evaluate their sense of self and sheds light on those parts of their identities (whether it is professional, national, personal, etc.) they were not fully aware of or that needed further questioning.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study show that a traineeship abroad will trigger the different parts of the participant's identities to flourish rapidly in the host country. Hence, they play distinct roles in the making of decisions or when experiencing different cultural or professional issues, giving shape to new personal and professional identities, subjectivities from which prospective language teachers imagine possibilities for the future (Norton, 2013) that were more blurred before the sojourn. In this sense, this article is encouraging in that it demonstrates that overall, traineeships abroad have the potential to enhance incipient language teacher identities by offering to the participants the opportunity to engage with a professional identity for the first time and with the privilege of the lower responsibility that the position of a trainee entails.

However, the present study has a few limitations that could be harmonized in future research. In the first place, it draws on a very reduced number of participants, with a similar background. Studies with a higher number of subjects from a wider variety of origins would significantly contribute to triangulate these results. On the other hand, the study is limited to a single context. Since the context is a determinant of uttermost importance in this project, this is a drawback that hinders our capacity to make general claims. Thus, research on a wider variety of contexts and their impact on teacher trainees' identities are needed in order to expand on the results of the present study.

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview questions

1. What’s your name and where are you from?
2. Which were the reasons that determined you to enrol in a mobility program? Why Salamanca?
3. In which ways do you think this mobility programme will influence your life?

- Personally
 - Academically (languages)
 - Professionally
4. How would you define yourself? Do you feel you belong to a country/a province/Europe? What makes you feel this way?
 5. Do you think that participating in mobility programme can have any effects on your sense of belonging?
 6. Are you planning to socialize more with local/Erasmus/people from your own country?
 7. Which were your expectations before coming to Salamanca? And fears?
 8. How has your stay here been (so far)?
 9. Which kind of jobs do you imagine yourself having in the future? Do you think this experience will help you with that?
 10. Do you think that this exchange program allows to make friends for a life? How are you going to keep in touch with the people you met during your mobility stay?
 11. Do you think there are any elements that define the European culture/identity?
 12. Do you think the fact you belong to a European country made your stay here easier?
 13. Did you feel welcome by the society where your stay took place? What about the institutions?
 14. In which way was the culture of your stay different from yours? Have you learnt any social or cultural aspect?
 15. Which languages can you speak now? Have you learnt the local language? Why/why not?
 16. Has your vision about any national group of people changed?
 17. Do you think that this experience provided you with anything that the students back home do not have?
 18. How do you see your country now, after the mobility stay?