

The Nature, Implementation and Potential of Short Term Overseas English Language Immersion

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This paper draws on the rich experience of the Hong Kong Institute of Education and its predecessor College of Education system in designing, managing and evaluating large-scale, short-term overseas language immersion programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers. An overview is provided of the typical problems experienced by staff and students in the course of providing, participating in and monitoring the success of such programmes, of possible solutions to problems observed and of the type and range of gains which may realistically be expected of participants. In so doing, reference is made to programmes operating at sub- and post-graduate levels, to contexts of operation ranging across three continents and to changing circumstances both in Hong Kong and world-wide which may impact on aspects of overseas immersion. Finally, recommendations for good practice are offered, based on hard and soft data acquired during extensive formal and informal evaluation and management of short-term overseas English language immersion programmes. The paper is of interest to current or potential funding authorities and providers, managers and co-ordinators of such programmes, to past and future participants and to academics exploring constructive links between language and culture.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a steady increase in the number of Asian universities that send students on overseas English language immersion programmes. This is particularly true of countries such as Japan, Thailand and Hong Kong, where English is not the chief medium of instruction in education contexts. These overseas language immersion experiences are seen to provide opportunities for students to develop their English language proficiencies in contexts of authentic English language use. Universities and language centres in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America and Australia have largely been the beneficiaries of these programmes. Whilst longer-term immersion programmes or residence abroad programmes have enjoyed some attention (see Freed, 1990, 1993, 1995; Huebner, 1995; Coleman, 1996, 1997, 1998; LARA, 2000; DeKeyser, 1986, 1991; Walsh, 1994; Laubscher, 1994; Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1990; Ginsberg, 1992; Weaver, 1989), there is a dearth of research into the nature and effects of short term programmes. Given the interest in and resources available much research needs to be done in order to understand the complexities and potential rewards offered by such programmes. We do know that there is an obvious tendency for programmes to vary between universities, language centres and countries, but there remains little published discussion regarding the aims, objectives and general structures of the programmes or of issues related to provision or evaluation. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the nature of short term English language immersion programmes and several of the underlying general issues relating to their provision.

We have found short term overseas language immersion programmes (STOLIPs) to be an extremely powerful means of engendering positive changes in students, reaching far beyond language development alone. Prior to becoming involved in a 'hands-on' sense in these programmes, we had been aware of them and had thought of them merely as supplementary vehicles for language proficiency development in an authentic context. The conventional wisdom at the time amongst colleagues more actively involved in managing and monitoring these programmes was that whilst some changes might be detectable as a result of these programmes, they were restricted to fluency (a somewhat elusive concept: Freed, 1995), which tended to dissipate rapidly on return to the home context, and a similarly temporary expansion of colloquial language. They were also viewed as providing a useful means for student language teachers to access the target culture somewhat superficially and to acquire small quantities of authentic teaching material for use later in their teaching careers. It was acknowledged by all that measuring and proving language gains as a result of such short programmes was impractical and that this difficulty represented a constant tension in relationships with funding authorities.

Our easy acceptance of this conventional wisdom changed almost overnight once we became personally involved in making monitoring visits to students at the overseas Centres during their course of their STOLIPs. Typically, these visits were structured to take place approximately midway through the programme so that any initial difficulties would have dissipated and students would have settled in, but not so late in the programme that intervention, if necessary, would not be worthwhile and effective. During these visits we were impressed forcefully and immediately by the positive changes underway in the students we met, which by the end of their programme were even more marked and substantial.

At that point it is no exaggeration to say that they had metamorphosed from stereotypically passive, reluctant users of English in the Hong Kong context into confident, lively, proactive communicators in English, willing to take risks linguistically and socially. Added to this was an avid, open-minded exploration of the host culture and an increase in personal maturity, confidence and independence little short of astonishing over such a short period.

While it was, and remains, delightful to witness such changes in these young people it is clear we need to understand more fully the programmes and related issues in order not only to maintain but also to improve the potential benefits of the programmes and to assure financiers that their money was and continues to be money well spent. It is clear to us that there are huge benefits to be gained from short term language immersion in a native-speaking context. Our involvement has been constant since those first monitoring visits and we now co-ordinate a very large package of these programmes. Experience, changing market forces, new course developments etc. have led us to modify designs and implementation considerably over time, with positive effects on outcomes. Our experience has also provided unique insights into the working of STOLIPs and allowed us to reflect of ways of moving the research and discussion of STOLIPs forward.

The subjects and context of our discussion in this article will be Hong Kong students and the experiences we have gained from devising and managing STOLIPs. We believe the lessons learned and issues encountered may well be representative of those that all students face whenever they are placed in residence or study abroad contexts. We begin with an overview of the programme design which is followed by an examination of the paradoxical nature of the programmes, and general issues of culture shock and adjustment. We then outline the linguistic and other benefits to be derived from short term overseas language immersion programmes (STOLIPs), subsequently moving on to identify key elements, and address problems and suggest how they may be resolved or ameliorated. The article closes with some conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Programme Design

The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), probably the largest commissioner of short term overseas language immersion programmes (STOLIPs) in the Asia-Pacific Region, has over its eighteen years of involvement in such programmes supported the English language enhancement of over 2,000 students. HKIEd commissions STOLIPs from universities and language centres in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The programme length currently varies from six weeks for in-service and post-graduate participants to ten or sixteen weeks for full time pre-service teachers studying for a BEd degree. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government now resources STOLIPs for all Hong Kong students studying English full-time as a major subject at any of the accredited teacher education institutions in Hong Kong, provided that the STOLIP is credit-bearing and a substantial component of the programme of study. Students pay a contribution, but no more proportionately than they would be expected to pay for their substantive programme.

The period of residence overseas for HKIEd programmes normally takes place during the summer vacation period June-August. Overseas universities and language centres are invited to tender for the various programmes. All HKIEd participants are given a minimum two-day preparatory orientation course in Hong Kong before embarking on their period of residence and study abroad.

While abroad, participants study at the successful Centres during the working week and live exclusively with host families rather than being accommodated in campus hostels. This homestay experience maximises cultural exposure and plays a significant role in enhancing opportunities for developing participant understanding of both the language and the culture in which they are immersed. Weekends may be free but Centres and/or families also arrange a variety of outings and social events for participants. While programme content varies, all programmes at some point provide opportunities for participants to explore language teaching pedagogy and to visit local primary and/or secondary schools.

The emphasis in all programmes is on the development of English language and in longer programmes exposure to alternative English language teaching methods and content experiences. The emphasis of HKIEd commissioned STOLIPs can be summarised thus:

1. Improving oral communication skills both through classroom lessons, e.g. structured language lessons, drama, poetry, literature, etc. and through activities in the field, e.g. mini-action research type activities;
2. Developing a more sophisticated understanding of second language acquisition and learning;
3. Reflecting explicitly on the similarities and differences in educational contexts and practices;

4. Reflecting on what it means and takes to live away from home in a significantly different cultural environment;
5. Developing social, academic and professional relationships with native English speakers; and
6. Being exposed in small groups, wherever possible, to other teaching experiences in local primary and/or secondary schools; in some STOLIPs this may be developed into a formal teaching practice conducted overseas.

Participants are assessed in respect of language competencies and attitude prior to and on return to HKIEd. Formative assessment during the programme is normally portfolio-oriented but does include summative assessment in some programmes, particularly when participants are integrated into mainstream academic or field experience programmes offered by the respective University.

The Language Enhancement Paradox

While there is consensus in the literature (see Coleman 1997) that residence abroad for a year or more can develop participants' language competencies, originally language immersion by means of a period living in the target country was devised as a way for the institutions in the country of origin not to have to teach foreign languages explicitly. Thus, according to Stern (1964) residence abroad was necessary if students were to 'pick up' the language. Short term immersion programmes today are valued somewhat differently and are seen as a means of developing not only language competence but cultural understanding and skills specific to the objectives of the programme in question e.g. pedagogy. Periods spent abroad place participants in contexts that challenge their cultural beliefs, attitudes and understandings of the country in which they reside. However, away from their home country, and far from the support of familiar culture, family and friends, many participants suffer emotional strain and anxiety resulting from contact with the new culture:

Separation from previous support networks, climate differences, increased health problems, changes in material and technical resources, lack of information about daily routines and so forth... These additional problems serve to distract the new arrival from the culture-learning task, and deplete the energy and motivation necessary to master the communication process. They thus have an indirect effect on the acquisition of skills for effective functioning within cultures new to oneself. (Smith & Bond, 1993: 192)

Brown (1991), Rubin and Thompson (1982), Skehan (1989), and Sparks and Ganschow (1993a, 1993b) *inter alia*, advocate that the propensity to reach full potential as a language learner is at least partially determined by affective variables such as anxiety and that positive affect will positively influence language learning. Therefore we see a paradox between the theory, the implementation and the possible effects of language and cultural immersion.

Participants sent abroad to enhance language competence and cultural understandings may in the course of their immersion suffer the negative, disabling effects of culture shock, which in turn may severely influence the likelihood of the programmes achieving their stated aims. Put simply, the anxiety and stress induced by immersion in a foreign culture and language may have an adverse impact on the efficacy of language immersion programmes. Given the short term nature of many immersion programmes, participants have less time to deal with and respond to culture shock related issues. For STOLIPs we see a need to consider more closely the nature and processes associated with such programmes. Such consideration is necessary as an aid to understanding the impact of dilemmas such as the language enhancement paradox and in turn for us as commissioners and those providing programmes to develop scaffolding strategies to assist students when dealing with them.

Culture Shock and Adjustment

Oberg (1960) coined the phrase 'culture shock' and indicated its six negative characteristics. These include:

1. Strain or stress relating to psychological adaptation;
2. A sense of loss or deprivation resulting from the removal of friends, status, role, and personal possessions;
3. Fear of rejection by or rejection of the new culture;
4. Confusion in role definition, expectations feelings and self-identity;
5. Unexpected anxiety, disgust or indignation regarding cultural differences; and
6. Feelings of helplessness. Participants experiencing culture shock were found often to experience confusion, frustration and depression.

As a construct, 'culture shock' has been used to describe the emotional, psychological, behavioural, cognitive and physiological impact of immersion in a new or unfamiliar context (Pederson, 1995). Early literature on culture shock reveals difficulties experienced by participants during their adjustment to life in a foreign culture. However, more recent literature has broadened the scope to which the construction can apply. As Pederson (1995) states:

Culture shock applies to any new situation, job, relationship, or perspective requiring a role adjustment and a new identity. In a broader more general sense, culture shock applies to any situation where an individual is forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies. (Pederson, 1995: 1)

Early researchers posited that levels of adjustment or improvement varied over time and could be represented as a U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955) or W-curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The U-curve hypothesis described the adjustment patterns based on the psychological and emotional locus of control of international students residing in a new culture. Initially these students [participants] experience an incubation or settling in stage, which is quickly followed by a crisis stage resulting from engagement in everyday activities. Over time, crisis gives way to an understanding of the host culture, which is followed by a more positive, objective viewing of the culture. When plotted, these stages represent a U-curve. Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) suggested that even after returning to his or her home culture there is some degree of alienation and adjustment. This 'shock of re-entry' results in a second U-curve which when plotted together with the initial U-curve of emotional and cultural adjustment resembles a W-curve.

Adler (1975) described a five-stage model of culture shock that broadly followed a U-curve which was couched in more neutral rather than negative terms. His model considered participant's emotions, perceptions and behaviours. The strength of Adler's model lies in its very useful interpretations of these emotions and behaviours. The stages are:

1. The honeymoon or tourist phase
2. The crises or culture shock phase
3. The adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase
4. The adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase
5. The reciprocal interdependence stage

These phases are both sequential and cyclical. The shift from crises to adjustment and adaptation can repeat as one encounters new crises, requiring additional adjustments. The stages effectively mirror the U-curve and W-curve stages whereby adjustment moves from a higher, more adequate level through to a lower, less adequate level and toward a return to a higher more adequate level of coping in the new culture.

However, despite the popularity of Oberg's notion of culture shock and related explanations of adjustment stages, much of this early research suffered from being cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and attracted criticism on these grounds. In fact, Ward and Kennedy (1993:221) suggest that such a concentration has 'impeded investigation of the process and product of cross cultural transition' and as such they recommend that 'adaptation and adjustment' be examined as outcomes of cross-cultural relocation. Most culture shock research to date has been descriptive. It must also be acknowledged that because of its inherent complexity and multifaceted nature there are at this time few if any means to measure culture shock accurately. While in this article we cannot focus on culture shock in its entirety, it remains a recurring consideration in respect to STOLIP design and delivery.

Dealing with the Issues

Linguistic and other gains

STOLIPs require substantial funding and it is entirely appropriate that administrators should be concerned that the managers of such programmes demonstrate that they represent value for money. This concern is usually expressed as a wish for proof of significant gains in language proficiency. This accountability could easily be satisfied by providing administrators with pre- and post-STOLIP standardised language proficiency test scores showing clear improvement by participants. Unfortunately, this is rarely possible, though Crew (1994), in his assessment of the efficacy of a 6-week STOLIP, did note measurable gains in aspects of participants' English language proficiency (notably speaking, listening and acquisition of colloquial lexis) compared with a control group of non-participants. Reduction in language learning anxiety was perhaps the most marked finding, with posited long-term facilitative impact on participants' language learning. Similarly, in a later survey by Tse & MacLennan (1997) there were noted gains in confidence and fluency, though they did not use a calibrated instrument in reaching their conclusions. Crew & Bodycott's (2001a) study of the

effectiveness of a B.Ed STOLIP conducted at four Centres located in three different continents reported considerable gains in a variety of areas, of which language development was one, relying on a basket of qualitative and quantitative assessment mechanisms rather than a single standardised proficiency test. Other than these studies, research into STOLIP language gain is scarce.

Generally, whilst there is a dearth of published research related to STOLIPs, even in the considerable body of literature addressing longer-term overseas language immersion (see examples listed earlier) it is apparent that the issue of proven language development is troublesome and is generally either avoided or treated superficially. Regan (1995) comments "many studies find that advanced learners abroad do not seem to make major advances on the structural level of their linguistic development, but they do nevertheless seem to improve in some indefinable way" (p.246).

Coleman (1996) and the Learning and Residence Abroad Project (LARA 2000) reveal the rather surprising fact that the majority of European universities do not attempt with any vigour to assess language gain on language students' return from (in most cases) a year abroad - it is assumed that gain has occurred but it is not common for this to be verified directly. Intuitively, it does seem obvious that participants' language will improve as a result of residence in a target language country but in practice much research into this assumption tends to lack depth, be flawed technically in some way or focuses on such a small sample or aspect of proficiency that generalisation from findings is unwise. The net effect of this lack of readily available proof of progress in the area which comprises the usual fundamental rationale for STOLIPs, i.e. language development, is that funding authorities frequently demand extremely rigorous and detailed reporting of whatever gains can be reported and may be unduly sceptical even when this is done.

Hence, committed co-ordinators of STOLIPs often need to justify their programmes to a much greater degree than other programmes. Their task is made more complex by research findings which indicate that lower ability students gain more from study abroad than those who are more advanced (e.g. Freed, 1995, Lapkin, Hart & Swain 1995) or that girls generally seem to benefit less than males from the overseas experience, for various reasons (e.g. Brecht et al, 1995).

Despite the difficulties inherent in demonstrating quantitatively measurable language development, gains in other areas are clear and routinely reported. Gardner (1979, cited by Regan, 1995) states concisely why this should be so, i.e. in acquiring a second language "the student is faced with the task of not simply learning new information (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.) but rather of acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community". Thus the Study Abroad Evaluation Project as reported by Carlson, Burn, Useem and Yachimowicz (1990) with reference to US undergraduates concluded:

That language proficiency appeared to increase substantially, especially in the area of speaking skills; that those who studied abroad demonstrated a greater increase in interest in international affairs in the course of the junior year than those who remained at home; that those who studied abroad showed a dramatic increase in their level of knowledge about the host country, especially in the areas of cultural life, customs and traditions, social structure, and social issues....

Sociolinguistic competence is somewhat of an 'umbrella' term, encompassing a wide range of sub-competencies within the generic competence and this is perhaps a more constructive route to take in assessing language gain resulting from STOLIPs i.e. to report language development as observed changes in specific language competencies. Competency-based assessment reporting is clearer and accessible to all stakeholders, whether or not they are language professionals, it is easily tailored and its relevance to context is assured. When competency-based assessment has been employed by Centres in formal STOLIP evaluation reports (e.g. Bodycott, Crew, Gray & Chan 2001) it has been well-received and should be encouraged as a constructive move towards open, realistic appreciation of linguistic development which goes a considerable way towards resolving the uneasy tensions implicit in attempting tortuously to apply unsuitable conventional testing procedures to a context which is inappropriate.

Interaction with the community

Most learners of a second or foreign language spend considerable periods of time in language learning classrooms in their home country. Many also come into classroom-based contact with sample native speakers of the target language, the employment of whom is an increasingly popular strategy with educational authorities to enrich the language learning experience of students, lend some authenticity to communication and the language itself and, as a minimum, provide a model of how the language is spoken by native speakers. It is by no means uncommon for these classroom experiences to extend over years. In Hong Kong, for example, a student leaving school at the age of eighteen will have received up to six lessons a week of English for 12 years. This does not take into

account the reality of additional English lessons for many at kindergarten and at English tutorial sessions after school.

This being so, it is a singular oddity that many STOLIPs seek to recreate the all-too-familiar classroom experience for their participants, ignoring to a large extent the immensely rich linguistic and cultural environment outside the classroom walls. We believe that the host country context itself is the most valuable resource for language learning in its broadest sense. Participants need to be taken out of classrooms and into meaningful, authentic interaction with the community. This interaction will be both formal and informal, structured and serendipitous, but the key point is that successful functional interaction impacts hugely on attitudes towards the target language, its associated culture, and participants' belief in themselves i.e. that they can and will make significant progress towards mastery of the target language.

Prior to departure our research indicates that most intermediate level participants rate their own language proficiency at lower levels than is actually the case. This is because they have rarely, if ever, been required to function in that language and regard it as a school subject rather than as a real means of communication. Consequently, the imminent prospect of having to use that school subject in order to survive in a foreign land fills them with trepidation and reinforces their low self-esteem in language learner terms. When they arrive in the host country and settle in, they very quickly discover that they can not only survive using the language competencies with which they arrived, but they can function at well above survival levels – they can even have fun in the target language. This is usually a revelation and it is at this point that their perception of the target language changes from that of school subject to personally successful, practical means of communication, with a real culture attached to it. From then on, participant attitudes and, by extension, language and cultural learning and awareness, accelerate, though, as discussed above, this may well not be the type of learning that is easily amenable to standard language proficiency tests.

The classroom has a part to play, of course, but we argue that it should not be the main part. Why should participants be restricted to an artificial classroom environment when such a massive body of rich natural resources lies outside it? Experiential learning involving the target culture community and all senses, integrating content with language development and cultural exploration, leads to confident, authentic communication and infinitely more mature, worldly-wise (in the best possible sense) participants. The notion of non-classroom based, community interactive programmes is still in its infancy, and much needs to be done in order to understand it and its potential and then to develop it to that potential, but it is clearly the way forward for STOLIPs. Laubscher (1994:xiv) sums up neatly:

We need to have a better understanding of that learning component over which educators have traditionally exercised the least control but that gives education abroad its unique ability to foster cross-cultural understanding; that is, out-of-class experiences that bring the student into direct contact with the host culture.....[We need] a more systematic approach to helping students take maximum advantage of this feature, which makes education abroad unique. To do that, it is necessary first to acquire some sense of how to organise and exploit the learning activities that abound in the non-academic environment.

In recent years, participants on STOLIPs with which we have been involved have been fortunate in that Centres have increasingly shared our vision of community-as-classroom and have designed their programmes accordingly. This is an ongoing process in which we are all learners, but it is an extremely exciting and rewarding adventure.

Homestay

Homestay is emerging as a major factor in the impact of the STOLIP experience on participants. The literature on this aspect of residence and study abroad is scant, yet in our experience all STOLIP Centres provide testimony to the value of homestay, both per se and in comparison with the alternative of institutional accommodation (hostels, halls of residence etc.). The benefits of homestay include interaction on a sustained, individual basis with native speakers in a family domestic context which could not be replicated in any other way, with consequent wide-ranging linguistic benefits and deep insights into the everyday culture of the host country, plus (surprisingly often) the development of strong emotional attachment to the host family members and the establishment of a life-long bond which is often revisited and developed further over years.

Contrast this with hostel accommodation, in which speakers of the participants' first language are all too easily and routinely available, in which there is restricted access to host country culture, in which the essentials of day-to-day life are usually nearby, as are social activities, there is little travelling involved to reach the Centre and therefore there is little need or opportunity for meaningful interaction and negotiation with the wider target language community in the course of the normal

week's activities. The value of homestay is recognised by major agencies such as the Peace Corps (see Guntermann, 1995), which acknowledge and value the extended range of interaction and cultural exposure implicit in such arrangements. The arguments in favour of hostel accommodation tend to centre around issues of safety and security, maximising participants' comfort zones, simplicity of management and co-ordination etc. i.e. issues unrelated to the primary objectives of STOLIPs. It is our firm belief that homestay is a crucial aspect of successful STOLIPs and that hostel accommodation, whatever its merits, cannot be an effective substitute.

Cultural differences and coping strategies

We have discussed briefly the 'negative, disabling effects of culture shock', an established factor the existence of which is supported by a substantial body of literature. In very short term residence abroad (say, four weeks or less) the likelihood of negative impact of cultural relocation on participants may be less than in longer programmes, as participants may not elect to truly 'settle into' the host culture at all but instead adopt a superficial, spectator-like approach. Our experience with STOLIPs of six to ten weeks, however, leads us to believe that participants typically spend the first week or so in a state of novelty-inspired excitement, after which homesickness may set in for a while but that by the third week they have achieved a stability which continues to the end of the programme. For the vast majority of participants this stable period is at least neutral in attitude towards the host culture and for most it can be characterised as open, interested and tolerant. During the homesickness phase aspects of the host culture may be perceived in a more negative light than will later be the case, but this is far from what most people would conceive of as 'culture shock'. Our position, therefore, is that short term residence abroad is actually far less troublesome in terms of culture shock than programmes which have a longer timeline.

Given this reconceptualisation of culture shock as applicable to STOLIPs, it is natural to see cultural difference as less of a substantial negative factor and more as a matter of cultural difference management. Thus cultural differences need to be acknowledged, celebrated even, and awareness of those differences by both participants and programme staff explored, manipulated and incorporated into the STOLIP in pursuit of its objectives. Thus, we encourage Centres to use drama as a means to acknowledge, celebrate and using cultural differences to advantage. We believe it is an essential component of any STOLIP that there is in-programme acknowledgement of cultural differences, and that the programme be designed to minimise negative aspects, and in so doing maximise the positive and most importantly and constructively, to use cultural differences as vehicles for learning. A successful STOLIP is to a large extent determined by the ability of the Centre staff to acknowledge the nature and value of the culture to which participants not only belong, but also bring with them to the host country.

Our own research (Crew, 1998; Crew & Bodycott, 2001b) has shown that cultural differences, even when negatively charged as difficulties and anxieties, are manageable and amenable to resolution and positive impact if participants maximise their use of communication strategies to achieve this end. This applies to all forms of potentially stressful situations, not just those which are culturally rooted. Thus, communicating constructively and openly with tutors, fellow participants, homestay providers, Centre welfare staff, parents and persons of emotional significance at home etc. will almost invariably result in positive outcomes; participants who keep problems and worries to themselves suffer needlessly and impact negatively on other participants and quite possibly the whole programme in that Centre. For this reason, during pre-departure orientations for participants, considerable time needs to be devoted to promulgation of culturally open attitudes and of communication as the most effective coping strategy in all situations of distress, difficulty, dislike or misunderstanding. This has the added benefit of encouraging participants to broaden their perceived contexts of use of the target language and it is of some interest that once the initial settling-in period is over, such communications will often be in the target language even when being conducted with another participant.

Programme Orientation

Pre-departure orientation for participants needs to be a high quality, comprehensive process, designed and delivered for the benefit of, and using the accumulated expertise of, all stakeholders - home institution staff, overseas Centre staff and participants themselves. This may seem trite and obvious to the reader, but achieving this in practical terms is more complex than it may appear.

STOLIPs that are to take place at more than one Centre need a high degree of co-ordination in order to ensure that while the same programme takes place at all Centres, individual Centres' strengths can be used to best advantage within the overall design of that programme. Particularly where participants will be returning to the home institution after completion of the programme, some

variation in the way in which the programme is delivered in the target country or countries is a bonus, as the returning participants bring with them a rich mix of experiences from which the whole returnee group can then benefit. This has to be balanced against a need for standard quality assurance and uniformity of provision within the objectives of the programme. To this end, we believe that a shared understanding of programme objectives by the staff of home institution and all Centres is essential, following which those objectives also need to be clearly understood and agreed by participants.

It has become established practice for the STOLIPs which we co-ordinate that each overseas Centre sends a core member of staff to Hong Kong to attend and participate in an orientation or preparation programme consisting of a substantial series of briefings, meetings, presentations and sharing sessions extending over two-three days. During this time objectives are clarified, modified where necessary and agreed. Means of achieving those objectives via good practice are shared and promoted. Issues, trends and problems are discussed and (where necessary) resolved. Local context visits are undertaken, administrative and financial matters are clarified, and relationships with ex-participants re-established. New participants are met and briefed on the specific Centres and communities to which they will be travelling, both in general by host institution staff and in detail by Centre staff

Participant briefings by home institution staff are intended to deal comprehensively and interactively with programme objectives and expectations, travel plans and advice on safety and comfort issues, homestay and the general nature of cultural differences and strategies for dealing with them. Emphasis is placed on recognition and optimisation of the STOLIP experience as an investment of their time and (to some extent) money. The nature and approximate timing of monitoring visits during the programme by home institution staff are discussed, as are past issues relating to changes in participants which may take place as a result of the STOLIP (e.g. increased independence and maturity), which may not always be a welcome surprise to relatives on return etc. The mood during orientations is deliberately upbeat and light-hearted whilst simultaneously dealing effectively and clearly with what are sometimes called 'hygiene factors' and evidencing a high level of support and encouragement for participants.

Centre staff then have the opportunity to give their own groups of participants more detailed and tailored information about their version of the programme and the context in which it will take place. Ex-participants are present, who respond to questions and give first-hand accounts of their own experiences at the Centres concerned, thereby ensuring a flow of trusted, high quality information. Participants also report feeling reassured to have met at least one of their future tutors, thus guaranteeing a familiar face on arrival. From the Centre staff perspective, an initial impression of the group, its characters and concerns is gained, and any modifications to the programme which are thought necessary can be put in place before arrival in the host country. Relationships between homestay providers and participants are usually initiated by e-mail immediately before or following the briefings, so that participants are eased into the target country experience and culture rather than it being a sudden shock, with accompanying negative aspects.

Conclusion

We have argued that a paradox exists in relation to the provision of overseas language immersion programmes and that programme structures and teaching strategies that assist participants to cope with factors relating to cultural differences and shock need to be explored and discussed further.

We have further stated that the value of STOLIPs lies not in their suitability as vehicles for language development in its narrow sense, but in their capacity for addressing language gain in a far more holistic sense, incorporating language and cultural awareness, attitudes and knowledge. This is essential for real gain in language competence – for without this greater awareness and knowledge language remains a narrow, sterile school subject instead of an enriching, culturally-laden medium of communication. Given this enriched understanding of the target language, the language learning spiral becomes entirely possible i.e. language cannot exist in a cultural vacuum, therefore real understanding of a language cannot occur without real understanding and insight into the culture which 'drives' the language; once this process of enhanced understanding is underway, it enables greater insights to be determined, as a result of which further linguistic achievement becomes possible, which in turn allows cultural understanding to move to higher levels - and so forth.

Many residence and study abroad programmes are not restricted in purpose to language learning alone and seek to integrate language and cultural development with (for example) aspects of teacher education, exposing participants at first hand to comparative aspects of education provision in host countries and associated explicit reflection on such aspects. This is seen as a mind-broadening facet of the STOLIP which develops future teachers of English, affording them a wider vocational perspective than would otherwise be possible. The fact that this takes place using the English

language and in an English-speaking culture allows seamless integration of content, culture and language, an essential combination on which we have commented earlier. Integration of this kind is perfectly possible for all STOLIPs in which application of the language and culture to a further set of objectives is needed.

In summary, we firmly believe that STOLIPs are enormously powerful tools for participant development. In order to do this they need to maximise all forms of interaction with the host community and culture (including homestay), acknowledge and utilise cultural difference constructively in programme design and delivery, provide comprehensive preparation for participants, involving all stakeholders and emphasising the critical importance of communication strategies to the success of these programmes.

Beyond the basic functions of STOLIPs, we believe that they have a further part to play in discharging our overall responsibility as educators. We live in a rapidly changing, ever-smaller world and as such we need to ensure that our students gain as great an understanding and tolerance of other cultures as possible. This is particularly true of language educators because of the cultural underpinning of all languages, but can be regarded as a generic responsibility of educators and governments today:

The vital mortar to seal the bricks of world order is education across international boundaries, not with the expectation that knowledge would make us love each other, but in the hope that it would encourage empathy between nations, and foster the emergence of leaders whose sense of other nations and cultures would enable them to shape specific policies based on tolerance and rational restraint. (Fulbright, 1989:199-200)

We are uncomfortably aware that in addition to there being a general lack of published research on STOLIPs, there is an even more acute shortage of longitudinal research in this area. Put simply, unless this research is carried out, expressions of belief in the value of these programmes are actually little more than conjecture, with projections based on 'snapshot' data. We have established to our own and others' satisfaction that, at the very least, a prima facie case exists for taking STOLIPs seriously as structured learning experiences, but the time is right to establish what the long-term benefits may be. We are undertaking research of this type ourselves, and are particularly interested in the long-term impact of our STOLIPs on English language teaching in Hong Kong. More generally, we are investigating the post-STOLIP durability of perceived immediate language gains and of foreigner-stereotype beliefs. Beyond our own small efforts there is, therefore, considerable scope for additional longitudinal studies and it is our earnest hope that interest and dialogue in short term English language and cultural immersion and related affects on programme stakeholders will be undertaken.

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