

Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication

'The PIC project/Le projet PIC'

2003-2006

INTERIM REPORT

October 2005

INTRODUCTION

This document is an interim report on the PIC project as it enters its third and final year. After more than two years preparation, the project began in September 2003. The first year was spent establishing the infrastructure, designing the instruments for data collection and selecting and preparing the participants who were to go abroad as language teaching assistants the following year (2004-05). Now, in October 2005, their year abroad has finished, the main phase of data collection has been completed and the project team are in the process of studying, transcribing and codifying the wide range of material collected between March 2004 and April 2005. Our findings will form the basis of a series of symposia and conference papers at which the outcomes of the project are to be disseminated. It is also intended that, as with its predecessor, The Interculture Project (1998-2002) www.lancs.ac.uk/users/interculture, the website will constitute a working resource for anyone interested in the foreign language teaching assistants programme in France and England - in this, its centenary year - and, in particular, in the programme's cultural, linguistic and institutional dimensions.

So far, the project has achieved its objectives. We have collected virtually all the data anticipated in the original proposal and have enjoyed the active support of the British Council, the French Ministry of Education, Local Education Authorities and Académies, not simply at the time when we were setting up the project, but at every stage in its implementation to date. Without this support and the financial backing of the Economic and Science Research Council of England and Wales (ESRC), the project would have been unimaginable, and it goes without saying that we are extremely grateful for the opportunity it has provided for us to investigate the different aspects of a delicate relationship which is central to the success of language learning in both countries.

The purpose of this report is to give an account of the actions undertaken so far to all the external agencies involved in the project, including the ESRC, so that its background can be fully understood by those to whom we aim to disseminate the project's findings between now and its completion in September 2006. We hope that it will provoke critical comment as well as appreciation, so that the outstanding issues raised by the research so far can be satisfactorily addressed during the project's lifetime.

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October 2005

THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT

The Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication (PIC) Project arose from three main sources: first, a theoretical research interest on the part of two colleagues from Lancaster University in pragmatics, politeness and intercultural communication, second, a long experience of managing student exchange in Europe and in particular of being responsible for Modern Languages undergraduates' periods of study abroad, and, third and finally, the findings of a large-scale national initiative by the Higher Education Funding Council of England and Wales (HEFCE) - the fund for the development of teaching and learning (FDTL) - to investigate and disseminate models of good practice in Higher Education. The FDTL programme reached across all discipline areas and has led subsequently to the establishment of specialist subject centres, located at different universities in the UK. Together with existing discipline-based institutions, these are responsible for promoting quality development in what is now known as The Higher Education Academy.

The Interculture Project was one of three projects in Phase II of FDTL within the discipline area 'Modern Languages'. The project's primary goals were to develop a closer understanding of the year abroad experience and to produce pedagogical materials designed to enhance students' learning outcomes. It involved more than 150 students from four British universities spending the year abroad in five European countries and gathered a wide range of discursive data in the form of questionnaire responses, focus groups, diaries and interviews. These were transcribed, codified and made accessible on-line via a user-friendly searchable data base (see web address above), accompanied by a wide variety of exercises aimed at enhancing prospective year abroad students' intercultural awareness.

One aspect of the year abroad experience which received particular attention from students was the relationship between foreign language assistants and the staff of the schools where they were employed. The issues encountered were wide-ranging and often difficult to unravel. They concerned preparation procedures, the allocation of students to schools, the welcome provided by the establishments following the students' arrival, the negotiation of their role as language teachers and the management of the various professional problems they encountered during their stay, including the relationship between their job and their personal welfare. Often these relationships led to more or less well resolved tensions with staff at the school. It was difficult to know whether such misunderstandings were

ultimately personal, linguistic, political or cultural or simply derived from an undifferentiated amalgam of all these elements.

AIMS

The aim of the PIC project was to deconstruct this mix; to identify the factors which determined the success or failure of communication between language teaching assistants and their 'mentors' or 'responsables' in schools in France and the UK. How did the educational cultures differ in the two countries? To what extent were each party's expectations shared by the other, and, if not, were any mismatches overcome and, if so, how? If misunderstandings persisted, what factors best accounted for this? Were the patterns of resolution different in France from those in England. To address these issues, it was necessary to record a representative set of 'encounters' between assistants and mentor/responsables (MRs) at schools in both countries, to analyse closely the live exchanges between them and to invite the participants in the project to reflect on the outcome of their exchanges, both immediately after the event and over time. This would allow us to differentiate between breakdowns in communication which were purely linguistic in origin and those which were due to cultural, political, personal or 'other' factors.

However, the project also had a more immediately practical dimension. In preparing the students and mentors for their participation in the project as experimental 'subjects' and through their retrospective reflections, it was possible to gauge their reactions to the administrative procedures of the Assistants Programme, to assess the effectiveness of the students' preparation and identify some of the more practical issues associated with their integration into school life – as teachers and as individuals. It was intended that the project's findings raise awareness of these issues and make recommendations to the national agencies involved as to how the administration of the programme might be improved.

NEGOTIATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Involving LEAs and Académies

In order to recruit a significant sample of students to the project, to direct them to particular destinations in the two countries and to prepare them adequately for the experience of participating, we enlisted the support of the French Ministry of Education, the Centre International des Etudes Pédagogiques

(CIEP) at Sèvres, The British Council and a number of universities on either side of the Channel. Following initial discussions with the French Inspectorate for Schools and The British Council, and having secured commitment to the project from the Délégation aux Relations Internationales et à la Coopération (DRIC), agreements were reached with the Recteurs of seven French Académies: Nantes, Paris, Versailles, Créteil, Rennes, Poitiers and Toulouse, for the experiences of a small number of assistants in each to be closely monitored: before, during and after their assistantships. Schools participated either by order of the Rectorate or voluntarily. An analogous procedure was followed at the English end. With the help of the British Council and Barry Jones of the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University, six 'Local Education Authorities' (LEAs) in the East Midlands and East Anglia: Bedford, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough, agreed to take part in the project and invited schools in their regions to participate voluntarily.

Involving Mentors/Responsables

In both France and England, it was intended that the schools engage with the project by arranging for the staff designated as MRs to attend at least two workshops, one before the start of the assistantship and one towards the end. Like the students, the MRs would also be expected to offer some account of their experience of the relationship, in writing or at the workshops, so that both points of view could be taken into account.

Selecting students

Contacts were made with three French universities with which Lancaster had Erasmus partnerships: Lyon III, Poitiers and Rennes II. All French prospective language assistants from the three universities who had applied to go to England were written to and, of these, 34 agreed to take part. They did so on the basis that they would be able to exercise a degree of choice over the region to which they would be posted (viz. South Midlands, East Anglia and the area North-East of London), though this freedom did not extend to the choice of Local Education Authority. They were directed to these by the British Council on a similar basis to any other applicant. The same principle was applied in England. Year abroad coordinators were contacted at the Universities of Cambridge, Durham, Exeter, Lancaster, Leeds and Warwick, students were notified and 37 came forward. The students identified themselves as PIC participants when they applied to the CIEP and British Council and were allocated accordingly to the appropriate regions.

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRES AND 'NESSays'

Three variables in the students' profiles were investigated before the year abroad experience in order to be able to assess the extent to which these conditioned their subsequent behaviour toward their mentor/responsible:

- personality/psychological outlook;
- the character/quality of institutional preparation received;
- the terms in which they represented Frenchness/Englishness and their relative propensity to form stereotypes.

Personality/psychological outlook and its consequences

Following consultation with the Department of Psychology at Lancaster University, it was agreed to use an approved on-line personality test known as 'The Big 5' (see Annexe - 'The Big 5' questionnaire). Responses to 100 questions were grouped and graded according to a template designed to generate a percentage 'score' along four variable scales: 'extraversion', 'agreeableness', 'conscientiousness', 'neuroticism', 'openness (culture)'.

In general, the students were well above the average on the 'agreeableness' parameter. Apart from the broad conclusions summarised in the table above, it is not yet possible systematically to relate the scores of individuals or groups to the quality of the outcomes of the exchanges with their MRs. Qualitative insights will be drawn from individual case studies in the next phases of the project. In addition more systematic conclusions can be drawn by quantifying the number of 'moves' of a certain type as defined by Sinclair and Coulthard [1975] and Tsui [1994] (eg. what they term 'conflict', 'challenge' and 'focus' moves), and calculating the correlation between these and scores along the four variables. This data can then be compared to the language of the students' own reflections on the speech encounter. At the time of writing (November 2005), the task of codifying the moves is still in progress. In the meantime, qualitative generalisations can be made by establishing a complete data profile for the more extreme examples in the personality test. Of particular interest will be to compare the record of the assistants' analysis of their relationship with their MR with the MR's own account (in progress). It should be borne in mind that the participants in the projet were self-selecting and therefore more likely to have above average levels of motivation and commitment. This has not inhibited them from

making their views known in cases where they felt strongly about particular aspects of their experience.

Levels of preparation

Findings on the type and level of preparation received bore out what is already generally known to the major agencies engaged in the assistantship scheme. The form of preparation is highly variable between institutions within both France and England, and differs between the two countries. Once again, it should be borne in mind that the institutions participating in the project were likely to offer above average quality of preparation (see Annexe).

It is clear from feedback that more attention could be given to preparation in both countries and that the potential for mismatches of expectation between the assistant and the school can be minimised if appropriate measures are taken during the year prior to departure. From the perspective of the type of responsibilities which foreign language assistants have to take on, probably the most important area in which preparation is needed is that of practical pedagogy. It should also be borne in mind that the data deriving from the PIC project is potentially misleading since the project itself involved intensive preparation workshops. This will largely have neutralised any differences between institutions which might otherwise have been present. The occurrence of structural misunderstandings will therefore be all the more significant and have been highlighted accordingly by the data. It is probable that the need for preparation is more acute for English students going to France than vice versa, due to the more diverse way assistants are used in French schools, the greater initiative required of them in devising pedagogical activities and the increased likelihood of being shared between a number of schools, especially in the primary sector.

Notwithstanding the excellent information available on the internet and the official documentation provided by the British Council and the CIEP, many students felt underinformed in their insight into the educational system of the host country: types of institution, levels of class, nature of examination etc. They were grateful when these were explained to them by MRs. This appears to be an area which could receive greater emphasis in preparation courses.

Views of 'the other'

In order to gauge how each set of students viewed the other culture and to assess the extent to which students entertained 'stereotypes' of France and

England, all participants were asked to write an entirely open-ended, personal narrative on the topic of FrenchNESS or EnglishNESS. The content of these texts, which will be published in anonymised form on the Project website, together with all the data, was discussed and synthesised at the workshop. Apart from raising the consciousness of the participants in the project, the idea was to form a view of attitudes and expectations which might be seen later to condition students' behaviour in their interactions. It was also intended further to test the finding of The Interculture Project (cf Tusting and Crawshaw [2003]) that British students, although highly conscious of the danger of stereotypes prior to departure, were ready to form 'stereotypical views' on the basis of their personal experience (see Annexe). This finding was amply borne out by the evidence of the logbooks, where aspects of school organisation were very often perceived as manifestations of national culture. In this, the English students were more prone to forming stereotypical views than the French, although they were equally concerned to identify the distinction between personal behaviour and general features of culture.

THE WORKSHOPS AND THEIR ROLE

Preparatory workshops – the scenarios

A series of three intensive preparatory workshops for both students and MRs were held between March and September 2004 (the first year of the project). As has been suggested, the purpose of these was partly to gather 'pre-experience' data on the personality, attitudes and degree of preparation of the students, and partly to inform them - and the MRs - of what the project's activities would involve. In order to achieve this, a series of 'scenarios' was devised by the project team. Each scenario represented a typical recurrent misunderstanding between assistants and mentors, which were reconstructed from interviews with former returnees. Subsequent trials with the MRs at the workshops confirmed their veracity. The scenarios were used to rehearse the situations in which the subjects might find themselves and to train them in the format of data collection demanded by the project. They were designed to sensitise the participants to the cultural, institutional and linguistic factors which intervened in the interactions between assistants and mentors.

Two types of scenario were devised: one for demonstration and analysis and one for enactment. The demonstration scenarios were pre-recorded on video or audio-tape and played to sub-groups who were then asked to comment

closely on the behaviour of each of the interlocutors in the 'event' and report back in plenary session on their findings. Enactment scenarios required the workshop participants to 'play the role' of an assistant according to an outline description, with native speakers taking the part of the MRs, and then to explain their attitude to the wider group (see Annexe). For logistical reasons, three scenarios were created for the English students going to France and two for the French students going to England.

A. Scenarios for English students going to France (Workshops in Cambridge [March 2004] and Lancaster [June 2004])

1. 'Discipline Problems in an Ecole Primaire': represents the frustration of an English assistant who seeks support from her responsible in resolving discipline problems in her class in a primary school in a 'difficult' area (Zone d'Education Prioritaire – ZEP). The misunderstanding derives primarily from the fact that the Principal of the school wrongly believes the student to be a trained teacher and has placed the student in sole charge of the class concerned. The Principal shows indifference to the concerns of the student and is reluctant to accept responsibility for the problem. Instead, she blames the government for making English teaching compulsory in primary education without first ensuring that adequate resources are available. She nevertheless agrees to speak to the students concerned. (Video Demonstration)
2. 'Video-watching': describes a confrontation between a status-conscious responsible and an independent-minded assistant in which the assistant, instead of following instructions and teaching pronunciation and grammar according to the dictates of the nationally prescribed examination system, has shown English video-films in class. She finds these more motivating for the students and has not appreciated the extent to which the syllabus should determine class activities. Following a confrontation, the assistant backs off and a compromise is reached. (Enactment and subsequent audio demonstration)
3. 'Seeking advice': records a meeting between an assistant who is seeking help with teaching materials. Not being herself an English specialist, the responsible is ill-placed to give her the advice she needs and offers only limited support. The assistant is left to her own resources and feels mildly frustrated. (Enactment and subsequent audio demonstration)

B. Scenarios for French students going to England (Workshop in Cambridge, September, 2004)

1. 'Oh là là!': reflects the habit of pre-GCSE pupils of imitating the French mannerisms of the 'assistant' as a distraction in class, to relieve boredom or simply for humorous effect. Not surprisingly, this is perceived as an insult by the French male assistant, not just towards him personally, but against his national self-esteem. He complains to his mentor, expecting something to be done, and is taken aback by the mentor's apparent readiness to see the pupils' point of view. He is only partly satisfied by the mentor's assurances that he will have a word with the pupils concerned. (Video Demonstration)
2. 'School trips': evokes the reaction of a French assistant when asked by an insistent teacher to accompany her and her lower-sixth form French class on a visit to a neighbouring theatre to see a Molière play on a Friday evening. Classical theatre does not interest the 'assistant'. In any case, she has taken part in the assistantship programme primarily in order to be near her boyfriend who is in another town and whom she visits whenever possible. She does not wish to go beyond her contractual obligations. Pressed by the teacher (who is not her mentor), she agrees reluctantly to help out on another occasion. (Audio Demonstration).

Retrospective Workshops

As a closure to the data collection process, two retrospective workshops were held in March-April 2005, in Paris and Cambridge respectively. These allowed the project team to report on findings to date and enabled both assistants and MRs to reflect on their experiences and on the overall administration of the assistants programme. It has therefore been possible to match the reflections of the assistants to the impressions of the MRs.

PROVISIONAL FINDINGS FROM THE DATA

There were five different types of data collected from 'assistants' which relate directly to the assistant-MR relationship:

- transcriptions of 'live' conversations between assistants and MRs - referred to as 'entretiens';

- immediate 'post-hoc' reflections on the entretiens - referred to as 'témoignages';
- longitudinal analysis of the progress of the relationship between the assistant and the MR, normally written in the form of a diary or occasionally recorded orally – referred to as 'logbooks';
- written 'retrospective reflections' on the totality of the experience, as noted in final workshops held in March-April 2005 in Paris and Cambridge.

Data from mentors/responsables included:

- written reflections on the entretiens and on the development of the relationship with the assistant, noted in writing at the time or retrospectively at the final workshop in March-April 2005;
- transcriptions of recorded telephone interviews conducted retrospectively in June 2005.

1. 'Entretiens' and 'Témoignages'

The data from the entretiens and témoignages almost invariably record the initial contact between the assistant and the mentor/responsible and/or the outcome of the first experiences of teaching. They tend to focus on the extent to which the assistant's expectations were met, the reception by the school, advice on teaching activities and school administration. As such they reflect 'first impressions' which offer an insight into the assistants' attitudes and the way in which the use of assistant differs in France and England.

The main issues addressed in entretiens and témoignages concern:

- the character of the welcome
- the responsible's expectations and those of the staff at the school
- the timetable and teaching arrangements
- class observation
- the attitude and conversational manner of the responsible
- the responsible as role model
- creating an impression and receiving feedback
- advice, planning and communication

The welcome

Obvious as it is, the fact of being recognised on arrival, of there being a person at the school designated to make assistants feel at home and answer their initial questions, is critical to their successful integration. Yet, even within the project, there were a number of schools where the assistant was not recognised and several instances where staff appeared not to be aware that the school had a language assistant at all. It seemed that this situation was most likely to apply in the primary sector in France, especially when the assistant had been allocated to more than one school. Data from the workshops suggests that this is due to the delay over the summer in the communication between the Académie, the Délégation Académique aux Relations Internationales et à la Co-opération (DARIC), the Inspection Régionale and the individual schools, which means that the schools sometimes do not know themselves until September whether or not their application for an assistant has been successful. In a number of cases, while the Head might have been informed, the advice had not reached staff in the English department.

Not surprisingly, the best cases were those where the mentor/responsible (MR) took a live interest in the assistant's personal welfare, to the extent of providing assistance with accommodation and bureaucratic procedures such as bank accounts, tax, residence permits etc. . As with so many of the mentor's responsibilities, the extent to which this took place appeared to be the product of personal investment rather than an integral part of official duties. The degree of appreciation registered by newly arrived students who received the kind of help nevertheless described above underlines its value.

Linked to the above was the view, articulated by the MRs who attended the workshops, that the post of mentor/responsible should be more fully recognised within the institution as part of their official administrative responsibilities. The feedback from MRs confirmed that few had volunteered for the post. They had mostly been informed by their Head of Department or by the Head Teacher of the school that they should take on the job. Some claimed not to know what it entailed. This feeling was more strongly expressed by language teachers in France than by those in England, though the extent of personal engagement by those who did involve themselves actively in the new assistants' welfare was broadly equivalent in both countries. The findings re-emphasised the value of establishing a clearer set of official guidelines and of making them more readily available to schools and language departments in particular.

The expectations of school staff

Despite the stereotype of staff's wrongly expecting assistants to be trained teachers, this was the exception rather than the rule. More frequent was the tendency for MRs to relate their previous personal experience as language assistants to the present-day situation. Again, this applied in both countries. MRs' readiness to engage personally was clearly in large measure a consequence of their empathy with the assistant's predicament. This response could be contrasted with staff who, while they might not explicitly assume that the assistant had been pedagogically trained, nevertheless placed them in sole charge of complete classes. Such situations gave the assistant the impression that the expectations of the school did not match with their real state of preparation and often made it difficult for them to cope. This in turn gave rise to exchanges where there was an inherent potential for misunderstanding, a context which was more prevalent in France than in England, where the nature of the assistants' activities tended to be more clearly defined by the curriculum. Data from the assistants indicates that the assistants' ability to 'cope' is often taken for granted. Equally, the MRs tend to ignore the assistants degree of preparedness and to view them rather as a resource for meeting the language teaching needs of the institution.

The timetable and teaching arrangements

Apart from the feeling of support - or alienation - generated by the degree of welcome from the school, the single most significant indicator of co-ordination leading to a sense of security and belonging on the part of the assistant was the process of establishing the timetable. The best-case scenario was for a prototype timetable already to have been prepared and for this to form the basis of the initial 'entretien'. This situation did apply in a number of cases, again more frequently in England, where the nature of the assistant's teaching responsibilities up to and including year 11 was more likely to be driven by the examination syllabus and where the school was more likely to have had sufficient notice to make the requisite plans. Timetabling was, as often as not, co-ordinated by the head of the French department who was then in a position to allocate the assistant in advance to different groups. While this system afforded a higher degree of organisation, the nature of the teaching activity itself was perceived to be relatively more stultifying, with assistants in most cases being asked to see students from a particular class either individually or in groups of two or three to rehearse examination topics. It was acknowledged that this was probably not the most effective way to use language assistants, yet the competitive demands of the English system are such that, in order to obtain the best outcomes in national examinations, assistants can easily become instruments of rote-learning.

The situation in France is different. Here, the timetable was more likely to be the outcome of dynamic negotiation with a range of different teachers – led by the assistant herself. This appeared to be the consequence of two factors: first, the relatively lesser degree of control exercised by the responsible both over the nature of the teaching to be delivered and over the timetable itself (the responsible was less likely than in England to be head of the language department), and – paradoxically in view of national stereotypes – by the fact that, in France, the type of learning activity was less driven by the constraints of the examination. The assistant would negotiate with each of the English teachers the best time for her/him to be available to the teacher concerned before reporting back to the responsible. The nature and timing of what had been agreed was a frequent topic of the entretiens.

Overall, this situation makes the position of the English assistant in France relatively more complex than in England. The conditions under which the assistant operates are likely to vary from teacher to teacher, in terms of the timing of the classes, the number of pupils the assistant may be required to teach at one time and the topic or tasks which s/he is called on to undertake. In short, the English language assistant in France may have greater freedom, but the degree of freedom implies greater pedagogical responsibility and means that s/he has to negotiate the teaching tasks with a greater number of people. This means inevitably, that there is a greater potential for misunderstanding – both logistical and pedagogical – and probably demands a higher degree of organisation and self-discipline on the part of the assistant.

Unlike in England, it was common practice in France for assistants to take half a class (10-15 pupils and sometimes more), in parallel with the teachers with whom they were working. This applied most frequently at secondary level (deuxième cycle), while at primary level (premier cycle), it was not uncommon for the assistant to fulfil the function of a ‘chargé de cours’, which implied taking responsibility for a whole class. In England, this was not permitted, even at primary level, and the evidence of the workshops underlined mentors’ concern to respect the letter of the law. The French practice of ‘teaching in parallel’, means that it becomes all the more important for there to be complementarity between the activities of teacher and assistant. Once again, this increases the importance of negotiation between the two parties, and leaves a certain open-endedness in the teacher’s level of expectation. Some teachers are much more specific than others in defining what they expect the assistant to do, and are more efficient in giving the assistant sufficient notice to prepare. Knowing what is expected of them in a particular class becomes a particular object of concern on the part of the assistant and was one of the most frequent topics of discussion between assistants and teachers.

Class Observation

It is a recommendation of the assistants' programme that assistants undertake a minimum of a week's classroom observation before taking full responsibility for their teaching functions. Not surprisingly, all those who did so valued the experience. However, the practice was not universally applied, even when, on certain occasions, the assistant pointed out that it was normally a requirement. It seems that it is not always clear whose responsibility it is to ensure that observation does take place and in whose classes. The best practice is that where the MR, in collaboration with the head of department, takes charge of co-ordinating the observation period by arrangement with the teachers concerned, so that the assistant has the chance to familiarise herself with the techniques of all the teachers with whom she will be working. This is especially true in France where, as has already been pointed out, the assistant may be acting in support of a number of different teachers, each of whom may require slightly different patterns of work.

Attitude and conversational manner of the mentor/responsible

Insofar as the first entretien was a component of the PIC Project, it was more common for the exchange to be initiated by the assistant than the other way round. Once under way, however, the roles tended to become reversed. In the few cases where no MR had been designated, the entretien took place with the member of staff with whom the assistant had the most contact. In general, the MR quickly took the lead role, asking questions of the assistant and then commenting on the assistant's replies, or alternatively responding at length to the assistant's questions. Frequently, the conversation devolved into an information session, in which the MR explained to the assistant what was required of her, whom she should contact, what her role should be in the school etc. A common pattern was thus one where, having sought to elicit questions from the assistant, the MR dominated, leaving little opportunity for the assistant to interrupt the flow and ask further questions herself. Despite the value of the information being imparted, this was not always appreciated by the assistant who wanted her own voice to be heard. It is evidently as much a part of the MR's role, having invited comment from the assistant then to become a listener, rather than to be the sole provider of information.

The most successful entretiens were those where there appeared to be a real dialogue between colleagues, where the MR is an interlocutor from whom advice can be sought, whilst at the same time being a partner in a common

enterprise. Very often, the assistant was seeking answers to questions and became frustrated if the questions were left unanswered. This is hardly surprising in an environment where MRs have little time and may not themselves be the teacher with whom the assistant is working. The pressure on staff was universally understood by the assistants, which meant in turn that they appreciated all the more the time which staff in general - and especially the MR - were prepared to give them. Undoubtedly the most successful partnerships were those where meetings took place on a regular basis - once a week or once a fortnight during the early stages and then becoming less frequent. The project was perceived as a catalyst in this respect, bringing about meetings which might otherwise not have taken place and thereby raising awareness of their utility.

The mentor/responsible as role model

A significant theme in the assistants' perception of the MR was their explicit respect (or otherwise) for the latter's degree of dedication to his/her profession. It is clear that the role of MR sets standards for assistants of which assistants are highly conscious, which either motivates them or has the opposite effect. As young teachers, assistants are extremely sensitive to attitudes and practices which they see as ethically laudable and/or effective, and they are quick to judge the professional aptitude of their mentors accordingly. From this point of view, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the MR's position as both a cultural icon and a professional role model. The assistant is often described as a cultural ambassador. The label can be applied equally, if not more aptly, to the MR, a fact which, in a number of schools, appears to be overlooked. Inevitably, MRs are also teaching instructors - if only through example - and this heightens the importance of their role.

Creating an impression and obtaining feedback

Conscious as they are of the MR's effectiveness, assistants are equally concerned themselves to be creating a favourable impression. One of the most telling features of the témoignages is the assistants' anxiety as to how they are perceived, and the extent to which they appreciate positive feedback. This cannot be emphasised strongly enough. Assistants were extremely susceptible to feeling left out, to not being kept informed, and they are quick to blame the system or the institution if they feel excluded or misjudged. They badly want to be treated as equals. Their need for reassurance relates to their knowledge of the language, to their performance as teachers and to

themselves as people. This implies that the MR needs to be informed of the assistant's progress, not just in relation to the MR's own classes but more widely. Offering positive feedback and giving advice is evidently a key aspect of their role. While the English assistants were more prone to feel neglected than the French, assistants of both countries were equally appreciative if they felt that efforts were being made to include them in the life of the school.

Advice, planning and communication

If there is one thing which assistants appreciate and deplore in equal measure, it is knowing or not knowing in advance a) what is expected of them in particular classes and b) when the timetable has been changed. This issue self-evidently relates to the general question of communication. Nothing irritates the assistants more than to turn up at the school only to discover that a class has been cancelled, the school is on strike or that due to the unplanned absence of a teacher, they are expected to take that teacher's class. The quality of communication is an expression of inclusion in the life of the institution. Not to be informed of last-minute changes conveys the impression of being neglected. The same perception is expressed when the teacher gives insufficient notice to the assistant of the activities which s/he is expected to undertake, or when the planned activities are altered without the assistant having been informed. The unsurprising conclusion to be drawn from the assistants' accounts is that proper co-ordination combined with regular meetings are vital ingredients of a successful experience, particularly in the early stages. Often, the *entretiens*, particularly those recorded at a later point in the term, allowed the MR to check the quality of the arrangements with individual teachers. Even if the MR was not in a position to change the state of affairs, it was valuable for assistants to make their feelings known, and for the MR to be fully informed.

2. Logbooks

The logbooks, completed by virtually all the students over the four month period to December 2004, confirm the findings referred to above. They also reveal the extent to which assistants were ready to re-evaluate their impressions of colleagues with the passage of time. MRs who appeared to be excessively friendly at the point of welcome declined in assistants' estimation if they failed to sustain their interest in the assistants' welfare, or if the MRs' personal involvement was at odds with their professional competence. Many

acknowledged nevertheless that being left to their own devices made them more self-reliant. This did not, however, prevent them from criticising the system or the teacher for not providing them with consistent advice. The most highly prized attributes of an MR were 'authentic concern', making the time to answer questions and 'reliability'. Yet assistants were ready to modify their initially unfavourable perceptions as they got to know the MR or other colleagues better. In at least one case, the feeling that the MR did not like the assistant was revealed later to be quite false and caused the assistant to readjust radically her view of the relationship.

One aspect of collegiate behaviour to which the assistants were particularly sensitive was that of being used as a sounding-board or intermediary between conflicting colleagues. They were quick to regard it as unprofessional, as they were the readiness of certain colleagues to share personal confidences with them. Again, this was a view more commonly expressed by the English than the French. At the same time, both national groups included cases where learning of other colleagues' attitudes towards a teacher with whom they were themselves experiencing difficulties helped them form a clearer view of their own relationship with that person. A clear distinction emerged between the roles of 'intermediary' and 'mediator'. Ideally, assistants saw the MR fulfilling the latter role. Their need for someone, at some point, to act as a spokesperson on their behalf in addressing a colleague, a school official, a bank or social security office was virtually universal.

At the same time, the logbooks confirmed the students' propensity for self-criticism. When misunderstandings occur, the first reaction may be to blame the system or the teacher responsible. The second is for the student to ask herself whether it is in fact her fault and to weigh up the extent of responsibility on either side. This dual reaction was most strongly expressed by assistants during the initial phase, when shortcomings in their knowledge of the target language made them especially vulnerable to misunderstanding. At this stage, they are happy to be spoken to in their native language, or, better still, a mixture of both languages, according to circumstances. They interpret being spoken to fast as a lack of consideration for them as foreigners, especially when they are anxious to understand what is being said. This reaction was more common for the English than for the French. For both groups, however, as their confidence grows, so does their desire to be spoken to in the target language; their tendency to react negatively if their own language is used increases accordingly.

Only exceptionally did the assistants of either nationality make their negative attitudes towards the system or their interlocutor known to a professional colleague. Apart from routine problem-solving to do with attendance,

discipline, assessment procedures and pedagogical guidance, there were few examples of interpersonal difficulties being confronted directly. For the most part, the assistants were very conscious of being in a vulnerable position and realised that, even if they made their feelings known, they would be unable to change the situation. Negotiating difficulties of this kind is evidently one of the most valuable aspects of the assistants personal/professional development and of the programme as a whole. Several assistants successfully arranged meetings with MRs to discuss particular issues and these discussions occasionally featured as mid-term entretiens. More frequently, they were referred to in the logbooks together with a comment as to whether or not the meeting had led to change. It is these entretiens in particular which will be more closely scrutinised in the latter phases of the project. The retrospective telephone interviews with the MRs suggest that, in several instances, MRs were unaware of the assistants' feelings of discontent (where these existed), brushing them off as normal or making no reference to them at all. Close comparison between the statements of the assistants and their corresponding MRs, will enable us to assess whether this assertion is in fact true.

RETROSPECTION AND PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

As already stated, retrospective reflections on the totality of the experience were gained at the April workshops and through telephone calls to MRs in June 2005. What is remarkable about the assistants' written texts is the honesty and detachment which they bring to their analysis. What could occasionally be described as petulance in the témoignages and early logbook entries has generally given way to a more balanced understanding of the colleagues with whom they have had closest contact and of those aspects of the system which they initially found impossible to accept. English students in France have become much more ready to accept the greater freedom allowed by the 'hands off' attitude of certain of the teachers and have come to welcome the independence it affords them. The tenor of the retrospectives runs counter to the findings of earlier - much more extensive - studies that students' prejudices deepened rather than being tempered by the experience of living and working abroad. Again, this impression, derived from a first reading of the data as a whole, will be checked through closer analysis of selected profiles. Whatever the findings of this qualitative review, however, it cannot be read as statistically significant. The students taking part in the project were self-selected and are unlikely to be representative of the student population as a whole.

The retrospections – by both assistants and MRs also included recommendations for improvements to the programme as whole. These can provisionally be summarised as follows:

- the need for more careful preparation (school systems and pedagogy);
- earlier notification of postings to schools;
- wider dissemination of precise guidelines regarding (a) the duties of the assistant, (b) the role and responsibilities of the MR;
- clearer identification of the MR's identity;
- more official recognition given to the MR's position;
- the value of regular review meetings between the Assistant and the MR;
- improved communication between the assistant, MR, teachers and the school administration;
- avoidance wherever possible of last-minute changes.

A final version of the interim report will be circulated shortly with the relevant annexes and the findings of the further areas of investigation: a) the comparison between analyses of assistants and MRs, b) the schools' responses to changes referred to in second entretiens, c) the qualitative review of a number of longitudinal profiles.

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