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Career entry of modern languages graduates: the long term impact of study abroad on graduate identity

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Abstract: For students of modern languages, study abroad (SA) is a significant opportunity for linguistic, sociocultural and personal development. Less is known about the durability of these developments, once students progress to graduate careers. This paper reports a study of 33 specialist languages graduates from a UK university, 3 years post-graduation, who had previously participated in a longitudinal study tracking their development through a 2-semester stay abroad. The follow-up study gathered further data on personal biographies and career pathways, on maintenance of skills in the language studied, on social and professional uses of other languages, and on beliefs relating to language identity. The paper offers insights into the career entry and related identity development among UK languages graduates, including the ongoing impact of SA. We highlight the challenges involved in supporting participants' maintenance of a long-term multilingual identity and meeting societal needs for committed languages specialists.

Paper: Policymakers are concerned about the decline of language skills in English-dominant societies such as the UK, due to perceived societal needs for such skills to promote trade and economic development, security, and intercultural communication (British Academy, 2019). To meet these needs it is important to support advanced language learning (specifically through specialist degrees), but also to ensure that languages graduates sustain a long-term multilingual identity, and are motivated to progress into language-related careers.

This paper explores the long-term evolution of identity among UK languages graduates, once their formal education including study abroad (SA) has been completed, and as they enter the world of work. Two research questions are addressed:

1. What are the career pathways, social networks and language practices of UK specialist languages graduates, 3 years post-graduation?

2. How strong is the continuing disciplinary identity claimed by specialist languages graduates, and how has this been shaped by educational experience, including SA?

The paper adopts a poststructuralist perspective, in which individual agency is seen as significant in shaping identity, in interaction with social context (Bucholz & Hall, 2005). We draw upon dynamic accounts of language identity, language learner identity, and graduate identity (Block, 2007; McEntee-Atalianis, 2019; Tomlinson, 2010). Among languages students, we know that the destabilizing experience of SA typically leads to significant identity development, and in particular that a successful transformation from "foreign language learner" to "language user" promotes/consolidates a multilingual identity (Benson et al., 2013; Kinginger, 2013). In turn, entry to the workplace involves further identity development, as new graduates adapt to the workplace context (Holmes, 2013, 2015). However, in English-speaking contexts such as the UK, it is unclear how far the experiences of languages graduates on entering the workforce consolidate or conflict with the multilingual identity developed during their earlier education including SA.

The paper reports on the follow-up phase of a longitudinal study which originally tracked a group of languages undergraduates in Years 2-4, including SA in France, Spain, or Mexico. The original 21-month project is reported by Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura and McManus (2017). Participants generally developed a confident multilingual identity when abroad, though only a minority developed close attachments to their particular SA locality. They prioritized learning informal registers of French or Spanish, rather than academic/professional registers; indeed their "student" identity receded somewhat when abroad, in favour of an "international sojourner" identity, though it returned in force during their Year 4 studies.

In the follow-up study reported here, participants were re-contacted three years post-graduation, and a majority (n=33) agreed to complete a further set of research tasks (adapted from the original study). As well as a range of language tests, not discussed here, these tasks included two questionnaires,"Language Use" and "Background", the latter covering post-graduation biographies (jobs, travel, social relations) as well as language attitudes. Individual interviews elicited complementary qualitative data on activities and relationships since graduation, plans for the future, retrospective thoughts on participants' original decision to study languages, and on their past SA experience. Our analysis applies the identity framework of Benson et al (2013), and involves triangulation across the questionnaire and interview data.

Findings, RQ1: For the 33 participants, career entry was gradual, with considerable amounts of travel and short-term employment reported since graduation (common for Humanities: Pirog, 2016). Only 4 were not working/studying at the time of follow-up. However, only a minority (n=7) were following language-related professional careers (teaching, interpreting, diplomacy), while others were working in monolingual career settings (police, financial management, English journalism, administration). A larger number had however found sub-professional jobs where language skills were relevant (international event management, international marketing, multilingual website maintenance). Few had sustained friendships with locals from SA, but many had made new multilingual friends, and tried to learn further languages. The most regular use of languages was through digital media, for leisure purposes; a minority (n=12) were using their languages more regularly, e.g. at work or in close personal relationships.

Findings, RQ2: The participants were aware both of their privileged status internationally as English

speakers, and their distinctive identity compared with monolinguals. They referenced their languages degrees as central to their graduate identity, even though few had adopted language-related careers. They viewed themselves positively as bilingual or multilingual users, who expected to function flexibly and use mixed language practices. Some were keen to learn additional languages, to maximize professional and personal mobility; for this group, the label "multilingual identity" seems particularly apposite. Others were settling into primarily monolingual careers, but there was no explicit rejection of a multilingual identity, even where the multilingual self was operative in very reduced domains (leisure and holidays).

Concerning the longer-term impact of SA on identity, the degree of continuity is striking regarding participants' confidence as languages users, their preference for oral fluency, and disinclination to master professional registers (perhaps explaining their limited engagement in language-related professions). Participants agreed about the enduring impact of SA on personal and intercultural competence. Those who had developed close relationships with locals during SA had the highest level of commitment to bilingualism, but a multilingual identity was still significant for many others. Participants' exercise of agency to sustain this identity was evident in the popularity of sub-professional jobs involving some form of multilingual practice, and in participants' propensity to add new multilingual individuals to their personal social networks. This active identity work was weakest among those most integrated into monolingual professional environments. For Anglophone graduates, fulfilling professional lives are available without any expectation of multilingualism, and languages may be marginalized to leisure and holiday practices, despite ongoing positive perceptions of the impact of SA on personal competence, and positive valuations of a languages degree. Overall, our findings reflect something of a paradox, with participants sustaining a positive multilingual identity but without clear commitment to mastering and using academic and professional registers of language during SA, and in turn apparently reluctant to enter language-centred careers. At a time of weakening support for languages in HE, these findings represent a considerable challenge to curriculum planners and SA managers.

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