Teaching Practice Abroad for Developing Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teachers

Karin Vogt

Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg/Heidelberg University of Education

Abstract

For foreign-language students, living abroad for a period of time during their studies is often a compulsory component of their university degrees. Similarly, European preservice teachers have the opportunity to complete a work placement at a partner school in a target language country. In this way, future English as a foreign language teachers have the chance not only to foster their linguistic and intercultural competence, but also to experience a different professional and institutional culture and ideally enhance their professional skills. The present study focuses on the perspectives of 35 undergraduate preservice teachers based in Germany who completed a 3-month teaching practice placement in Ireland or the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2014. In this research project, data from 5 years of reflective reports (*n* = 276) underwent content analysis, were complimented with focus group discussions (*n* = 6) after the preservice teachers' stay abroad, and were analyzed for the potential of teaching practice placements for professionalization and intercultural learning processes. Results indicate that there seems to be an increase in cultural awareness in general, albeit to a different extent with different participants, with the professionalization aspect taking particular importance and being closely tied to intercultural development.

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche menée entre 2010 et 2014 auprès de 35 étudiants se préparant à devenir professeurs d'anglais langue étrangère et ayant réalisé un séjour de 3 mois en tant que stagiaires auprès de diverses écoles primaires et collèges au Royaume-Uni et en Irlande. Dans le but d'analyser le développement de l'apprentissage interculturel tel que le perçoivent les futurs enseignants, une analyse de données provenant de 276 textes de réflexion et de six entrevues de groupe a été entreprise. Les résultats indiquent que les attentes des étudiants sont étroitement liées à l'idée qu'ils se font de leur perfectionnement professionnel. L'accroissement de la compétence interculturelle ne peut pas être décrit de façon linéaire, mais plutôt en tant que profil de compétence individuelle. Les résultats suggèrent que les stages dans les écoles se distinguent visiblement des séjours d'études universitaires à l'étranger.

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Teachers as Agents of Social Change

The importance of being able to communicate effectively with interlocutors from various backgrounds, cultural backgrounds included, is a necessity not only for today's global citizens but also for pedagogical staff in particular (e.g., Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015; Moule, 2012; Papatsiba, 2003). Interculturally competent teachers help enhance mutual understanding and a pluralistic society, endorsing the "ideals of global education" (Paik et al., 2015, p. 102). Intercultural competence is therefore a crucial skill for teachers as key influencers in the classroom and as multipliers of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Being interculturally competent is particularly important for foreign language teachers since their mission is not only teaching the target language but also aspects of the target culture(s). Foreign language teachers need to have an excellent command of the target language and must be intercultural speakers (Kramsch, 1993), given their vital role as multipliers of knowledge in an educational context. Yet several studies have shown that, although there seems to be consensus among teachers regarding the necessity of teacher intercultural competence, they themselves often lack intercultural competence (Burkart & Thompson, 2014; Mahon, 2006).

Study abroad seems to be a way to enhance intercultural competence in teachers. Alfaro and Quedada (2010) contended that teachers who leave their home culture behind in order to teach abroad in a different cultural context on a semipermanent basis tend to become more open and more culturally minded. This, in turn, might be beneficial for their task of developing intercultural competence in their learners—an especially salient goal of language teachers. Since 2007, European preservice teachers have had the opportunity to obtain scholarships for teaching practice placements at schools in other countries. This special form of study abroad seems promising because it enables preservice teachers to live in the target language culture for a period of time, develop their language and intercultural competence, and enhance their professionalism at the same time.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the development of intercultural competence with 35 preservice teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) based in Germany who each spent 3 months in Wales or the Republic of Ireland teaching different subjects at a primary or secondary school. After briefly defining the terms and conceptualizations of intercultural competence and reviewing Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence as the underlying theoretical framework, I will outline previous work involving the development of intercultural competence during periods of study abroad with the target group of teachers and preservice teachers and then report on the present study. Due to the wealth of data in the study, only the results relating to intercultural competence will be considered, contrasting participants' own expectations and perceived outcomes of their teaching practice abroad, and analyzing instances of intercultural competence during their stay abroad.

Terminology and Theoretical Framework

Study abroad can be seen as an educational experience of a learner, typically at a higher education level, and taking place in a variety of contexts and for a variety of

purposes (Kushner & Karim, 2004). Kinginger (2009) defined study abroad as "a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes" (p. 11). Collentine (2009) highlighted the language development aspect of study abroad, seeing study abroad as the "context [that] takes place in countries where the L2 enjoys an important sociological and functional status, entailing a combination of planned curriculum and host family" (p. 218). Intercultural and experiential learning objectives are also typically associated with study abroad (see Engle & Engle, 2003, for a classification). In many contexts, study abroad functions as part of a university degree program that enhances professionalization and global citizenship through increased opportunities for intercultural and experiential learning, among others.

To begin to understand interculturality and intercultural competence, one first needs to define the underlying term *culture*. Although agreeing with Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) in that "culture is notoriously difficult to define" (p. 13), I align myself with Geertz's (1973) definition of culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action" (p. 83). I have chosen this exemplary definition because it focuses on the attitudinal, cognitive, and action-oriented aspects of culture as well as the indication of an external, visible representation and an internal representation related to norms, values, and so forth.

It is by no means any easier to define the term *intercultural competence*. Deardorff (2011) stated almost resignedly that "intercultural competence is an often-discussed but rarely understood and defined term within the field of international education and beyond" (p. 37). Again, there is a plethora of conceptualizations with inconsistent terminology for the ability to effectively communicate with speakers from diverse backgrounds. Terms vary from *intercultural competence* or *intercultural communicative competence* to *intercultural communication competence*, *intercultural sensitivity*, or *intercultural awareness* (see Timpe, 2013, p. 21, for an overview). Despite the numerous attempts to conceptualize intercultural competence, there is no unanimously agreed upon definition. Bennett and Bennett (2004) defined the term as "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 149). This definition highlights both the utilitarian aspect (effectiveness) and the aspect of adequacy (appropriateness) of the intercultural situation. Hammer (2009) has taken a different angle, seeing intercultural competence from the individual's point of view as "the capability of shifting perspective and behavior according to cultural context" (p. 209). As divergent as theoretical models might be in their terminology and subcomponents, they also share similarities. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) maintained that all models of intercultural competence known to them include affective, action-oriented, and cognitive elements.

It is obvious that the conceptual clarity that Ruben (1989) called for over two decades ago has not been achieved. The theoretical framework that I have chosen for the present study is Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence. I selected this model because it best applies to foreign language learners in an institutional educational context such as school or university. Nevertheless, it considers different locations of learning, namely the classroom, independent learning outside of institutional contexts, and field learning in real-time intercultural encounters. Study abroad—especially by preservice teachers—could be subsumed under field learning. The model integrates communicative competence and intercultural competence but looks at intercultural competence separately at the same time, which is relevant for my sample of preservice teachers who are also learners of the foreign language. I chose this model as a theoretical

framework for other reasons as well. First, Byram's model is the only one that includes aspects of linguistic and cultural learning. In fact, it comprises the formulation of abstract learning objectives and thus caters explicitly to foreign language learners. Second, it has been the most influential model of intercultural competence in the European context, with parts of it having found their way into the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), the highly important language policy document in Europe and beyond. Third, the model has had a considerable impact on foreign language research with studies aiming to operationalize the model (Burwitz-Melzer, 2003) or using it as a basis for assessing intercultural competence or parts of it (e.g., Vogt, 2006).

Intercultural competence as a part of Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence model comprises five components he called *savoirs*. *Savoir être* refers to "attitudes" of "curiosity and openness" and the willingness to relativize one's own meanings and behaviours as well as the willingness to value those of others by not seeing one's own as the only possible meanings and values. A reflective and analytical challenge is called for to relativize one's own and value others' beliefs or behaviours. It comprises knowledge (i.e., *savoir*) of how social groups in one's own and the interlocutor's cultures function. It also encompasses knowledge about processes of interaction. *Savoir comprendre*, the "skills of interpreting and relating," and *savoir apprendre/faire*, the "skills of discovering and interacting," constitute the two-part domain of skills. The skills of interpreting and relating refer to the ability to draw on existent knowledge and elicit meanings from significant phenomena from another culture, such as a document or event, and relate them to like phenomena in one's own. The skills of discovering and interacting represent the ability to acquire and operate new knowledge of another culture, as well as the ability to interact with particular interlocutors and manage the constraints of real-time communication, mutual perceptions, and attitudes in a given situation. *Savoir s'engager* refers to "critical cultural awareness," more specifically the ability to evaluate critically cultural perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures by using explicit criteria.

Literature Review: Study Abroad and Interculturality

One of the main objectives of study abroad programs is the advancement of students' cultural awareness and intercultural competence in order to empower them as learners and to help them function effectively as members of a globalized workforce and as global citizens. A discernible focus in the literature on the development of intercultural competence in the context of study abroad is the target group of undergraduate students. Numerous studies on interculturality in the context of students' study abroad have highlighted their intercultural learning outcomes (e.g., Brogan & Ó Laoire, 2011; Merino & Avello, 2014; Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2011). Yang et al. (2011) surveyed 214 Hong Kong university students engaging in different types of overseas experiences in 20 different countries. Matching expectations and (perceived) outcomes, the researchers found that students' intercultural learning outcomes are better if they are encouraged to set goals for their intercultural development. Brogan and Ó Laoire (2011) administered language tests and questionnaires to 146 students of German on an ERASMUS study abroad before and after their study abroad period, finding that students showed a marked increase in certain areas of cultural knowledge, such as everyday lifestyle, but not in all of them. While most studies have focused on the study abroad period, one emerging direction in current study

abroad research seems to be learners' experience after their return home (Kartoshkina, 2015). For example, Merino and Avello (2014) investigated the intercultural awareness of 26 first language (L1) English and 28 L1 Catalan speakers immediately after and 15 months after a period of study abroad, asking them to write compositions on a cultural topic. Results suggested that the study abroad context seemed to benefit learners' cultural development, especially immediately after the study abroad period.

      Although a discernible focus in the literature has been on undergraduate students, the subgroup of preservice teachers (or teachers in general) has not been a key area of interest so far. Some research, however, has been done on their development of intercultural competence in or following a residence or study abroad experience. As far as inservice teachers are concerned, Plews, Beckenbridge, and Cambre (2010) and, subsequently, Plews, Beckenbridge, Cambre, and Fernandes (2014) looked into the intercultural and professional experiences of Mexican inservice teachers of English on a 3-month language monitor program in Canada during which they were to improve their linguistic and cross-cultural skills. Using a narrative-based approach in their first study, the researchers asked the participants to compose stories to present outcomes (Plews et al., 2010); the teachers rated their stay as a success, indicating that, in addition to linguistic, cultural, and experiential learning, one emergent aspect of teachers' study abroad seems to be their evolving professional identity in this context. Plews et al. (2010, 2014) underlined the necessity of particular curriculum structures for international teacher development programs, highlighting the beneficial aspect of cooperation with host teachers and interaction with homestay hosts. Paik et al. (2015) investigated 22 international inservice teachers on a U.S.-based short-term structured program that consisted of a formal university training course on teaching methodology, experience at local schools, and cultural activities in the host country. Survey questionnaires and interviews were employed and the authors found that a combination of classroom instruction, roommate experience, and leisure activities organized by the program had a positive effect on participants' intercultural awareness. Informants also enhanced their teaching skills, particularly in terms of a changed pedagogical perspective, for example, regarding differentiated learning or learner-centredness. Roskvist, Harvey, Corder, and Stacey (2015) studied two New Zealand inservice teachers in 1-year overseas study abroad programs in Europe, looking into their perceived linguistic gains and factors that would hinder or encourage their linguistic development. Both teachers assessed their linguistic gains in a positive way. The authors identified involvement in the wider life of the school, resulting in a professional-personal network, as one decisive beneficial factor.

      The intercultural competence development of preservice teachers of foreign languages seems to be even more neglected in the research literature. Ehrenreich (2004) studied 22 foreign language teaching assistants from Germany who were enrolled in a teacher education program in order to become EFL teachers. By the time of their research interviews, they had all spent one school year in English-speaking countries. Ehrenreich reported that the informants in her study developed an increased affinity to the target culture, but a continuous or systematic development of intercultural competence could not be discerned in the data, probably due to a lack of formal instruction in theoretical concepts of intercultural competence. She contended that the gains of this type of study abroad can only be described individually, being determined by numerous variables, something that Kinginger (2009) also put forward for study abroad in general (see also Wong, 2015, for a critical discussion of study abroad outcomes regarding intercultural learning). Ehrenreich

recommended better integration of teaching assistantships abroad in the students' home curriculum, as a measure to enable the systematic development of intercultural competence and to improve preservice education as a whole. Meanwhile, Wong (2015) has been critical of interventionist approaches, advocating alternative instructional approaches such as situated learning. While ERASMUS study abroad programs at university are relatively well researched (e.g., Coleman, 1998; Maiworm, Steube, & Teichler, 1991; Merino & Avello, 2014; Teichler, 1997, 2015), studies on ERASMUS work placements at schools abroad are rather scarce, probably because funding for teaching practice programs has only be available since 2007. As one notable exception, Diehr (2013) investigated the outcomes of teaching practice placements abroad using the European teacher portfolio EPOSTL. German preservice teachers of EFL assessed themselves on their perceived language and intercultural outcomes of teaching practice placements in the United Kingdom. The study is still in progress, therefore the findings have yet to be published.

In sum, study abroad research has mostly targeted undergraduate modern languages students, occasionally inservice teachers, and only rarely preservice teachers. Data were usually collected from informants immediately after their study abroad experience, or otherwise studies had a pre-/post-design and did not gather data during their experience, giving informants little time to reflect on cultural aspects they experienced. Little is known about instances of intercultural learning or the development of intercultural competence with preservice language teachers during their teaching practice placements abroad. The present study aims to close this gap in the literature by investigating instances of intercultural learning during preservice teachers' teaching practice placements, along with their expectations and perceived outcomes of their study abroad experience with a focus on interculturality.

The Study

Research Questions

The research interest of the present study lies in the intercultural learning processes and professional development of future EFL teachers during their teaching practice placement at schools in target-language countries. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the expectations of EFL preservice teachers before their teaching practice placement in the target language country?
2. What are the subjectively perceived outcomes after the teaching practice placement abroad? How do these relate to interculturality?
3. What instances of intercultural learning can be observed?

Study Design

The study design is qualitative with two research instruments, namely reflective reports by participants and focus group discussions with previous outgoing and future outgoing preservice teachers. In line with Dörnyei (2007), I understand that qualitative research explores and describes the essential qualities of complex phenomena in a natural setting. In this case the natural setting would be the learning environment that teaching practice placements provide for preservice foreign language teachers. According to

Merriam (2009), qualitative research focuses on "the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). The present study is primarily concerned with subjective perceptions and experiences of human beings in a study abroad setting. The teaching practice experience of the informants is situated in a complex setting like the classroom or a school in a different cultural and linguistic context. The placements also have a dialogic nature due to the constant contact between the supervisor and the preservice teachers, so that the aspect of Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) definition of qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3) is stressed.

Study Context And Participants

To shed light on the impact that teaching practice placements may have on preservice teachers' intercultural and professional development, the current qualitative study was undertaken from 2010 to 2014 with 35 preservice teachers from Germany on 3-month teaching practice placements at elementary and secondary schools in Wales or Ireland. Of these, 29 were female, mirroring the typical gender distribution of preservice teachers at their home institution, a University of Education in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany. The participants were on average 22 years old. They were all preparing to become teachers of EFL and another subject and were advanced speakers of English (C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference). Preservice teachers located in Germany typically complete an undergraduate program and sit two state exams that make them eligible for a post at a state school (teachers tend to be civil servants for life). They take their first state exam at the end of their undergraduate course, which includes several shorter periods of teaching practice and a whole semester at a school. The students in question had to spend 3 months in an English-speaking country as a course requirement (options included, for example, stays abroad as au pairs, teaching practice placements, work and travel or study abroad at a partner university). One option was a teaching practice placement at one of the university's partner schools, as a part of the European-funded mobility program ERASMUS. The teaching practice period abroad was not mandatory but could be credited as part of the home degree. While abroad, the preservice teachers fulfilled various duties such as teaching assistant activities, small-group teaching, extracurricular activities, or tutoring, depending on their assets and/or the needs of the schools. They were supervised by their school mentors on location and by the university lecturer, who was also the coordinator of the ERASMUS program. Before their departure, they were briefed several times on organizational and cultural issues, for example, school uniforms and dress code, but they did not have to take part in systematic formal instruction on intercultural issues prior to their departure.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

As part of the regular requirements for teaching practice abroad, the preservice teachers were asked about their expectations of the teaching practice placements before setting off and to produce reflection discourse (Brogan & Ó Laoire, 2011) in the form of weekly reflective reports in English during their stay abroad. Participants consented to these data being used in the study. The purpose of the weekly reports was to initiate and foster reflection on a variety of study abroad-related issues. The participants were asked to

reflect on: cultural and intercultural aspects, such as daily routines and the new school environment, or cultural identity and the role of otherness; linguistic aspects, such as bilingualism in Wales or Ireland; and professional aspects, such as their own perceived professional development as future foreign language teachers. The preservice teachers received guiding questions (see Appendix) to scaffold their reflective writing and were provided with immediate feedback in the form of comments, further information, or questions for clarification by the supervisor. The purpose of the feedback was to provide an impetus for further reflection, to encourage ethnographic learning, and also to offer encouragement and a safe space to verify cultural observations or to speculate on cultural meanings before being exposed to an intercultural transaction. The preservice teachers were also required to send lesson plans and reflections on the lessons they taught during the placement to the supervisor, but these documents were not used for the purpose of the study. At the end of their teaching practice, the preservice teachers were asked to review their pre-placement expectations and to match these with their perceived outcomes at the end of the teaching practice placement in their final reports.

The reflective data amounted to a total of 276 reports, or about nine to 10 reports per study participant. The structure and function of the reports come close to diary studies (Dörnyei, 2007), which are qualified by McDonough and McDonough (1997) as a "pervasive narrative form" (p. 121). Reflective texts such as reflective reports or diaries have been used in teacher education (McDonough & McDonough, 1997) and in studies on issues in intercultural awareness, for example, students' expectations about homestay (Rollie Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014). Using diary data seems to be an emergent trend in study abroad research (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Kinginger, 2009). The narrative-reflective aspects as well as the personal nature of the documents are particularly relevant for the purposes of my study. According to Dörnyei (2007), diary methods (or reflective reports) allow the researcher to look into dynamic processes and "study time-related evolution" (p. 157) within individuals. Thus, they are appropriate for delineating learning processes in complex proficiency areas such as intercultural competence or professional teacher concepts by eliciting data continuously throughout the teaching practice period. I provided the guiding questions and kept in touch with the informants regularly (at least once a week) with feedback in order to avoid or attenuate weaknesses of the method, such as considerable variation in length or depth of the participants' reflections and in order to maintain participants' motivation to provide high-quality, in-depth reports. Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli (2003) classified diary studies into three categories, namely interval-, signal-, and event-contingent designs; the present study can be seen as an interval-contingent design since the informants were asked to report on their experiences at regular, predetermined intervals.

Additionally, after the teaching practice experience, the cohort of preservice who had already completed their teaching practice abroad was matched with the next cohort of departing preservice teachers for focus group discussions (also called focus group interviews, Dörnyei, 2007). These took place about 6 months after the original cohort's return. Six to 10 informants from both cohorts participated in six discussions, which each lasted 1 to 2 hours. The purpose was for the participants to exchange information first hand and to reflect on their experience in a peer group setting. This instrument was used because the "collective experience of group brainstorming" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 144) enabled the informants to stimulate each other's thoughts and recollections. Since focus group discussions take on various formats, the researcher asked only occasional questions,

allowing the informants maximum freedom to discuss and pursue emerging topics. The topics that the informants chose provided insight into salient experiences of teaching practice abroad that they felt worthwhile mentioning. To maintain an open and uninhibited atmosphere during the discussions, data were collected as field notes and audio recordings were deliberately not made.

The reflective reports were analyzed for content, adapting a procedure based on Mayring (2010). Mayring's qualitative content analysis involves the creation of a system of categories that result from an iterative process. In order to enhance the reliability of the results, I analyzed the data with a second researcher. We analyzed the data separately and established separate systems of emergent categories. We then shared results and discussed them, creating a common system of three main categories (language, culture, and professionalization) and corresponding subcategories. The field notes from the focus group discussions underwent a thematic analysis. In order to take up as much of the informants' input as possible in a natural setting, a category system was not created. Instead, the emerging themes of the focus group discussions were compared with the categories from the reports to see what experiences and impressions were still present with the participants 6 months after the teaching practice period abroad. The categories for interculturality were then linked back to Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural competence. Due to the wealth of data in the overall study, the present study focuses on those findings related to interculturality and the role that teaching practice abroad had on its development with the sample preservice teachers.

Results and Discussion: Intercultural Gains of Modern Language Preservice Teachers During Teaching Practice Abroad

The results presented are in line with the abovementioned research questions concerning informants' expectations regarding interculturality before their teaching practice abroad and their perceived intercultural gains during and after the placement.

Expectations Regarding Interculturality

"I am very excited to learn how different the British school system, meaning the English and Welsh one, actually is compared to German schools," announced one preservice teacher. This expectation is typical of the participants in the sample. In general, the informants' expectations were geared toward relational knowledge (Byram, 1997): Preservice teachers wish to acquire cultural knowledge related to "the other" culture, mostly by way of comparison to their own cultural frame of reference. Overall, the participants' expectations were relatively vague (e.g., "I am interested in general differences between Wales and Germany"), probably due to the fact that, never having been in the situation before, they could not really anticipate what opportunities for cultural learning they would have in the special context of their cooperating school. Nonetheless, they were able to formulate more precise plans for their intercultural development when asked after about 8 weeks to set their goals for the remainder of their stay.

A major focus of the participants' culture-related expectations was the planned contact with target culture members, for instance, by obtaining cultural insights while socializing with locals. In this respect the personal development of the teaching practice placement was seen as the most important aspect. In some cases, however, target culture

contacts were instrumentalized for participants' professional development. One preservice teacher's statement—"I think the stay will be an enrichment regarding my later job. Building up friendships and contacts is definitely an advantages [sic] for a foreign language teacher"—displays a willingness to encounter and develop a network among speakers from other cultures. It also reveals that making contact with local people is regarded as an investment in professional life and not just as a way to develop one's personality and broaden one's horizons. Thus, skills were instrumentalized to the ends of developing professionalism. Not surprisingly, the expectations related to preservice teachers' professional development were the most diversified and most clearly articulated. They included almost unanimous views on the expected gains of professional development. Among the most clearly identified areas were the acquisition of experience and teaching routines with an increased methodological repertoire, achieved preferably through model teaching or learning on the job. About 40% wished for model teaching and learning from an experienced mentor using best practices. References to knowledge or theoretical frameworks acquired in previous studies were typically not made. The preservice teachers also wished to learn about dealing with disciplinary issues, something that Reynolds (1992) has identified as a problem that novice teachers face in general. The preferred approach was, again, modelling: "I am looking forward to get [sic] to know more teaching methods, to see how teachers handle certain situations, e.g., conflict solving." The professionally oriented expectations were by far the most prominent and most explicitly explained by the participants in the data.

Perceived Outcomes of Teaching Practice Abroad

Knowledge. When matching the data on outcomes of teaching practice abroad onto Byram's (1997) competence model, we see that the knowledge aspect of intercultural competence was mentioned most often by the informants, as one example clearly illustrates: "my teaching skills, my language skills and my knowledge about other cultures have improved." As in the expectations voiced by informants, the cultural knowledge they said they acquired tended to be relational, being typically based on cultural comparison. What is striking about the knowledge component in the data is that the subcategory of culture that I consider "culture in context" was particularly prevalent. Culture in context starts from the informants' school context and concerns the system (e.g., school uniforms), behaviours and procedures (e.g., house divisions or assembly), and attitudes (e.g., school spirit). The following example from the data illustrates how informants almost constantly made observations starting from their immediate school context, thus gaining valuable cultural insight in the sense of Yoshida's (1996) individualized representations of cultural traits:

> The first and most obvious difference is that the students wear school uniforms. It is seemingly an objective of the senior staff that the uniforms are worn correctly, as some students wear jewellery or too short skirts or wrong shoes, for which they are punished strictly.

Skills. Concerning skills, informants were able to garner information in the role of the observer, such as the preservice teacher in the following example:

> I learned a lot about the foreign school system by just being there and experiencing it myself, through observing it, making notes, reflecting regularly, exploring the school building and the different classrooms, the decoration of the classroom walls, talking to the school staff and asking a lot of questions and by talking to the pupils.

By becoming an observer and reflecting on observations, relating them to cultural frames of reference, the informants displayed Byram's (1997) skills of interpreting and relating. But a lot of the time, the observations were descriptive rather than analytic. They remained on the surface such as in the following example: "I have noticed . . . that most students are very polite when they walk past a teacher or LSA [Learning Support Assistant] by saying 'Hello Miss/Sir.'" By overattributing isolated observations to general cultural traits, the informants precluded a deeper reflection on and engagement with school-related cultural topics that would result in Byram's skills of interpreting and relating. An example of the lack of skills in interpreting and relating and a missed opportunity for reflection and learning can be seen in the deliberation of one preservice teacher who was supposed to reflect on the cultural notion of school spirit. The informant in question pointed out assemblies and school uniforms, which were unknown to her in her German professional context, as well as the role of sports. In her reflective report, she described in minute detail all the places on the school uniform where the logo of the school was found, followed by an enumeration of other places, for example, the banner or yearbook. She never related this to a conclusion that would reflect her engagement with the cultural artefact at hand (i.e., the school's aim to use a logo to foster a collective feeling of belonging for the learners).

Attitudes. Where attitudes are concerned, informants were able to garner information in the role of the observer and once again displayed Byram's (1997) skills of interpreting and relating. In some instances, another attitudinal aspect of intercultural competence, the ability to change perspectives (Byram, 1997), became obvious in the data, as the following example illustrates:

> Through my stay in Wales, I learned primarily to appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of a different school system as well as those of my own school system. Before I arrived at [town in Wales], I had seen the German school system as rather bad, but now I cannot completely agree with that.

In this example, the stay abroad and the familiarization with a different educational system by becoming part of it invoked a change of perspective.

Critical cultural awareness. The category in the data called "culture in context" illustrates the way the informants seemed to develop critical cultural awareness in Byram's (1997) sense but tended to apply it for the sake of their emergent professionalism. Informants often evaluated reports related to educational systems ("I like this daily routine [assembly] and would like to adopt it") and behaviours and procedures such as pupils not having to bring materials to class:

> Students are not expected to bring along their own stuff like pencil cases and books which on the one hand prevents them from having to carry such heavy school bags

like our students in Germany but on the other hand they lack learning to deal with this responsibility.

Depending on their individual intercultural profile, informants took notice of cultural information from the school context, they reflected on it with regard to their own (future) teaching environment, and/or they integrated cultural aspects into their own professional identity:

> There are a lot of things I appreciate over here and that I might take with me to Germany but as well a lot of things I like better the way we do it. This stay was an opportunity for me to form my own view on things.

In these ways they displayed critical cultural awareness. The findings from the reflective reports were confirmed by the data yielded from the focus group discussions, with school-related cultural aspects being one of the most prevalent topics among the preservice teachers. In this manner, cultural gains were instrumentalized for professional development to a certain extent, making the culture of teaching practice abroad a special case of the culture of teachers who study abroad.

Instances of Intercultural Learning

When looking at instances of intercultural learning, the range and scope of intercultural learning processes represented in the data are striking. I present and discuss selected findings representative of two relevant emergent categories in the data: contact with members of the target culture and acculturation processes, and the notion of otherness. I then relate these categories to Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence.

Contact with members of the target culture and acculturation processes. Contrary to study abroad in a university campus environment, and due to their structured environment, teaching practice placements abroad tend to be more conducive to providing regular contact with the target culture. Teaching practice in a school offers continuous professional and purposeful contact in a structured context, namely the framework of daily teaching practice activities. Regular contact with pupils, teachers, and sometimes parents also facilitates the building of relationships on a professional and personal level, since informants often reported that they also spent some of their free time with school staff. Moreover, the homestay or lodging provide regular informal contact with a host family or landlord or landlady that acts as a source of cultural interaction (Engberg & Jourian, 2015), from which many informants in our study profited. When the preservice teachers interviewed their hosts to explore an issue for reflective reports, they were garnering information from cultural experts ("My landlady . . . for example mentioned that most of the students are unmotivated to learn [Welsh]"). Friends and acquaintances, a lot of them from school or other regulated free time activities, such as clubs, choir, or voluntary work, represent another option for target culture contact ("Tonight I'm going to meet a lady who is organising visits to elderly people. I'm very interested in joining her group of volunteers").

In the data of the present study, it emerged that the willingness to take the initiative in making contact with locals was conducive to intercultural learning. Participants who

actively sought target culture contacts did so for two purposes: (a) to join locals, for example, in clubs in order to find their place in the community and (b) to garner expert cultural information for their assigned reports by approaching locals in their immediate environment. One participants's experience of joining a club is indicative of the level of integration he achieved in a short time: "As to becoming friends, the people I have met in the climbing clubs are very friendly and I have made friends with a few of them during my first 6 weeks in [town in Wales]." When taking an active part in establishing cultural relationships, participants tended to gain deeper and personalized insights into cultural phenomena, something that is related to Byram's (1997) attitudes and skills of discovery and interaction.

As suggested by Engberg and Jourian (2015), having opportunities to interact with diverse members of the host community seems to benefit the achievement of positive study abroad program outcomes. In the context of teaching practice abroad, the feeling of belonging to the staff, and being considered by colleagues and mentors as part of the staff, seem to impact most positively on preservice teachers' achievements during their stays abroad. The teaching practice placement provides the opportunity to interact in a structured way and on a regular basis with colleagues in and outside of school, thus offering ample possibilities for target culture contact.

Target culture contact is also facilitated when students on study abroad take an ethnographic approach to intercultural learning (Barro, Jordan, & Roberts, 1998). A preservice teacher who was asked to reflect on bilingualism in Ireland not only researched the role of Irish in published literature but also interviewed local teachers and even participated in an Irish heritage trip to explore the cultural phenomenon and experience it first-hand. The results of her exploration led her to change her opinion on the subject: "I originally thought that young adults would not be interested in the language at all, but talking to the Irish teachers and going to the Irish heritage trips convinced me otherwise." This participants displayed attitudes of curiosity and openness, and developed her skills of discovery and interaction in an intensive manner.

However, when contact fails to be established despite the participant's efforts, the individual experience might be overgeneralized, as previous findings from computer-mediated intercultural communication confirm (Vogt & Heinz, 2004). In the data of the present study, one participant was disappointed by a local acquaintance with whom he wanted to become friendly but who, in turn, did not show any initiative to do so despite their having many things in common. This isolated experience was then overgeneralized as the informant compared the British to Americans ("from my point of view, many British seem to be a bit like the Americans who tend to be superficial"), making a prejudiced statement about both groups. The participant in question did not attempt to change perspectives by trying to understand the other's position; his lack of reflection might have been due to limited time or the reluctance to invest time and effort in someone who would soon be gone anyway.

Otherness. How informants in the study dealt with the concept of otherness illustrates the considerable range of intercultural learning processes found in the data. Invited to consider otherness within the framework of the reflective reports, the range of participants' responses starts with complete naivety—"when I'm driving in my car I definitely feel different . . . the people here are definitely driving on the wrong side of the road". Some informants seemed to be unobservant, such as when they named language as

the only dividing factor: "Actually as European I do not feel different . . . The only thing which makes me different is the language." Others were very much aware of their otherness—"From the beginning of my stay onwards I have felt like having a post-it note on my forehead saying 'stranger'"—making them feel insecure and inhibited, at least in the beginning. One mature preservice teacher expressed his incomprehension at the binge drinking excesses of younger staff at his school, feeling "like an alien" in these situations and relating this to his sharp awareness of otherness. Still other informants adopted a more positive and creative approach to otherness, profiting from their own otherness to try out new things or feeling more entitled by their foreigner status to ask local people about cultural aspects about which they would not ask in their regular environment. One observed: "because I am the other it is no problem at all. I am allowed and expected to act like this." Informants enjoyed their expert foreigner status and felt special when locals showed an interest in their person and cultural background. This expert status, however, made some participants very aware of their behaviour, feeling they are in the role of ambassador:

> Since I know that I am representing my country, I look after my behaviour in order to leave a good impression. I also try to be as open as possible and have a positive attitude to show I'm willing to assimilate. In Germany, I would not have thought about it as much as I do here, as a foreigner.

This participant monitored her behaviour and acted more consciously in order to be a shining example of "her kind" and to show her willingness to integrate into her new cultural environment. Her comments are indicative of a high level of reflection on the concept of otherness and she seems to have achieved Byram's (1997) objective of critical cultural awareness.

The participants seemed to regard acculturation as one important aspect of intercultural competence. However, they displayed different degrees of integration into the target culture community and of acculturation. While one bicultural German-Turkish informant adopted basic cultural features, such as informal greeting conventions, very early on in her stay ("I even noticed that I took over some forms of behaviour and manner . . . e.g. greeting people by saying 'Hey ya! You alright?'"), others took a more observant role at first. Typically, participants adopted smaller aspects or behaviours of their new cultural environment in everyday life, for example, one quoted her changed habits regarding drinking tea: "I would say that I assimilated my way of living to the Irish culture. I definitely got used to . . . their tea consumption. Having a cup of tea in the morning is an essential part of my everyday life."

Some cases of mild reverse culture shock could also be detected in the data as a sign of acculturation (see Kushner & Karim, 2004). One informant described her experience on re-entry for mid-term holidays, on which she reflected in a culturally competent way:

> When I was visiting my family for the mid-term break, I could detect a few changes in my behaviour and reactions. While in Ireland it is often common to greet everyone, to ask them how they are doing and to have a polite tone of voice overall, Germans tend to be more direct and rougher in conversations, which is not worse, just different.

Also, in one case, there is evidence of acculturation paired with blatant (positive) national stereotypes about the host culture. A preservice teacher whose stay was extremely successful in terms of intercultural and professional development evoked hetero-stereotypes about Germans in her final report and contrasted them with the overgeneralized observation that the local people ("people here") did not conform to those "typically German" traits of discipline, strictness, and punctuality. She then concluded that she had adopted what she called "British" behaviour and had made it a part of her cultural identity. This result confirms findings on ERASMUS students, for example Maiworm et al. (1991) or Jackson (2011), who found that after a study abroad period a substantial number of informants display more pronounced stereotypes than before. However, the participants in my data who made overgeneralized statements have experienced intercultural learning processes in other areas. Similar to Ehrenreich (2004), intercultural learning processes for these preservice teachers seem to be described best by individual profiles, which would make a general sequence of competence development impossible. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to capture a complex notion like intercultural competence by using standardized instruments or procedures (see criticism in Wong, 2015), so this result is hardly surprising.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The purpose of this article was to analyze preservice teachers' expectations of and perceived gains from their teaching practice placements abroad, with a focus on interculturality. Thirty-five EFL preservice teachers from Germany were asked to reflect on their cultural experience while placed in primary and secondary schools in Wales or Ireland in weekly reflective reports. Data from 276 reports, as well as field notes from six focus group discussions held 6 months after the placements, were analyzed for content pertaining to language, culture, and professionalization. Both expectations and many documented outcomes of intercultural learning in the data suggest that (inter)cultural gains are instrumentalized by preservice teachers for the sake of their professionalization. Although personal development is also present in the data, it does not represent the informants' primary focus, which contrasts findings of other studies (Brogan & Ó Laoire, 2011). The strong presence in the data of the category "culture in context," which is informed especially by the immediate context of the participants' school environment, is an important indicator for this finding. Preservice teachers' desire to be a part of the staff seems to be a critical job-related success factor that has an impact on intercultural competence development. The findings of this study suggest that teaching practice abroad must be regarded as a special form of study abroad because of its more structured nature and the regular contact opportunities it affords with target culture community members in the framework of the school context (and accommodation arrangements). Engberg and Jourian (2015) contended that the study abroad design is crucial to ensure a potentially beneficial study abroad experience. They argued that educators must intentionally structure opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and at the same time provide reflective learning opportunities. The nature of study abroad design in the context of teaching practice placements abroad meets this demand, as the structured environment of the teaching practice under scrutiny coincides with the reflective character that the instructor requires of the preservice teacher narratives. In terms of expectations, teaching practice abroad also differs from study abroad at universities due to preservice teachers' close alignment of

expected professional development with the general expectations of their stay abroad. In the current sample, the expectations that informants had for their competence development were all closely related to the aspect of professional development. Also, perceived cultural gains were instrumentalized for these preservice teachers' emerging professionalism, and instances of intercultural learning very often started from aspects of culture in informants' immediate professional contexts. With regard to intercultural competence development in this target group of teachers, findings by Roskvist et al. (2015) are confirmed in this study in that the creation of a professional-personal network originating in involvement in school life represents a factor that fosters linguistic development. The results from the present study also suggest that this network seems to be beneficial for teachers' intercultural development.

As for potentially modelling intercultural competence development, the data point toward individual competence profiling as informants' competence development was not linear, with participants displaying evidence of intercultural learning and stereotyping at the same time. This finding corroborates results from previous studies (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2004). Evans (1988) has stated that a "degree in Modern Languages is a sandwich course and the meat is the year abroad" (p. 42). This metaphor, which alleges that the most essential learning experience takes place automatically during a period of study abroad, definitely does not hold true for the preservice teachers in this study. If intercultural learning processes are to be successful, they need clear guidance, corroborating research by Plews et al. (2010, 2014). Otherwise, students and preservice teachers on study abroad might resort to shallow observations only, as has been revealed in this study's data. Wong (2015) also highlighted the beneficial role of student reflection and outside guidance in students' intercultural development during study abroad.

A special mention should be made about the study design. Weekly reports can be seen as an impetus for intercultural learning, however outcomes are various. From a foreign language learning point of view, they may help maintain and perhaps advance students' written language skills since they are written in the L2. With regard to fostering intercultural learning in teaching practice placements abroad, a period of instruction as guided face-to-face reflection is necessary in order to facilitate reflection processes and to enable learners to analyze their personal experience in light of theoretical concepts (e.g., culture shock), thus establishing a link to theory and potentially deeper learning. The briefing and debriefing activities as they were carried out in the present study were obviously not systematic enough for some participants, calling for continuous and systematically guided competence development measures. For this, a combination of formal instruction and teaching practice abroad seems to be promising. Awareness-raising activities would be beneficial for preservice teachers and would ideally bookend the teaching practice period abroad, with theoretically based concepts to guide reflection processes prior to departure, and more reflection and stimulated recall activities for the formal instruction period following the stay abroad. First attempts at designing a learning environment prior to departure based on formal instruction have now been made at the students' home university.

Finally, the potential multiplied impact of preservice teachers' stays abroad compared to regular undergraduate modern language students calls for more attention to teaching practice abroad as one particular type of study abroad. We need to ensure the success of study abroad so that foreign language teachers and preservice teachers can become successful intercultural speakers (Byram, 2008), and be able to foster this in their

(future) learners as well. Every effort has to be made in order to enable language teachers to teach the target language competently but especially in ways that trigger intercultural learning processes in their learners on the basis of teachers' own intercultural awareness.

Correspondence should be addressed to Karin Vogt.
Email: vogt@ph-heidelberg.de

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Appendix

Guiding Questions

1. Expectations
Please include answers to the following questions (you may, but need not, answer all of them):
- What do you expect from teaching practice in Wales/Ireland?
- In what ways would you like to improve in terms of teaching skills?
- What is the role of Wales/Ireland, a place abroad in a different educational system, in it?
- What are you most looking forward to in this teaching practice?
- What are you most worried about in this teaching practice?
- How do you feel about working with pupils of this age/skill level?
- How do you feel about your level of English proficiency?
- What do you hope your relationship to the pupils will be like (will you try to be a coach, a manager, a lecturer/instructor ...)? How will you achieve this?

2. School environment
This week's report is meant to make you reflect on the daily school routine at your school. What have you noticed is different? What has struck you as worth adopting as part of your own teaching or communication with pupils? What would you rather not take over? Please refer to your immediate school environment only and note the details that you have observed so far.

3. Differences in everyday life
I would like to know whether you have detected any differences in terms of everyday life in Wales/Ireland compared to Germany and, if so, what they are and how you noticed them.

4. School spirit
Do you think there is more of a school spirit in comparison to German schools? Would you say that the teachers are different in their approach to pupils, e.g., when it comes to correcting them, as regards independent learning, peer-assessment, etc.? Do you have school uniforms at your school? What role does discipline play?

5. Cultural identity
I would like to ask you to reflect on the role of Welshness/Irishness as a part of people's cultural identity. Have you come across people who are decidedly Welsh/Irishness (or who consider themselves as such)? How does that become obvious? Or isn't there such a big difference between the Welsh/Irish people you have got to know and other people from the UK? Are there any regional differences within Wales/Ireland that you have detected? I would like you to focus on cultural identity this week.

6. Linguistic identity/bilingualism
Where and in what contexts do you come across Welsh/Gaelic at school and in your everyday lives? How much Welsh/Gaelic do people (pupils included) speak in general and

outside of their institutional contexts? Do you think Wales/Ireland is a bilingual country? Why (not)? What do people in Wales/Ireland think about Welsh/Gaelic as a language? Do people identify with Welsh/Gaelic as their national language? What importance do they attach to it? Are there any regional differences as far as you can see? Do young people think differently from older people regarding this topic?

7. Otherness
As you are in the role of the "other" as you are from a different country, how does this position make you feel? How do you perceive things that are different from your environment at home? And would you say there is a difference in which you perceive things, in which you approach people etc. that you (would) do differently in your environment in Germany? How do other people approach you, knowing that you are "different" from them?

8. Reflection on preliminary outcomes and goal-setting for remainder of teaching practice
This week I would like you to relate what your general duties at your school are, i.e., what subjects/projects/lessons do you teach, what clubs do you run? Do you substitute sick teachers? Have you taken part in general school life, e.g., school fêtes, open days, or trips? Which of the activities did you like best? What would you say has helped you to develop and to learn most so far? What activities would you still like to take part in during the remainder of your time in Wales/Ireland?

9. Stereotypes
During this week, I would like you to reflect on stereotypes (call it tongue-in-cheek, if you like). Could you now sketch the "typical" Welshman/Irishman/Englishman/Welsh/Irish student/housewife, etc. (knowing, of course, that there is no such thing). And would you now be able to recognize a German person if you saw him/her, on the basis of certain characteristics (for example, wearing Birkenstocks)? Is there really a grain of truth, as people like to say, about stereotypes in your view?

10. Final report
You are asked to match your expectations with the outcomes and to reflect on how you have (or have not) achieved them. Here is a list of questions that you may refer to:
- What were your expectations for the teaching practice in Wales/Ireland and which ones were (not) met? Why?
- What was the role of Wales/Ireland, a place abroad in a different educational system, in it?
- What did you most enjoy in this teaching practice?
- What were you most worried about in this teaching practice? Can you compare your worries to what happened afterwards?
- How do you now feel about working with pupils of this age/skill level?
- How do you now feel about your level of English proficiency? What linguistic/cultural skills have you developed most?
- What were your role and your relationship to the pupils (a coach, a manager, a lecturer/instructor ...)? Have you achieved this? How?