

The Impact Of Study Abroad On Language Learners' Perceptions Of The Concept Of Citizenship: Some Preliminary Considerations. *

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Abstract

The notion often associated with study abroad that it will deepen students' understanding of citizenship and expand it beyond national borders remains contested. While the Erasmus website (European Commission, 2012a) claims that study abroad and the experiences associated with it 'give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen' there is little research that documents how students themselves actually conceive of the term citizenship in practice (Streitwieser and Light, 2010, 1) or how a period of study abroad might transform such conceptualizations. In order to contribute to this debate, this paper analyses reflective pieces by undergraduate students on the nature of citizenship written before (n=16) and after (n=8) a year of study abroad as part of an Erasmus exchange programme. It presents an initial attempt to derive a typology of understandings for the term citizen from this data and to assess the impact of study abroad on these understandings. The findings of this pilot study suggest that before students engage with study abroad, they have a tendency to articulate a relatively straightforward understanding of the concept of citizenship with a strong focus on the notion of 'belonging' to a country. In contrast, those in the post year abroad group recognise that the concept of citizenship is "difficult to define", complex and composed of a number of elements. In addition, both obligations and responsibilities increase in importance and become more significant than rights for the post-year abroad group. Implications for a more in-depth study and for further research, in general, as well as for the preparation of students for study abroad are considered.

Key words: study abroad; citizenship; internationalisation; language teaching; language learning

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1. Introduction: Mobility And Citizenship

(Introduction: Mobility and Citizenship)

This paper investigates the impact of a year abroad on Irish students' perceptions of the concept of citizenship as it applies to them. It begins by briefly reviewing the literature in the field of student mobility generally. It then looks more specifically at studies linking study abroad and perceptions of citizenship before presenting the results of an initial pilot study.

Numerous references to internationalisation can be found in recent literature dedicated to the higher education sector (e.g. Guo and Chase, 2011). Associated with the concept are several dimensions including the development of partnerships with universities abroad, the promotion of faculty exchanges, the hosting of visiting scholars and international students and the provision of study abroad opportunities for local students. The last decade has witnessed exponential growth in these latter two dimensions making student mobility one of the fastest growing phenomena in higher education (Bhandari and Laughlin, 2009; Streitweiser and Light, 2010)]. For example, in 2009. There were 3.7 million mobile students world-wide, an increase of 77% on 2000 (OECD, 2011).

Of all of the student mobility schemes, the most successful is the EU's Erasmus programme which currently involves over 4,000 universities. Despite some current financial difficulties, this programme supports over 230,000 students every year (European Commission Education and Training, 2012). Furthermore, under a proposed new 'Erasmus for All' programme, some 5 million people may be offered the chance to complete part of their studies in a European country in a number of ways including as part of a more traditional undergraduate programme, a joint degree structure or as a postgraduate student. The proposed seven-year programme is due to replace the current programme in 2014 and is likely to have a total budget of approximately €19 billion (European Commission, 2011b).

With such growth in student mobility has come an increased interest in determining how and in what ways study abroad experiences influence student learning. At this stage, few observers dispute the fact that study abroad is one of the highest impact activities of a well-rounded

educational experience (Hudson and Hudson, 2003; Streitwieser and Light, 2010). However, research on the impact of study abroad tends to focus in particular on the potential for gains in language proficiency and intercultural competence (e.g. Bennett, 2008; Paige, Cohen and Shively, 2004; Hunter, 2008) with many studies reporting in particular gains in linguistic fluency and confidence after a substantial period of study abroad (Root and Ngampornchai, 2012, 8). The results relating to intercultural competence are more mixed and depend to some extent on the definition of the construct.

An additional expectation, often associated with study abroad, that it will deepen students' understanding of the concept of citizenship and potentially expand it beyond national borders remains contested. Indeed, much of the literature on the nature of citizenship, up until the 1990s at least, has tended to equate it directly with nationality (Davies and Reid, 2005). This is despite the fact that, although globalisation tends to be perceived as a recent phenomenon, nations have seldom existed in isolation from one another (Nussbaum, 1997). There is a growing acceptance today that such a view of citizenship is simply inadequate in an increasingly interconnected world. While the Erasmus website of the European Commission (European Commission Education and Training, 2012) states that study abroad and the experiences associated with it are intended to 'give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen' there is little in the secondary literature that documents how students themselves conceive of the terms 'citizen' or 'citizenship' (Streitwieser and Light, 2010, 1).

There are exceptions, however. These studies tend to be located within the framework of transformational learning theory. Building on earlier experiential and constructivist learning theory (e.g. Dewey, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978), transformational learning theory holds that, given the right conditions, learners undergo a process of constructivist learning and may potentially experience deep shifts in many of their fundamental views and deeply held attitudes and beliefs (Hendershot and Sperandio, 2009, 46; Wynveen, Kyle and Tarrant, 2012).

For example, Hanson (2010, 81) conducted an evaluation of the impact of two interdisciplinary global health courses over six years incorporating a six-week stay in Nicaragua (n=120). Based on her analysis of a combination of quantitative data, derived from in-class evaluations and

university exit surveys, and qualitative data, obtained using focus groups (n=13), individual written submissions and one interview, she concludes that transformational learning processes applied to international education led to shifts in students' 'values, beliefs, behaviours, skills, insights, and particularly [their] overall disposition to critical and self-reflection'. In addition, Wynveen, Kyle and Tarrant (2012), on the basis of a survey completed by 623 students from ten US universities on the first and last day of a four-week study abroad program in either Australia or New Zealand, found that citizenship viewed in terms of pro-environmental behaviours can be fostered through study abroad experiences. Furthermore, Killick (2011) conducted a three-year qualitative study of 14 undergraduate students in the United Kingdom who participated in a range of international mobility activities of different types and durations including exchanges, work placements and volunteering. On the basis of in-depth interviews with his participants, he concludes that the experience helps students to personalise places and practices which up to that point had been distant to them both psychologically and geographically. In addition, O'Reilly (2012) in her longitudinal study of Irish students participating in Erasmus exchange programmes in Germany notes that a number of positive outcomes were reported by the students involved including enhanced 'European connections' which took the form, for example, of friendships with students from other European countries. In a similar vein, Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow and Nam (2009) conclude, based on their study of 684 returnees from study abroad, that it is a transformative experience for many students impacting on how they see and engage the world, their basic values, their philosophy of life their friendships, their careers, and much more. Based on data gathered using a quantitative electronic survey and in-depth qualitative interviews, they also note that some returnees had become considerably less nationalistic. However, they also comment that all study abroad is not the same and stress that while study abroad literature has grown substantially in the past decade, there has been little systematic study of its actual impact on individuals. In particular, there are knowledge gaps when it comes to an understanding of how study abroad, for example over longer periods than were the case in many of the studies described above, impacts civic life.

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by reporting on the findings of a pilot study designed to investigate the impact of one year's study abroad on Irish students' perceptions of the concept of citizenship as it applies to them personally.

2. Methodology

Two groups of students were selected for participation in this pilot study. The first group (n=16) was in their second year of a four year, undergraduate bachelor degree on one of the following programmes, the BA in International Business, the BA in Global Business or the BA in Applied Language and Intercultural Studies. A compulsory requirement of all of these degrees is that the third year be spent at a partner university abroad studying business, language and/or translation in a country where one of the students' target languages is spoken (Germany, France, Spain¹, Japan or China). The second group was in their fourth and final year and had just returned from their year abroad (n=8)².

In terms of the structure and content of these degrees, the focus in all three is on developing proficiency in the target language(s)³ as well as an understanding of the culture with which these languages are associated. A range of business subjects is also studied by those on the two business degrees with specialism possible in, for example, Marketing, Finance, Human Resource Management etc. in their final year, while the focus is on either translation or intercultural studies in the final year for those enrolled on the BA in Applied Language and Intercultural Studies.

1 Those going to Germany, France and Spain are supported financially by the Erasmus programme of the European Commission.

2 This is a smaller group as students enrolled in the European Business programme remain abroad for their fourth (i.e. final year) as well and obtain a dual degree from the two higher education institutions involved.

3 Students on the BA in International Business and the BA in Global Business study one foreign language while students on the BA in Applied Language and Intercultural Studies study two and spend their year abroad in the country of their choice where possible.

Explicit preparation for the year abroad takes place primarily in the students' language modules with the focus on raising their proficiency in the target language(s) in particular their academic language and increasing their knowledge and awareness of the target culture. Additional preparation involves meeting with their year abroad co-ordinators and with fourth year students who have returned from their year abroad. The emphasis in these meetings is on practical issues around the year abroad such as accommodation, choice of location etc. The concept of citizenship is not specifically explored with these learners currently.

In terms of primary research, each of the two groups participating in the study was asked to write a short reflective piece in response to the question 'What does citizenship mean to you?' The pieces were completed during class-time and no other instructions or guidelines were provided in order to avoid guiding or prompting the students in any particular direction. In addition, the research received clearance in advance from the relevant University Ethics Committee and, in accordance with institutional ethics requirements, students were assured that their responses could remain anonymous and would not affect their grades in any way. Participants were given approximately 20 minutes to complete the task.

The responses were analysed using a phenomenographical approach. This is a qualitative approach designed to identify the different ways learners understand a phenomenon in a particular context and is concerned with developing 'a typology of understandings' (Streitwieser and Light, 2010). The objective is to identify the key issues and themes emerging from the individual papers, categorise them into thematic grouping and attempt to represent them in a manner which would also be of value in comparing the results for years 2 and 4, i.e. the pre- and post-year abroad responses.

Specifically, the data was analysed as follows. The pieces were read repeatedly and in some depth. Individual elements associated with citizenship were identified and then categorised under the broad headings which emerged from the data. (Individual repetitions or duplications were not included).

It should be noted at this point that this study was an exploratory, pilot study conducted with a small number of students in one institution. The intention is to replicate it on a larger scale introducing both longitudinal and control elements into the research design. However, despite its preliminary nature, this pilot study produced a number of potentially interesting results which are presented in the following section.

3. Results

The themes which emerged for the pre-year abroad group were 'belonging' (15), 'rights' (7), 'obligations' (1), 'responsibilities' (1) and 'European' (2) with the number in brackets afterwards indicating the number of times an element associated with this theme appeared for this group. Similarly, for the post-year abroad group, the following themes emerged: 'belonging' (6), 'obligations' (5), 'rights' (3), 'responsibilities' (3), 'language' (3) and 'representative role' (1).

These findings can be depicted as follows with Figure 1 representing understandings of citizenship in advance of a year abroad and Figure 2 representing understandings after a year abroad.

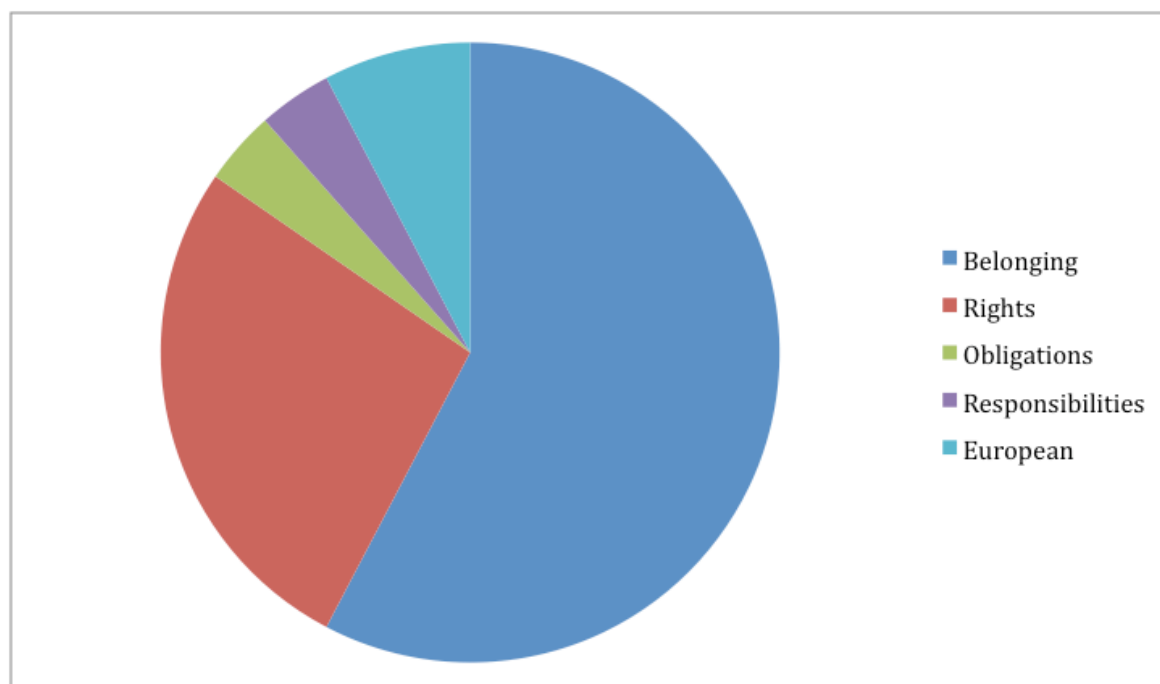


FIGURE 1: Perceptions of citizenship pre-year abroad

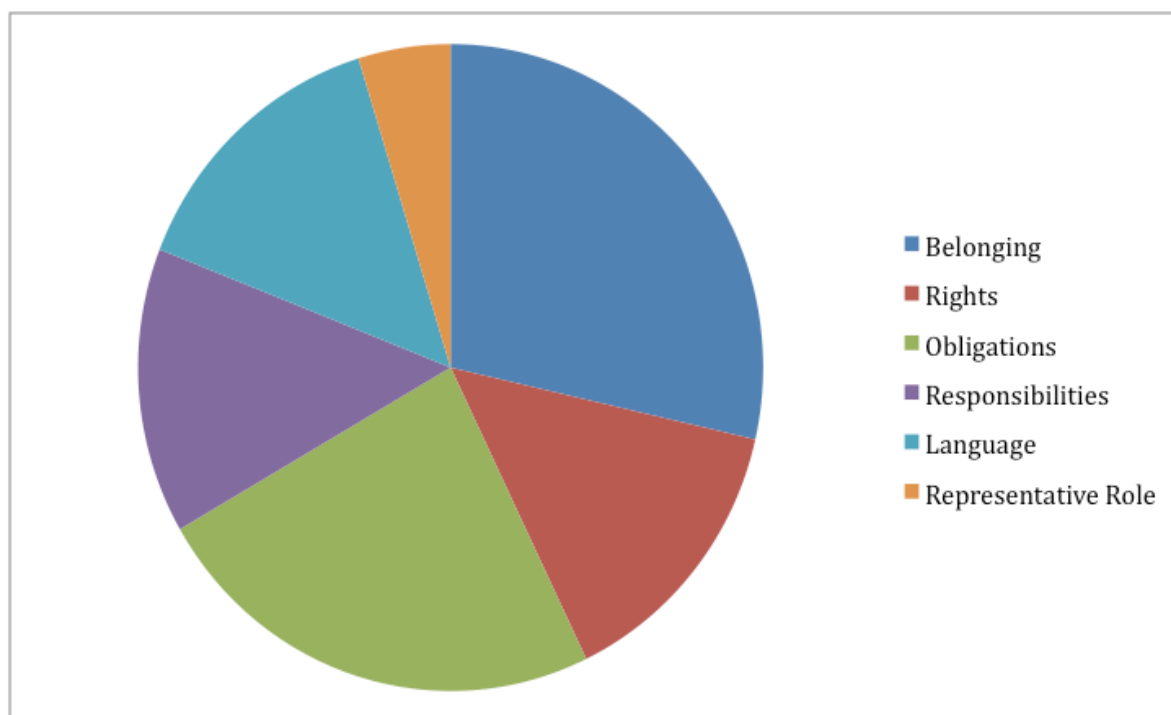


FIGURE 2: Perceptions of citizenship post-year abroad

3.1 Pre-Year Abroad

Further consideration of the data indicates that for those students in second year who had not yet spent their year abroad, there is a considerable focus on the notion of 'belonging' in terms of their understanding of citizenship. Of the 26 components of citizenship identified in the reflective pieces by this group, 15 of them were categorised under the heading of belonging. The majority explicitly used the term "belonging" itself, for example, "...being part of and belonging to a country..", "...belongs to a certain country". Subsumed under the notion of belonging is also a sense of a "connection" described by some as an "emotional connection". This feature also includes feeling happy, included and accepted in a country as well as being part of a group "with the same background".

The second area on which this group tended to focus in their responses concerns 'rights' with 7 mentions in the data. Such rights relate to legal rights and entitlements. Examples given include the right to vote and the right to express your opinion about and to criticise "...the

country in which [they] are a citizen”.

‘Obligations’ and ‘Responsibilities’ both received 1 mention in the data in references to the requirement to ‘obey the rules and laws and respect them’ (Obligations) and “..contribute by working” (Responsibilities).

In addition, the above components of citizenship mentioned by these participants were related directly by them to the notion of a “country”, i.e. they were confined within national borders.

Two students in this group touched on a transnational concept of citizenship classified in Figure 1 as “European”. They spoke of European citizenship as being something they enjoyed in addition to their national citizenship and related European citizenship primarily to the right to work and travel in other EU countries e.g. “Citizens of Europe are allowed to travel to other European countries. I am an Irish citizen but I am also a citizen of the European Union.”

3.2 Post-Year Abroad

In the reflective pieces by the post year abroad group, the notion of ‘belonging’ plays a less dominant role although it remains significant, underlying up 6 of the 21 components of citizenship mentioned by this group. The language used to express this concept is more sophisticated among the members of this group with some describing it as “national affiliation” and including in the concept, the sharing of values, beliefs and cultural norms.

A sense of ‘obligation’ being associated with citizenship is more dominant among this group compared with the previous group. The types of obligations referred to include the need to “respect the laws and traditions of that country” and “...abide by the laws”.

Aspects of citizenships relating to rights and responsibilities were the next most important categories receiving an equal number of mentions by the post-year abroad group. The understanding of both of these elements was similar to that demonstrated by the previous group with rights encompassing legal rights, the right to take advantage of services offered and the right to dissent and criticise. The notion of responsibility was expanded somewhat to

encompass a sense of shared responsibility within a country articulated as follows “..feel responsible for the acts of some of the other citizens”. As with the previous group, responsibility also included a willingness “...to contribute to the improvement of the nation”.

The expanded, transnational notion of citizenship classified under ‘European’ for the previous group was not referred to at all by this group. However, two new themes did emerge from their data. The first concerned the importance of language in relation to citizenship with three commenting that language is a significant factor in citizenship.

The second concerned the notion of citizenship bringing with it a representative function in that citizens act as representatives of their countries when they are abroad as articulated by one of the respondents as follows, “...feel responsible for your acts in your country and outside of it because you represent it”.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the findings indicate that there is some intergroup variation in the way that students conceptualise citizenship. Neither sample presented a common understanding or a single, clear definition of citizenship.

However, despite the pilot nature and resultant limitations of this study outlined above (Section 2), some tentative generalisations can be made regarding differences between the two groups. Firstly, students in the second year of their degree have a tendency to articulate a relatively straightforward understanding of the concept with a strong focus on the notion of ‘belonging’ while those in the post year abroad group recognise that the concept is “difficult to define”, complex and composed of a number of elements. For example, on average, the first group mention 1.75 of the broad themes as being components of citizenship while the second group mentions on average 3.14. As well as being attributable to the year abroad, this may, however, also be an outcome of the development of higher order thinking skills over the course of an undergraduate degree underlining the need for a control group in future studies of this nature.

A second observation concerns the fact that both obligations and responsibilities increase in importance and become more important than rights for the post-year abroad group. In addition, for this group, in tandem with the perception of responsibility requiring a contribution to the development of a nation comes the notion of 'shared responsibility' by all citizens of a country.

Thus, again bearing the limitations of this pilot study in mind, these preliminary results appear to suggest that after a year abroad students begin to move away from a narrower understanding of citizenship focussed on compliance and rights to a broader understanding focussed more on obligations and responsibilities. This change in approach runs parallel to a movement away from an ideal of "good citizenship" towards a notion of "active citizenship" in the research literature with the former characterised by passivity and compliance on the part of the individual. An active citizen, on the other hand, is described as being equipped with the knowledge and skills required for them to be able to reflect on their impact on society and the state, and is motivated to critically evaluate existing social structures (Kerr, Sturman, Schulz and Burge, 2010; Neubauer, 2012, 89) with a view to transforming them.

In addition, two new elements appear in the post-year abroad group, which of their nature would appear likely to be associated with having just spent a year in another country. These concern the importance of fluency in the language of a country in terms of being a citizen of that country and the representative role played by citizens of one country when they are in another.

Interestingly, associations with the concept of "citizenship" by the second group are all linked to the idea of "national" citizenship or what Nussbaum (1996) defines as "political citizenship" in which a citizen has a "distinct, bounded" affiliation with a geographical state (discussed in Hendershot and Sperandio, 2009, 45). Unlike in the first group, there is no mention at all of European citizenship or of any more transnational or global interpretation of this concept by the second group. This may be because, in linguistic terms, students automatically assume that by "citizenship" "national citizenship" is implied and that it is necessary to explicitly ask them to reflect on issues around global or European citizenship. Contradicting this hypothesis is the fact that two of the participants in the first group did nonetheless speak of European citizenship.

An alternative interpretation is that transnational notions of citizenship and for example a sense of shared responsibility which extends across Europe or globally has not been fostered by a year of study abroad. This possible interpretation is supported by one of the tenets of experiential education, i.e. that “experiences are not educational in and of themselves” (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002). In other words, study abroad does not necessarily or automatically result in this kind of transformative learning. It is also supported by Wynveen, Kyle and Tarrant (2012) who have attempted to identify the features of the study abroad experience that result in transformative learning. They conclude that of particular significance are the design of the experience in terms of the program at the institution abroad including the instructors and the setting. In particular, they counselled against an ‘unfacilitated experience’ (2012, 348) whereby students are simply left to fend for themselves while abroad.

Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow and Nam (2009). in a similar vein concluded that the key areas for the success or otherwise of transformative learning concern what they call the “four basic D’s of study abroad”, i.e. demography, or age and background of the students, destination, duration and depth. The demography or age and background of the students clearly potentially plays a role but tends not to be under the control of those preparing students for study abroad. Similarly, the destination country is determined by the target language. Issues around the choice of particular institutions as partner universities clearly could potentially also play a role but are primarily beyond the scope of this particular study. Duration is set within the course structure at two semesters or one academic year. The final variable “depth” is of most relevance here dealing as it does with the question of whether students engage in a meaningful manner with their experience abroad.

Wynveen, Kyle and Tarrant (2011) similarly stress the importance for a deep learning experience of strong pedagogical techniques implemented by competent instructors. However, they emphasise their importance not only during the study abroad experience itself but also in the home institution when preparing students for study abroad and indeed on their return. Witte (2012) recommends that knowledge from research in both linguistics and pedagogy be applied in the development of such pedagogical techniques as both disciplines, in his view,

support the principles of experiential pedagogy which “includes the provision of rich learning experiences beyond the cognitive level”. Recommended approaches include role play, group work, tandem work, cultural and political simulations, games, project work, the study of appropriate literature, virtual classrooms, critical incidents, “scaffolded” or facilitated reflection, critical reflection and reflective knowing (see for example Coulson and Marina, 2012; Smith, 2011; Witte, 2012) .

Looking at the final two approaches for the purpose of exemplification, Smith (2011) sees critical reflection as a way for learners to examine subjective thoughts about who they are. ‘Reflective knowing’, a related concept, involves reflecting on and questioning accepted stereotypes and assumptions, be they a student’s own or someone else’s. There is huge variation in how critical reflection could be potentially encouraged and put into practice in the classroom. A simple example relevant here could involve discussion and role-play related to an incident likely to raise issues around questions of national, European and/or global citizenship. To take just one example, the recent naming of An Taoiseach Enda Kenny, the current Irish Head of Government, as “European of the Year 2012” by the Association of German Publishers (Sheahan, 2012) potentially provides a useful stimulus for debate around such issues. Additionally, during a year abroad, students could be required to source critical incidents themselves which they consider would be useful for addressing such issues. These materials could provide a basis for debate, problem-based learning and various other forms of analysis on their return.

The use of approaches of this nature around the study abroad experience could help to counter the criticism that universities neglect aspects of pre-departure preparation for students embarking on study abroad programmes (Root and Ngampornchai, 2012). It is possible also that given potential time or credit constraints, elements of these approaches could be incorporated into language modules using elements of Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL. In this way, it may be possible to provide students with what Paige and Goode (2009) describe as ‘cultural mentoring’. In their view, such mentoring can have a particularly significant impact on potential transformative learning during a period of study

abroad.

In such a way, the development in learners' conceptualisation of citizenship by a year abroad reported on in this study could be further enhanced. Similarly, by prompting students to look beyond national boundaries in their interpretation of citizenship, it might be possible to come closer to achieving the goal of the Erasmus programme itself, i.e. to 'give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen'

In a wider sense, this could be advantageous in helping to guard against an insular mentality and promote an understanding of the interconnected nature of a globalised world. In the words of Robertson (1992 in Agbaria 2011,70) , it could potentially assist in the 'intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole' something which is particularly important in Europe currently given the current resurgence in nationalist, regionalist (Fischer and Stehle, 2013, 13) and separatist tendencies in the face of economic crises.

In conclusion, the findings of this pilot study provide some initial indications that study abroad impacts students' perceptions of the concept of citizenship as it applies to them personally. After a period of study abroad of one year in this case, the participants in this study have a more complex and developed understanding of the concept. Specifically, in addition to the notion of 'belonging', 'responsibilities' and 'obligations' play significant roles with responsibility extended in some cases to include collective national responsibilities. 'Rights' continue to be of importance but relatively less so. In addition, the importance of 'language' in understanding citizenship is recognised by some post-study abroad as is the 'representative role' played by members of one country while in another. However, despite these developments, the participants in this study lacked, in their perception of the nature of 'their' citizenship, a transnational component which recognises the interconnectedness of local and global elements. In particular, the sense of being citizens of Europe does not appear to have been developed¹, nor does that of global citizenship. Thus, viewed in conjunction with a review of the literature in this field, the results of this pilot study would suggest that there is considerable

¹ A recognition of the importance of this issue is perhaps one of the reasons why 2013 has been designated "European Year of Citizens" (European Commission 2011a).

scope for further research on the impact of study abroad on students' perceptions of citizenship. Similarly, there would appear to be a significant need for research involving the development and testing of pedagogical approaches and techniques which encourage transformational learning before, during and after study abroad particularly as it relates to learners' perceptions of citizenship.

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