

## **Teaching Ethnography as Modern Languages Method: Legacies and Future Practices for Global Citizens**

### **ABSTRACT**

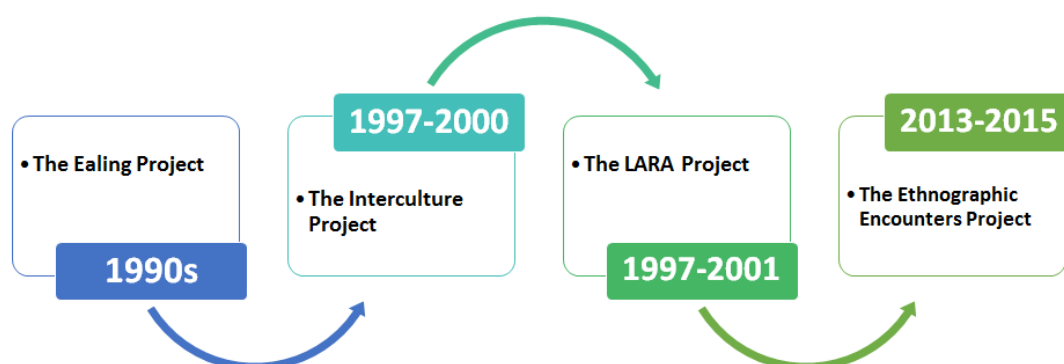
Most modern languages degrees in the UK include a Residence Abroad component, the key aims of which are to help students acquire a greater understanding of a new language and culture and to develop research skills. While the acquisition of linguistic competences has been well documented, cultural learning on the year abroad is less well researched. This article will report on the initial results of research which aims to extend our understanding of how students develop their analytical competences when studying other cultures ethnographically. It is based on an innovative pedagogic project carried out at the University of Southampton, in which students were provided with training in ethnographic methods and digital skills prior to their year abroad. This training and the reflective blog posts that students produced during the year abroad were designed to foreground the process of cultural encounter and learning that students go through in order to carry out their individual Year Abroad Research Projects (YARPs). The paper will present results based on our analysis of the 'raw data' collected by students for their individual ethnographic YARPs (including fieldnotes and diaries), as well as individual interviews, focus group discussions, and the students' reflective blog posts. We will highlight the main areas of successful cultural learning, and the places in which students come up against obstacles in their ethnographic encounters.

**Keywords** Ethnography; Teaching; Residence Abroad; Modern Languages programmes; students as researchers

## Introduction

Over the last decade, ethnography has become increasingly popular as a methodology to engage with the complexity of the world we live in. From sociology to politics, geography and linguistics, ethnography is presented today as a method for understanding people in the complexity of their own lives and when confronted by complex challenges. Ethnography aims to describe life as it is lived and experienced, by a people, somewhere, sometime (Ingold 2018). Following the digital revolution known as the 'Fourth Revolution' this qualitative shift to ethnography fits, paradoxically, with contemporary society defined by self-reflexivity, the rise of individualism and further societal fragmentation (Giddens 1991). In parallel, ethnography has acquired a more visible public and media status which is illustrated by the BBC Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed*, hosted by the sociologist Laurie Taylor. Alongside these developments, anthropology as a discipline has undergone a critical phase of both its theoretical premises and its methodological tools illustrated, for example, by the recent publications in the online journal *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. Several contributions of leading anthropologists have indeed debated the role of ethnography (Ingold 2017; Nader 2011 and Miller 2012) and its broader methodological appeal while participant observation remains described as the basis of the anthropological approach. Ingold (2018: 21), for example, defines anthropology, 'as an inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world' and he goes further in advocating that anthropology is 'a generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit'. This useful distinction invites students and researchers in Modern Languages to engage further with ethnography as a methodological tool drawing on anthropological principles.

In this context, Modern Languages in the UK have followed the global trend by demonstrating a growing interest towards ethnography as part of their broader curriculum. The recent workshop ‘Ethnography and Modern Languages: Critical Reflections’<sup>1</sup> demonstrated the central role ethnography has to play across linguistic, digital, literary and cultural studies (Wells 2018). Yet this is not new as it is inscribed in earlier attempts to engage Modern Languages departments with the content and importance of the compulsory Residence Abroad component of language degrees in HEIs across the UK. The groundbreaking ESRC funded ‘Learning and Residence Abroad (LARA)’<sup>2</sup> project in the 1990s was the first UK initiative to integrate ethnography as part of Modern Languages curriculum.<sup>3</sup> However, the project did not have a transformative effect on the sector and it is only now that it has attracted a renewed interest.



### Figure 1: History and Trajectory of the HEA Project

This background forms the context in which a team of colleagues from the University of Southampton decided in 2014 to develop a new research project in relation to the Residence Abroad and the training of Modern Languages students.

<sup>1</sup> The workshop forms part of the AHRC Open World Research Initiative programme ‘Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community’ organised by Naomi Wells at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London, in November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> ESRC Reference R000232716.

<sup>3</sup> The results took the form of a book published by a team of highly talented linguists, cultural studies specialists and educators from different institutions: Celia Roberts, Michael Byram, Ana Barro, Shirley Jordan and Brian Street (2001) *Language Learners as Ethnographers*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. Modern Languages and Linguistics in Southampton teach a second year module entitled ‘Learning about Culture: Introduction to Ethnography’ on the basis of this project. For more information, see the LARA project <https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/lara-project-materials/> Consulted on 23 May 2018.

The ‘Ethnographic Encounters Project’<sup>4</sup> was funded by the HEA and ran from February 2014-September 2015. This project was part of a broader innovative context in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics in which ethnography is taught alongside other traditional areas of Modern Languages, with a second year optional module entitled ‘Learning about Culture: Introduction to Ethnography’ which was created on the basis of the LARA project. This article will draw on evidence from teaching ethnography in both these contexts: as part of the 18-month Ethnographic Encounters Project to train and support students in carrying out ethnographic research during their year abroad and as part of the semester-long module that culminates in a short-term ‘home ethnography’ assessment. It will use these two contexts to report on the results of research which aims to extend our understanding of how language students develop their analytical competences when studying their own and other cultures ethnographically.

### **Contexts of Residence Abroad, Language Learning and Ethnography**

The practice of ‘study or work abroad’ whose primary purposes centre on becoming proficient in a second language is becoming ever more popular, particularly in the US and Europe (Farrugia et al 2012; European Commission 2014). A number of studies illustrate how Residence Abroad can help learners to develop an understanding of different cultures. Murphy et al. (2014) refer to study abroad as a ‘vehicle for building students’ global competences’ and describe how spending time abroad may influence open-mindedness and cultural awareness. Paige et al. (2009) found that the impact of Residence Abroad for US students was not simply limited to linguistic skills or interests, but had a strong impact on the

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<sup>4</sup> The initial team was originally composed of Dr Heidi Armbruster, Dr Lisa Bernasek, Dr Tony Campbell, Dr Claire Eldridge and Professor Marion Demossier which was then joined by a number of undergraduate students from the project. Dr Lisa Bernasek and Professor Marion Demossier have then worked together to extend the project as part of the curriculum and have since set up a postgraduate research group on Facebook: Debating Ethnography which has had its first three day ethnographic training in April 2018.

participants' social and professional lives, further academic choices and/or global engagement activities. In sum, the Residence Abroad is considered to be one of the most effective means through which an individual can develop linguistic and intercultural competencies in a context which can normally not be replicated in the learner's home country (Gore 2005; Byrham and Feng 2006; Valls Ferrer 2011).

More specifically, Residence Abroad for UK students has become an essential part of a growing number of degree programmes. With Modern Languages departments facing cutbacks and decline, the British Academy has made a powerful case for languages not only in relation to trade and the global economy, but also for greater intercultural understanding, as well as highlighting their value as both the object and vehicle of study and research.<sup>5</sup> It states that:

Understanding the languages, cultures and societies of others, as well as the way in which languages interact with each other and with English, is an important means of improving intercultural interactions and enhancing social well-being at home as well as overseas.

As with other departments preparing their students for the year abroad, Modern Languages in Southampton has seen an increase in the diversity of year abroad configurations experienced by students, from studying through the Erasmus programme to teaching in Mexico with the Anglo Mexican Foundation or working for a tourist park in Brazil.

Generally speaking the Residence Abroad programme is characterised by a light touch approach which is not necessarily embedded into a solid intellectual disciplinary project. Instead there is a tendency for students to remain close to their peers rather than taking risks by becoming completely immersed in the host culture. The year abroad arrangements confirm this ever-increasing control over the encountering process and the

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<sup>5</sup> See The British Academy (2011). *Language Matters More and More: a position statement*. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LMmm%20-%20A%20Position%20Statement.pdf>. Consulted 10 October 2018.

possible risks perceived and associated with the host culture. General intercultural training is the norm, but it impedes the complete anthropological immersion which requires specific training in fieldwork research. Moreover the stranger's gaze<sup>6</sup> that students might develop is confined by the length and quality of the encountering process. Previous research suggests that while a few students are happy to push boundaries, the majority remain nested in their comfort zone as a tourist, forming relationships within a Residence Abroad 'bubble' (Papatsiba 2006), and with close friendships with locals developing only rarely (Mitchell 2015). Although students find themselves negotiating bilingual and multilingual language practices, new social networks established abroad are rarely Target Language-medium-dominant (Mitchell 2014).

Ethnography has been used in the context of the year abroad as a means of developing deeper cultural understanding. Several authors have argued for using ethnography as an integral component of the study abroad curriculum (e.g. Stimpfl 1996), and examples have been developed in US-based study abroad programmes (Jurasek et al. 1996, Ogden 2006). In these cases ethnography is seen as a means of deepening students' cultural immersion in the year abroad location, pushing them to engage more directly with the local communities. It is also seen as a means of developing self-awareness and reflection on students' own assumptions about cultural practices both in the host country and 'at home'. These examples take inspiration from anthropology and ethnographic texts in order to develop the potential of the study abroad experience from an academic viewpoint, in some cases even explicitly reframing study abroad as 'cross-cultural field research' (Stimpfl 1996).<sup>7</sup> However, although students are generally expected to produce a written report or reflection on the ethnographic research carried out, in these examples the focus is not on students' development of a written

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Kelly (2014) suggests that the self-reflexive stranger's gaze which underpins the Modern Languages training may offer a paradigm for research in cultural history and in the humanities more generally.

<sup>7</sup> This article contains a useful, if somewhat dated, annotated bibliography of ethnographic texts by anthropologists focusing on the fieldwork experience itself.

analysis based on key anthropological concepts, but rather on seeing the ethnographic research experience as a central means of developing students' intercultural learning:

...ethnography at its most fundamental level of inquiry can be reframed as the learning core or paradigm through which the field of education abroad will be better positioned to guide students toward becoming autonomous cultural learners and explorers who can describe, understand, analyze, appreciate, and enjoy intercultural differences. (Ogden 2006, p. 97)

Although the potential of ethnographic writing as a means of analysing the data collected, or the 'intercultural' experiences, is not fully explored in these examples, in the work of Shirley Jordan ethnographic writing is the key focus (Jordan 2001, Jordan 2002). Her research on the process by which students develop their 'ethnographic eye' through both research and writing was one of the key inspirations for the Ethnographic Encounters Project in the UK.

In the context of UK Higher Education, the use of ethnography during the Residence Abroad, and in language teaching more generally, developed alongside an interest in developing students' 'intercultural competence' (e.g. Byram and Fleming 1998). In one of the early examples of the use of ethnography in the language classroom described by Byram and Cain (1998), ethnographically-informed materials were used as primary sources within language classrooms alongside small-scale observation exercises in the students' own society in order to:

- allow learners to reconsider the position of their own culture and cultural practices in comparison with that of another community;
- take the students' own society and its cultural practices as a focus of the teaching;
- provide learners with a body of knowledge about some aspects of another country and its cultural practices. (Byram and Cain 1998 p. 37)

In this example ethnography was used both as material to provide information on another cultural context, but also as a way to develop a new way of seeing the students' own cultural context with the ultimate aim of developing 'such flexibility in the students that they can

accept other interpretative systems and relate them to their own' (Byram and Cain 1998 p.37).

Ethnography as a means of developing intercultural competence and deeper cultural learning was taken further with the ESRC-funded LARA project (1997-2001), which produced a number of publications (Barro et al. 1998, Roberts et al. 2001) as well as a set of resources for a semester-long ethnography module at undergraduate level,<sup>8</sup> on which the module at the University of Southampton is based. This project and its accompanying materials put anthropological concepts like culture and cultural knowledge at the heart of developing students' 'ethnographic eye' (Roberts et al. 2001), encouraging students to 'make strange' the world around them by exploring themes such as gender relations, local politics, eating habits, or language usage. The module based on this project culminates in a short-term 'home ethnography' in which students (ideally) bring together the ethnographic sensibilities developed in the module through collecting data on a particular topic and analysing that data using concepts explored and developed over the course of the semester. The possibilities and limitations of this approach, based on its application in a semester-long module at the University of Southampton, will be discussed later in this article.

In this context of the developing relationship between ethnography, language learning<sup>9</sup>, and the Residence Abroad, Modern Languages and Linguistics in Southampton has developed over the years three main disciplinary strands prior to the third year: linguistics, ethnography/anthropology and 'text based' approaches which includes history, literary and cultural studies. A typical second year student preparing for the year abroad will attend two modules which cover both the intellectual and disciplinary framework attached to the year abroad project and the more administrative and practical preparation for the year abroad. In

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<sup>8</sup> The teaching resources from the LARA project were digitised as part of the Ethnographic Encounters Project and can be accessed at: <https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/lara-project-materials/> (accessed 28 June 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see <http://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/archives-of-previous-projects/> Consulted on 23 May 2018.



parallel to an introduction to each of these fields, students will be able to choose a number of modules enabling them to consolidate the learning already acquired. In the case of ethnography, there is a first year module 'Introduction to Ethnographic Studies: Food and Culture', a second year module 'Learning about Culture: Introduction to Ethnography', as well as second and final year specialist modules in German, French, Spanish and Latin American studies.

### **The HEA-funded 'Ethnographic Encounters Project' (2014-2015)**

In order to consolidate and develop the existing offering for language students interested in ethnography at the University of Southampton, a team applied to the Higher Education Academy to carry out a project under its Departmental Teaching Development Grants scheme. The research carried out in conjunction with this pedagogic project was mindful of major transformations in learning processes attached to new forms of communication technology and the increasing development of academic audit cultures (as expressed in risk assessments and ethics procedures). It sought to answer the following questions: How do students engage with other cultures during their year abroad? What are the main obstacles to this process of encountering? To what extent could the process of cultural encountering be supported by academic training in ethnography and digital literacy? To what extent does ethnography encourage a more analytical understanding of the process of encountering? More broadly, it sought to engage students with key skills such as observation, deep and meaningful engagement, listening and communicative skills as well as analytical and intercultural competences.

At the core of the training, the project set out some ambitious goals. Students had to develop a common set of key skills - observing, listening, decoding and writing in a

multilingual setting - as well as engage with their position as researchers mediating and bridging different cultural and social experiences while developing a reflexive perspective on the encountering process. These skills were seen as providing a unique form of production of knowledge because of its transnational, transdisciplinary and comparative nature. By modelling innovative teaching and learning practices that made creative use of multimedia technologies (documenting experience through photography, film and audio recordings as well as digital fieldnotes and reflexive blog posts), the digital literacy component of the project further enhanced students' capabilities as digital producers.

The HEA project also engaged students with questions surrounding the copyright, management, and archiving of multimedia data, which are issues that all HEIs are increasingly having to consider. In the long-term, it aimed at building an archive of raw data collected by students which can be used as a teaching and learning resource for the wider HE sector. In terms of the student learning experience, the project expected to offer an innovative and interactive way for students to gain a range of new skills. Each student ethnographic project was unique and ownership lay with the student. Through participation in the project students gained experience of designing, managing, and ultimately disseminating their own research project and findings, both to their fellow students and to wider communities<sup>10</sup>.

A schedule of activities took place during the second year once we selected a cohort of ten students who applied to join the project. The selection was to represent as many languages and countries as possible to bring more diversity to the small sample. Motivation was crucial to the project. Between February 2014 and June 2014 the students attended a number of key training events in which students and staff contributed both as trainers and researchers as we recorded most sessions. These included:

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<sup>10</sup> Students were given the opportunity to present their work to staff and members of the public through the open day and a year abroad conference. An exhibition and the website where they posted their blogs helped with the wider dissemination.

- A series of ethnographic methods training sessions, which included an initial session in which students presented their respective project overview and benefitted from feedback given by the training staff and the peer group. Following this a Q&A session on ‘Doing Ethnography’ was given by two members of staff and was then used as a general discussion on ethnographic methods and ethical issues. Students were then given the possibility of joining a session focused on ethnographic methods within a second-year taught module. The training was then supported by individual discussions of their projects.
- Students were advised on archiving of research materials and data management.
- A digital literacy skills assessment and training session was offered as well to enable them to use the project blog.
- All the Students were provided with audio recorders and small video cameras.
- An E-Folio<sup>11</sup> Ethnographic Encounters blog site was established and students were asked to write initial posts.

A number of outcomes which were developed were seen as instrumental to the ethnographic training enabling students to engage with some key areas underlying the development of a solid research project prior to the study abroad. Through training sessions and initial discussions, students established their research aims, questions, and key methods before going into the field. Following consultation with the students they were asked to write on average eight blog posts per semester as part of a reflective research process.

We established two websites for the project to gather resources and facilitate communication. The internal blogging site (E-Folio) was used during the project for students to post their reflective blog posts during the year abroad, and for staff to post resources from training sessions and external sources (e.g. ethics guidance and examples of ethnographic research blogs). This site was accessible only by students and staff involved with the project. The public website (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters>) was developed towards the end of the project by a student intern to disseminate the project more widely. The website has since been disseminated through various Modern Languages forums such as the project workshop held in November 2015<sup>12</sup>, the Ethnography and Modern Languages workshop in November 2017, and the recent Southampton Debating Ethnography Facebook

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<sup>11</sup> E-Folio is an internal University of Southampton blogging platform, running WordPress.

<sup>12</sup> <https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ethnographicencounters/category/conference/>

group<sup>13</sup>. This website includes resources from the training sessions and other guidance on carrying out ethnographic research, excerpts from blog posts, testimonies from students, interviews with key figures in work related to ethnography for language learners, a shared bibliography, and a variety of other resources.

### **Findings from the Ethnographic Encounters Project**

At the onset of the HEA project and the teaching of ethnography to Modern Languages students we were seeking to answer the question of how ethnography can enhance the process of engaging with the host culture. Could academic training in ethnography and digital literacy support and deepen the process of cultural encountering? As the research progressed, and in reflection and discussion with students on their return to Southampton, other questions also began to arise. Did the ethnographic training provide students with the tools to process the data they had collected? Would more development of anthropological concepts help them to process this data more easily? How far should we encourage students to go ‘outside their comfort zone?’ Are we able to support them enough in developing this type of engagement?

All these questions could be summed up under the year abroad ‘experience’ and what it does to our students as a transformative praxis in linguistic and cultural terms. Students in Modern Languages cultivate linguistic and cultural ambiguities, mediating different worlds of meaning, words and experiences like the anthropologist (Kelly 2014). They are learners as cultural mediators and Modern Languages departments offer a specific set of powerful skills and experiences especially during the year abroad that can have the potential to empower students to become well-rounded, and critical individuals equipped for our modern and diverse world. They start on a journey taking them from language learning to more

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DebatingEthnography.soton/>

meaningful experiences of otherness, from the close reading of Zola to contemporary discussions of ethnicity. Yet their position as students of languages and cultures is reminiscent of that of an anthropologist at the outset of his or her fieldwork, ‘making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar’, a step fundamental to any anthropological investigation. As Georgia Hall stated (2018: 16), ‘Ethnography is therefore a search for meaning in context, rather than objective or generalizable “truths”’.

The search for meaning in context does not come naturally and it requires intensive training in both ethnography as a research method and in grasping key concepts in the fields of knowledge relevant to Modern Languages. The format of the HEA project focused on training students in developing their understanding of ethnographic methods, and encouraging them to use the blog as a space to reflect on the ongoing process of data collection and engagement with the local setting. Students posted their ethnographic observations which were then commented upon by the team with the aim of developing an ethnographic sensibility. The project was largely successful in developing students’ ethnographic understanding and their abilities to reflect on the research process; there was clear evidence from training sessions and blog posts of developing awareness and understanding of what it means to ‘do ethnography’. The majority of the students did indeed produce a wealth of ethnographic data, position themselves as researchers and explore key methodological issues. In a feedback session held with the students after their return to Southampton, several commented that the ethnographic research process gave them the motivation to engage with others, to go outside their comfort zone, and the confidence to talk about their research project. Overall most of them enjoyed the reflexive process of ethnography and came back with an appreciation for the new perspectives that are opened up through developing the “ethnographic eye”.

We found, however, that over the course of the project students' engagement was extremely varied and that writing played an important role in the process of describing the encountering process. Despite a wide range of engagements towards the topic, most students acknowledged the ethnographic experience as transformative. In the case of one student who had spent her year in France, the ethnographic material was so rich that several posts were published on a monthly basis. However, in her written project the rich ethnographic data never translated into a cogent argument about the decline of the French language in the face of globalisation. For this student (Irina), who now defines herself as an ethnographer, and who was one of the most prolific bloggers, her YARP included a wealth of ethnographic material while her theoretical framework around Republican ideology and language practices was less-developed. Yet her material was invaluable:

Although, I haven't conducted any formal interviews yet with the family members, I have been doing a lot of observing and keeping a field diary of when, where, who etc uses English around the house. Interestingly, I have found that a fair amount of English words can be heard chez-moi, especially concerning songs. For example, one day after school, the youngest member of the family came home with some school mates (about 14 years old), and decided to give a couple of very loud but very good renditions of the songs "Happy" by Pharrell Williams, and "I'm singing in the rain" – originally made famous I believe by Gene Kelley; not realising that I was stood outside the kitchen. I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that the girls knew most of the words in English by heart, and managed to sing these songs with a pretty good English accent. [Irina 2014]

In other cases the blog became a space for reflection on their research process and especially on their own positions as researchers. This was one of the major achievements of this project as most of the students felt that they became researchers in their own right. One of the students who worked for an ecotourism venue in her placement in Brazil identified key questions attached to land ownership and tourism as areas of tensions as soon as she arrived. However, she was never able to follow up this question in the midst of her participant observation and found herself struggling with time management and separating 'work' from

'ethnography' as her job was very demanding. Some students realised that engaging self-reflexively with the limitations in their ethnographic enquiries activated a valuable learning process during their research. Laurence, for example, described the challenge encountered before throwing herself into a long series of pieces for the blog. She starts her autobiography post by saying:

I've always dreaded writing about myself, writing autobiographies, motivation letters, CVs or any kind of information about my likes, dislikes, passions and hopes. I guess it sort of forces you to have a look at yourself from an outside perspective, to step away for a bit from your continuously growing or stagnating self, which is both complicated and challenging [Laurence 2014].

But later the whole experience becomes a source of anxiety leaving behind the whole philosophy attached to ethnography as an inductive method:

A newbie in a yet another foreign country, difficulties with the language, and on top of everything the challenge of having to start over thinking about a new YARP...[Laurence 2014]

The project provided a productive space for students to reflect on these challenges and to document their own research process which are all invaluable research skills. However, where the project was less successful was in supporting students to take the data collected and turn it into a piece of analytical ethnographic writing. Students found ethnographic writing challenging as a genre and the essay format they had been used to as students deterred them from engaging innovatively with the writing process. It is clear that allowing students to navigate different writing formats and explore freely both the digital and creative world of writing would benefit them. This was reflected in markers' comments as the students struggled in the exercise of the Year Abroad Research Project (YARP) even when their blogs and description were extremely rich, engaged and critical. While students were sometimes able to use interview data successfully in their analysis, the ethnographic observations were

not as fully developed as data sources. Even in one case of a student studying a local dance form in Spain where we saw clear evidence of participant observation and reflection on the blog, a marker commented that there was ‘no report of your observations and how these have informed your argument’. This could be interpreted as a lack of solid theoretical framework provided to students in the area of dance, politics of arts and national/regional identity but also a difficulty with combining the analytical aspects of an argument with evidence provided through intensive participant-observation<sup>14</sup>.

Another area of concern which arose was the emotional impact of the intense ethnographic engagement that some students developed. For one of our trainees, one of the first blogs was dedicated to the emotional encountering process that she described as challenging and transformative:

“Ethnographic Encounters”- what even does this mean? My first association with this expression were the emotional outbreaks I had with my host mother in a small town in Sardinia, Italy during a year abroad as a fifteen-year-old girl who had never left her hometown Vienna alone before. I felt intimidated by all the shouting of “*mamma*” until I realised that it had less to do with myself but more with her way of leading a relationship with her kids and indeed, she made me feel like I was part of the family. This experience first drew my attention to differences in cultures and at that time I started to be excited about exploring different values and mind-sets of people [Marta 2014].

On returning to university three of them expressed this in our feedback/follow up sessions, saying, for example, that they had found it difficult to step back from the relationships formed and to write about people who had become their friends as research subjects. Two students who expressed this concern were also two of the least active on the blog, meaning that we had not been able to identify their difficulties and provide support or guidance while

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that this could have been better managed as our departmental rules did not enable us to supervise these students individually when abroad and most of our supervisors were not necessarily equipped to provide the adequate theoretical literature or expertise in ethnographic research and writing.



they were in the field. As Marta argued when she was describing her ethnography of the French *banlieue*, taking a position means you are one side or the other:

This is when I realised how precious first impressions are, they are uninfluenced opinions that you build up about a place, images that you create and thoughts that will never be the same anymore- and with getting to know the place, they are quickly forgotten. Of course, one needs to be careful with them because they can be wrong, but to my mind this initial intuition about a place has a lot of meaning for people [Marta 2014].

In this case the student's clear engagement with the local setting and members of the community was not translated into a successful ethnographic piece, with markers commenting that the ethnographic material was 'underused' and 'superficial'. The student herself acknowledged this in our feedback session, explaining that she found it difficult to interview people or carry out 'more formal research' once she was immersed in the *banlieue* as she felt that she was unconsciously contributing to the negative portrayal of the place. For us, this was a real achievement.

The examples discussed above provide encouraging evidence of the usefulness of ethnographic research methods in pushing students to engage more directly with their surroundings during their period of Residence Abroad. The blog entries and follow up discussions showed that research carried out through participant observation, interviews, focus groups and other forms of qualitative data collection resulted in an often transformative engagement with the Residence Abroad setting. However, the difficulties students faced in incorporating this rich data into their analytical written research projects point us towards the importance of further training in ethnographic writing, in valuing the data arising from ethnographic observations and translating this into an analytical piece. Some of the intensity of students' research experiences also pushes us to think through how best to advise students

on negotiating the role of student researcher in an immersive, but highly politically sensitive setting.

### **Findings from teaching *Learning about Culture: Introduction to Ethnography***

As explained above this module runs over a full semester and introduces language students to ethnography as a method and as an ontological commitment to human beings as cultural creatures. The learning materials are partly adapted from the LARA project already described, partly designed by the tutor(s). One of the main ambitions of the course is to help students to understand language learning as a process of cultural learning. This includes moving beyond what they may habitually associate with ‘culture’, such as the ‘customs’ of the countries they choose for their year abroad, and to locate culture instead in the ‘everyday’ and in their own routine practices and encounters.

In teaching students ethnographic ways of seeing, we want to support a reflective process that moves away from what they might expect of ‘content’ courses in Modern Languages, namely to offer classic ‘area studies’ or factual knowledge about a specific country or region. Instead the ambition is to open horizons towards a more complex, messier and potentially more elusive idea of culture as a system of meanings which informs who we are and what we think and do.

One of the key orientations of the module is therefore to ‘make the familiar strange’, rather than vice versa, and to look at our own everyday practices with the imagined eyes of a stranger. ‘What happens in a gym?’ ‘How do young women create gender identities on Instagram?’ ‘What is the cultural meaning of a student ‘night out?’’ ‘What does my family expect from a holiday in Egypt?’ ‘What is the meaning of work in the fast food restaurant that employs me?’ These and similar titles reflect the exciting range of projects students

eventually develop, often fully taking on board that they can look differently at what they thought they already knew.

The module draws on anthropological concepts and themes (such as kinship, gender, material culture, social space) and introduces students to key methods of participant observation and ethnographic interviewing. It takes a task-based approach to learning and requires students to complete a small ethnographic project of their own. This means that the course confronts students with a number of novel ideas and theories as well as the requirement to learn and apply a method which heavily involves the researcher's own persona and can throw up challenges for students who have never conducted empirical social research. Some of these challenges have also transpired in the Encounters project, as the discussion above on students' blog posts makes clear. Having to do interviews with strangers can simply be a disconcerting prospect.

In Armbruster's experience of teaching this module as a trained social anthropologist in a Modern Languages environment there have also been lessons for the teacher. One key insight about teaching ethnography as a method is that it is best understood as a process of 'learning by doing'. It is only by going through the actual *labour* of learning from insiders that we pick up what is culturally relevant in given circumstances and develop a *felt* understanding of what doing ethnography means. There is no textbook replacement for processes of familiarising ourselves with a given scene, engaging with people, encountering their preparedness or hesitation to answer our questions, learning the modes of communication at play, sensing an environment, trying and failing. In other words, getting students out of the classroom and into the 'field' is key.

A fruitful challenge for teaching our students, therefore, has been to invite them to embrace ethnographic practice as a process of participatory, embodied and experiential learning which may require stepping out of one's comfort zone, and making this process

productive for learning rather than for emotional withdrawal. While many students generally embrace this idea, some find it daunting and realize ethnography is not for them. To recognise the importance of fine grained detail, to know what to observe and how to take notes are other standard challenges involved in ethnographic learning, heightened in this case by the course orientation of ‘making the familiar strange’ which requires recognising cultural constructions and tacit knowledges in contexts of familiarity. Further, while the ethnographic method involves the refreshingly accessible human practice of being ‘social’, it is also fraught with the challenge of making these encounters productive for a scholarly (i.e. theoretical) purpose.

Linking diverse and often patchy findings from the empirical work to the conceptual and theoretical probably represents one of the biggest challenges for students (and other ethnographers). Their projects are small-scale and conducted in what Jeffrey and Troman (2004: 538) have usefully called the ‘compressed time mode’ which is imposed by the semester dates in this case but increasingly informs how ethnography gets done more widely.

Two examples shall briefly illustrate successful ways in which students have approached this task. The first project, aptly named ‘Looking the Part: How are Social Norms Regarding ‘Dress’ Practiced, Learnt, and Accepted by Teenage College Girls?’ involved the study of fashion and style among nine female college students aged between 15-17 who were also friends. Through observing these students’ lengthy ‘morning routines’ and conducting informal conversations and interviews the researcher was able to explore the significance of fashion and appearance for these young women’s sense of self. Drawing on theoretical notions of ‘socialisation’, ‘ritual’, ‘performativity’ and ‘gender’ she analysed the significance of ‘looking good’ as a cultural practice of peer belonging and normative femininity. In ‘The Appeal of Nocturnality: An Ethnographic Investigation into Clubbing’ another student explored the significance of the ‘night out’ among university students in Southampton. He

too drew on notions of ‘ritual’ and made references to Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) ‘Rites of Passage’ to analyse the transformative practices of ‘clubbing’ where patrons ‘transgress’ everyday behavioural norms through excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. Drawing on perceptive observations and the language of his informants he presented a well-supported study about what he called cultural practices of ‘escapism’. Both projects (based on the Christmas break as a fieldwork period) were impressive for their successful application of an ethnographic lens to the researchers’ own familiar cultural environments, and made some effective use of theoretical principles for analysis. They also included comments on researcher reflexivity which illustrated how these novice ethnographers had learned from their informants. In many ways this is the most important aim of the course. Its main ambition does not lie in transforming Modern Language students into fully formed ethnographers or anthropologists, but in helping them to acquire an ethnographic sensibility and a heightened cultural sensitivity for research both at home and abroad.

### **Conclusions: Drawing lessons from teaching ethnography for students in languages**

Behind our HEA project lay a more engaged ideological positioning attached to the notion of global citizens which we defined as ‘people who want to learn about and take action on the world’s biggest challenges’. As teachers, we consider it important to foster students’ critical awareness of the world in which we live. In the context of a major digital revolution in which time and space have become largely compressed and key skills such as writing, listening and speaking have been the object of major ‘revolutions’, the team was inspired to transform the year abroad experience into a meaningful process of cultural learning. This is the context in which ethnography has a role to play as a key training skill. More than ever our task is now to educate, train and engage students critically with a world in which issues of communication,

understanding, translation and difference have become central to processes of contemporary identification and conflict.

In this context, ethnographic training can provide a starting point for managing anxieties of ‘culture shock’ during the year abroad and for critical reflection on one’s own place in the world. It also offers potential for bridging different academic traditions and is particularly well-suited for Modern Languages students who regularly deal with questions of meaning and translation (see also Kleinman 2016). Alpa Shah (2017: 47) defines the power of ethnography particularly succinctly. As she puts it it relies on:

living with and being a part of other people’s lives as fully as possible. It enables us to discover new ways of thinking about, seeing, and acting in the world. It does so by being inherently democratic not only because of its pedagogy of a two-way process of exchange between educator and educated but also because it ensures that we explore all aspects of the lives of the people we are working with, recognize their interconnections.

However, ethnography takes time to learn and needs opportunities for practice. The length of stay for productive learning outcomes, the role of supervision and training in developing those skills as well as the solid theoretical basis students need to acquire are all challenges that need to be addressed from year one in the undergraduate curriculum. This, we hope, provides food for thought on the ways in which we need to embed the year abroad in the Higher Education context.

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