Equipping student teachers for the future

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Abstract

This paper discusses internationalisation through field studies abroad organized within English courses for student teachers at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. A pilot study sheds light on similarities and differences encountered concerning the school systems. The overall aims of the study were to investigate the learning outcomes and the development of global teaching skills. The results indicate a high level of satisfaction among the students regarding the experience of recognizing similarities between their own Swedish school system and the English one, in particular the insight and inspiration gained from the differences. Hence, this pilot study provides support for future regular and effective cooperation between different European universities regarding the development of student teachers’ global teaching skills.

Key words: Internationalisation, teacher education, English for young learners, field studies abroad, global teaching skills.

Introduction

In recent decades, internationalisation has been present in higher education throughout the world. Regardless the multitude of varieties, the goal has always been to find effective means to meet the challenges and demands of an interdependent and multicultural society (Gacel-Avila, 2005). The efficacy of field experiences abroad is evident, but internationalisation through experiences abroad can also be supplemented with successful internationalisation at home (Seifert, 2009). The necessity of equipping students for the future has been recognized in higher education in Sweden as well. At the University of Gothenburg, a local strategic document, Vision 2020, was developed to ensure that all professional programmes at the university include international perspectives and offer student mobility (Göteborgs Universitet, 2012).

Within teacher education, just as for other programmes, there is a need to implement aspects of internationalization and globalization for a better understanding of these phenomena in our society of today. Further, such practice of intercultural experience should foster a global teaching competence and facilitate preparation for future demands by employers at for example multicultural schools. Before the outline of our organization of field studies is presented, we would like to clarify our interpretation of what aspects the concept “global teaching” encompasses. According to Noddings (2005), education has the power to prevent and solve global problems and global teaching is a type of humanistic teaching which is crucial for fostering future global citizens, in the sense that it highlights the necessity of understanding and benevolence for a sustainable democratic society in a global world. Ikeda (2005) confirms this by stressing that the teacher is the most important element in the educational environment, including being a role-model in fostering compassionate and courageous global citizens. To be able to function as global
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Teachers in a world that is becoming more and more interconnected, there is a need for student teachers to be exposed to other countries’ school systems and to experience different values during their teacher education (Zhao, 2010). In other words, prospective teachers need to be offered ample opportunity to develop an ability of viewing themselves as part of an international context.

Implementing global and international perspectives in a teacher education program can be done in multiple ways: through course literature, student exchanges and guest lecturers, but also through field studies in schools abroad or in international schools at home. Since there are no specific internationalisation goals on a national level in Sweden, the Board of Teacher Education at the University of Gothenburg in 2012 established, on a local level, four focus areas in the teacher education programmes: Human rights and sustainable development, ICT and digital competence, internationalisation and aesthetic processes (Göteborgs universitet, 2012). The implementation of global and international perspectives is organized by course leaders in multiple ways, e.g. through course literature, guest lecturers, exchange students and field studies in international schools and schools abroad. As a consequence, student teachers in the Primary Teacher Education Programme have for the past four years had the opportunity to conduct field studies in English primary schools within the university’s courses of English for young learners. In addition to fostering global teachers, the aim is to boost students’ motivation to use English for communication in authentic situations.

English holds a unique status as a global language and a lingua franca throughout the world today, compared to other languages. For reasons such as the strive for international excellence and employability of students, higher education has been affected by globalisation with an increase of courses being offered in English as a consequence. In addition to teaching through CLIL (content and language integrated learning), a greater focus on cultural diversity and intercultural competence has emerged in the teaching of English not only within higher education, but even for younger learners in primary and secondary school (Graddol, 2006).

In Swedish society, English has a special status and is not only the second language learned at school (L2), but is, by many, used on a daily basis outside school, at work or for spare time activities. At school this first foreign language is a compulsory subject from school year three, but is frequently introduced already in the first or second year. The significant role of English is also referred to by the Swedish National Agency for Education, describing the subject’s overarching aim as fostering a versatile communicative ability. Further, the acquisition of knowledge of social and cultural phenomena of English speaking countries is stressed (Skolverket, 2017). Thus, it is imperative that Swedish higher education teacher programmes are able to meet these demands by equipping student teachers with the tools necessary for becoming good role-models and professional English teachers to their future learners.

As a means of internationalisation, field studies are organized regularly in early years English courses within the Primary Teacher Education Programme. The students in this programme are participants of a preservice training in a course focusing teaching English to young learners in school years 1-3 and 4-6. The English course directed towards years 1-3 is positioned in the fourth term and comprises 15 higher education credits, whereas the course for years 4-6 consists of two parts positioned in terms three and five, comprising 30 credits.
The course content is similar for both English courses, even though it is more in-depth for years 4-6 than years 1-3. The English courses, hence, encompass the following topics: the learning and teaching of English as an L2, children’s literature, phonetics and pronunciation, grammar, assessment of young learners’ language skills, ICT, aesthetic processes and activities, intercultural aspects and internationalization. Within the didactics course module, a portfolio encompassing papers on a selection of the above mentioned didactic topics is designed by the students. In connection to the intercultural component of the didactics module, the students are offered a possibility to apply for a scholarship which enables them to undertake field studies abroad.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the learning outcomes and added value of field studies abroad as well as examining the effectiveness of the tools provided for students’ observation, a pilot study was undertaken. Within the research field of study abroad, for a long time many studies addressed programme management issues such as staffing and coordination. For the past fifteen years, though, there has been a gradual shift of focus towards encompassing learning outcomes in relation to academic knowledge, language skills and intercultural competence with the purpose of finding out what students learn and how their learning can be supported (Wong, 2015). Previous studies on the study abroad effects report successful learning outcomes in terms of intercultural awareness (cf. Merino & Avello, 2014) and linguistic gains (Roskvist et al., 2015). Similarly, the current study aims at investigating possible effects on intercultural awareness and linguistic gains, although primarily focusing global teaching skills.

The pilot study

Study design and research questions
According to Dörnyei (2007), qualitative research explores essential qualities of complex phenomena in natural settings. In line with this, the current pilot study is based on a qualitative data analysis. Since detailed, in-depth information regarding the concrete benefits from the field studies are targeted, a quantification of the data is not within the scope of this study. The qualitative investigation conducted in 2017 aims at clarifying in what ways students’ field experiences enhance their cultural awareness and, consequently, their global teaching skills. The overall research questions were as follows:
1. What are the learning outcomes in terms of teaching skills development?
2. What is the added value gained through field study experiences?

Study context and participants

As stated above, student teachers participating in preservice training in two courses focusing teaching English to young learners in school years 1-3 and 4-6 are offered a possibility to undertake field studies abroad in connection to the intercultural component of the didactics module. In each course, approximately fifty percent of the students tend to opt for field studies abroad, whereas the rest choose to visit local international schools of the Gothenburg region. Only the former are taken into account in this study. The data collected stem from papers written by 120 student teachers who conducted field studies at English schools in the autumn of 2015 and the spring of 2016 respectively as part of their pre-service training.

In connection to the field studies, the students have been assigned a so-called culture task which aims at making an international comparison of schools and educational systems. The tools used for preparing students for their field studies abroad consist of questions for comparison of education and topics proposed for observation (see Appendix 1). The learning outcome goals for this task are:

- To increase cultural awareness of their own country’s educational system
- To observe and appreciate similarities and differences between two school systems

The end products of the students’ observations are an oral group presentation as well as an individual reflective paper. This study focuses the latter. The student paper is to include reflections on the school visited as well as the staff and learners, a description of methods used and the conclusions of their observations of the educational organisation in the English schools visited in comparison to the one observed previously in Swedish schools.

Data collection and method of analysis

The data collected from the reflective papers was based on students’ reflections on their observations in their field studies. Since the students had been given the possibility to choose from a wide range of topics for observations provided by us prior to the field trip, we needed to decide which method of analysis to apply in order to categorise and visualise gains reported. From all the different topics observed and described by the participants, five categories, based on the five most frequent topics in the student teachers’ reflective papers were chosen to be focused in this study, namely: teacher role, ICT, reading, classroom organization and learning environment, and assemblies.

The analysis aims at shedding light on the gains perceived within the respective categories by looking into similarities and differences noticed by the students. This ability to discern relevant cultural differences is sometimes referred to as “intercultural sensitivity” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). For each category, statements extracted from students’ papers illustrate gains recognised by the participants. In addition, student teachers’ answers to the question “What was the added value of the school visit?” from written course evaluations were analysed. As regards code of ethics, consideration has been given to the gender aspect in that the data springs from texts written by female and male students.
to a roughly even extent. Also, precautions were taken to guarantee anonymity concerning students’ reflections transcribed in the study.

Results

As stated previously, the data presented here stem from 120 student teachers’ written reflections. All student teachers express overall positive gains from their field studies abroad. Whereas most of them reported only positive experiences, a couple of individuals, however, also mentioned experiencing minor frustration due to being away from family. There might, of course, be several reasons for this very high level of satisfaction among the participants, such as the fact that they actively chose to participate as well as were able to receive funding through scholarships covering all expenses.

Teacher role

As regards the teacher role, the students did not observe any similarities, but rather several differences in this aspect. The differences reported included English teachers having more authority and being more respected than Swedish teachers and that there is a stricter dress code. Some of the students concluded that this dress code seemed to have a positive impact on the status and authority of teachers. Also, English teachers apply disciplinary tools uncommon in the Swedish school system, such as reward systems. These observations are illustrated in the following student reflections:

It dawned on me what a professional approach the teachers have towards the profession and their pupils. The roles are well marked by both rules and cultural traditions with respect for the teachers that I have never witnessed in a Swedish school.

After this visit I have been thinking about the importance of how to dress as a teacher. I believe you will get a higher status as a teacher if you dress properly.

In Sweden we try to be aware of not dividing our pupils into "good" or "bad" and I could never imagine us pointing out stars in our classrooms.

ICT

For ICT similarities as well as differences were noted. As examples of similarities students brought up the fact that the same ICT resources are offered in Swedish and English schools, e.g. smartboards, computers and tablets. However, they are used in different ways and one of the most striking differences seemed to be how smartboards were available not only in some, but in every English classroom and that they were used frequently throughout the school day. Moreover, English teachers were perceived as more competent in using ICT, probably due to the expectation on them to use it regularly on a daily basis. Here follows one description of this aspect, where the student reflects on how we could learn from each other:

How the English teachers presented a new subject by using ICT was brilliant. ...I think the English school can use more tablets ... and in Sweden we can be more effective in using ICT as a teaching material.

Nevertheless, there were also some critical reflections regarding learning outcomes:
We seem to have similar problems as for the difficulty to control what they actually do on their computers or tablets, that is if they follow instructions and what they learn in the end.

**Reading**

Similarities and differences were detected in how the reading skills were supported and practiced in English classrooms in comparison to Swedish practice. One positive aspect mentioned was the function of libraries and reading corners in both school systems. In the English schools a greater variety was observed, whereas Swedish schools were perceived as having a less positive attitude to and lesser focus on reading, which is mirrored in the reflections below:

*Why do we often give the same book to all pupils in Swedish schools? Providing different opportunities and materials for reading is of great importance.*

*In the English classroom it seems as literature has a higher status than in the Swedish, which is shown by a bigger focus on literature.*

**Classroom organization and learning environment**

In the reflections of the students only differences were highlighted as regards the topic classroom organization and learning environment. In particular, there were positive remarks on the good use of the carpet area, which is used throughout the day for various activities, such as instructions, reading and playing games:

*Walking between carpet area and table gives the pupils a natural opportunity to stretch out and ‘getting the wiggles out’.*

Another successful use of the classroom, which made an impression on the Swedish students was the efficient use of the walls, by which posters and topics are on display as reminders of different aspects/objects of learning/teaching:

*At first sight the classrooms felt quite cluttered. However, after taking a step back...you could see the benefits. Every poster or item in the classroom fulfilled a pedagogical or didactic purpose. This way of utilizing the classroom space is something that I have not seen in a Swedish classroom.*

*Making the learning process visible can probably help children with their knowledge about their own learning. This works, for sure. Motivational for pupils.*

Some students highlighted how classroom organization was positively used in different ways in Swedish and English schools and how the learning environment would benefit from a combination:

*In Swedish schools we often put finished student projects on the walls. There are pros and cons with both ways and I would personally prefer to see a mix. I do think the Swedish thought of inclusion is great, and it is nice to have the students reminded of completed work. But it is equally important to use visual aids and to remind them of what we are currently working on.*
School assemblies

Finally, regarding the school assemblies attended, no similarities but a few differences were referred to by the student teachers. Most strikingly, assemblies of this type are not common in Swedish schools, which many students seem to find regrettable. One of the beneficial aspects of such assemblies is, according to the students, the focus on and rewarding of pupils' good behaviour and good results as a conscious effort to positively enhance the motivation of all learners to strive for successful learning. While expressing positive attitudes as regards school assemblies, there seems to be a certain ambiguity concerning how successful learning should be recognised:

*I find myself being torn between really liking the assemblies and, at the same time, really disliking them. Golden opportunity for creating a team spirit and promote values in the curriculum...but they did not award them for being children, but for being children who can behave as adults.*

*As a Swede, I do have a problem with individual rewards and the taboo of singling out talented individuals.*

Reflection and Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the student teachers have gained important insights, which enhance their intercultural competence and global teaching skills. So, what are the learning outcomes? Regarding factors influencing the development of their teacher role, students mention new insights into alternative and inspiring methods of teaching and assessment as well as an enhanced confidence in terms of viewing themselves as professional teachers with a global teaching competence. Didactic and methodological issues concerning for example how to best include ICT or how to foster a positive learning environment are frequently discussed in the students’ papers, as has been shown through the transcribed reflections above. In connection to the topics analysed, students report a grown confidence in themselves as professionals, stressing the necessity to strive for a balance between building a good teacher-pupil relationship and being a competent and professional leader that young learners need; Many state that their experience of seeing the teacher-pupil relationship in the English classes visited has altered their view on the characteristics of a good relationship and that it is possible to be close to your pupils while maintaining a professional role. Moreover, a new understanding of the value of quality pre- and in-service training emerges.

In addition to the analysed categories, added value contributing to their development as professional teachers was recognized through the following two major distinguishable aspects of learning commended by the participants in their course evaluation and, occasionally, their papers:

- Language use in authentic situations
- Intercultural awareness

Linguistic gains through language use in authentic situations are less frequent in the data analysed, but nevertheless perceived by the participants in the current study, similar to the findings of previous studies, albeit more limited (Roskvist et al. 2015). Thus, students express that they have noticed a boost to their own receptive and, in particular, productive
skills with an improved willingness to communicate in L2 English. Moreover, students claim that the opportunities for using L2 English in authentic communicative situations have had a positive impact on their confidence in their own language skills and ability to teach English to their future young learners.

Last but not least, new insights into cultural diversity are described, corroborating the results of previous studies (Merino & Avello, 2014). Based on students’ reflections concerning intercultural awareness, we can conclude that a frequently mentioned and highly appreciated insight seems to be that there is no right or wrong way to interact with learners, but rather different traditions and ways of viewing teaching and learning of young learners. Thus, students stress the importance of keeping an open mind to different perspectives and remember that there is a lot to learn from each other. Also, students express that the experiences gained from another school culture with different values facilitates a better understanding of pupils with different backgrounds. The added value in terms of intercultural awareness is illustrated in the following reflections:

*It is easy to get a narrowed cultural view when you live and learn in one country only.*

*I like the Swedish curriculum and the Swedish way of viewing children, but I believe we also have a lot to learn from other cultures.*

Having said all of this, a suggestion for further studies would be to look into how the tools used for the field studies described here could be further developed for use in regular and effective cooperation between teacher education institutions in different countries. Further, the investigation into gains reported in students’ reflective papers could be supplemented with interviews, which could possibly add depth to the findings. Also, in regard of practical problems commonly connected to the organization of field studies abroad and limited financial resources of some students, we see a need to investigate further into alternative ways of fostering intercultural competence and global teaching skills for student teachers, by which the inclusion of all students is guaranteed, e.g. through internationalisation at home. One possibility to obtain such a high level of inclusion could be to organize intercultural exchange through the use of for example social media as a type of didactic arena, where student teachers from different countries can easily meet on a regular basis and engage in peer-to-peer learning in authentic online communication.

In sum, the results of the current pilot study concur with findings of previous research and show a positive influence and added value of field studies abroad on different aspects of student teachers’ global teaching skills and professional development. Thus, the wider implications are to aim at implementing intercultural relations within teacher education programmes in general, and language courses in particular, and explore, what methods of internationalisation are most effective as regards future global teachers.

**References**


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Appendix 1. Topics for observation during school visits

- ICT – how and when it is used in teaching
- Reading – literature used, work mode, reading corners
- Classroom organization / Learning environment – layout, different areas, physical and social environment, e.g. notice-boards and walls in classrooms and halls
- Assemblies
- Roles – teacher and pupils (respect, relationship, communication)
- Teaching materials and resources (in one or several subjects)
- School cafeteria and lunches
- School yard / Playground – games pupils play, breaks
- School or student council
- School and classroom rules (discipline, reward systems)
- Timetable – subjects and time
- Carpet area
- Planning (long term / short term planning, lesson plans)
- Documentation of pupils’ learning, e.g. portfolios, written statements, report cards
- Assessment, national tests and grading – when, what, how and why?
- Contact school – home
- Curriculum and policy documents
- Teacher education in other countries
- Students with special needs (and TAG – talented and gifted students)
- School uniforms
- Team teaching (specialized teachers, home room teachers)
- A teacher’s day (working hours, duties, holidays, in-service training, salary)
- Routines during a school day (from the pupil’s point of view: schedule, breaks, homework)