

THE AMITY EXPERIENCE: BENEFITS OF TEACHER TRAINING ABROAD

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Abstract

The current demand for teachers of English in Primary and Secondary schools in Spain is staggering due to the implementation of a bilingual curriculum in the various autonomous communities. Recent graduates with Education degrees are not only looking for alternatives to improve their foreign language skills, but also to learn about new and innovative teaching methodologies to enhance their job prospects. As such, the opportunity to receive professional teacher training through an educational internship in a different country is an experience that, for these recent graduates, can lead to both personal and professional development.

This article discusses the challenges and opportunities encountered by eighty Spanish university students from Centro Universitario Villanueva who have participated in a teacher training internship program in the United States, through Amity Institute, during a full academic year, as volunteer Spanish teaching assistants. Based in San Diego, California, Amity is a non-profit institution which offers students from 29 different countries, who have a career goal in education, the opportunity to become volunteer foreign language teaching assistants in American classrooms and perform as “cultural ambassadors”. The benefits are numerous: the interns gain essential new teaching skills and practical hands-on knowledge, improve their English while living with a native host family and learn how to adjust to a different culture. Consequently, the main purpose of this article is to demonstrate how this eye-opening experience has been a primary ingredient for success in the students’ professional career, and a turning point in their lives.

Keywords: Teacher training, internships, culturally competent, language acquisition, career prospects, emotional challenges.

1 INTRODUCTION

The current labour market prospects in Spain for newly graduated primary and preschool teachers are undergoing deep changes due to the demand for those with proficient English language skills, who can teach in bilingual schools across the various autonomous communities. In addition to the foreign language skills, the need for international and intercultural competences, together with versatile communication skills, is also gaining popularity, as teachers who have been exposed to different methodologies and approaches to education are seen as more “employable”.

Acquiring international experience through some experiential learning program is often found to be one of the best options for young graduates who seek to enhance their future career prospects with this type of professional – and personal – development. Thus, international mobility is the most frequently applied method of internalization worldwide. According to Ala-Louko, “internalization will be part of any business in the future. This requires the ability and willingness to think and operate globally” [1]. Therefore, international mobility as such should be included in the academic curriculum to meet the goals of this new emerging mindset. Braskamp, Braskamp and Merrill stress the importance of the inevitable mentality change resulting from the coexistence with people from different cultural backgrounds, habits, customs, perspectives, religion and aspirations [2].

In today’s global community, from a professional point of view, the importance of intercultural and cross-cultural communication skills has taken a significant front row position, together with the ability to speak different languages and have a well-rounded education. Therefore, intercultural competence (hereinafter IC) starts to play a crucial role in a person’s holistic development. Hammer, Bennet and Wiseman define IC as “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” [3]. The process of IC acquisition is not immediate and undergoes several stages. According to Bennet [4], there are six stages involved: denial, defence, reversal, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In order to undergo this process one should be exposed to the authentic cultural context, for example a *sojourn* abroad. During the process of IC acquisition, several sub-skills are developed: tolerance, language skills, and cultural knowledge. Ala-Louko [1] adds three new extensions to the

abovementioned sub-skills, namely, productivity, resilience and curiosity. All of these sub-skills form part of IC development.

With this in mind, at Centro Universitario Villanueva (hereinafter Villanueva), undergraduate education students are encouraged to go abroad to an English speaking country to fulfil their degree-related *practicum* credit requirement, otherwise known as their teacher-training internship, at least during one of their three internship periods over the four-year degree program. Alternatively, we offer them a different type of program which they can take part in immediately after graduation. This is Amity Institute's (hereinafter Amity) Intern program in the United States, which is aimed at full-time students, or recent graduates, with a career goal in the field of education.

Amity's program was chosen for various reasons. It is specifically aimed at students of education and thus future teachers. It provides local supervision throughout the program, which lowers the anxiety level and gives security to students. Participants live with host families and thus can learn new customs and traditions while sharing their own. Furthermore, the feedback from students from other universities was highly favourable. Besides, the level of English required is fairly attainable, and, finally it is affordable and provides excellent value for the investment made.

In 2010, Villanueva started offering Amity's intern program to our senior education students, as an opportunity to acquire international life experience, receive cross-cultural exposure, improve language skills and gain practical hands-on training--all in a different educational setting. Since then, over eighty Villanueva primary and early childhood education alumni have participated in Amity's intern program.

After implementing the program each year over a nine-year period, we proposed investigating whether our beliefs in the success of the program on our alumni's career prospects were correct. Thus, we conducted a study to analyse the impact of [Amity's program](#) on their professional development, and whether or not this experience had contributed to their career advancement. Considering the disparate locations of some of these alumni throughout Spain, we determined that the most feasible way to proceed was to carry out an online anonymous survey, which explored five areas of interest, including information on general impressions, language acquisition, professional competences learned, cultural diversity and personal skills. All of these form part of IC. The results have been remarkably heartening.

2 AMITY INSTITUTE'S INTERN PROGRAM

Amity Institute is a non-profit organization founded in 1962 to "involve young people from abroad in American education, family and community life" as well as "provide exchange programs that work toward achieving the mission of building international friendship and cultural understanding through teaching exchange" [5]. Amity is a designated Exchange Visitor Program J-1 Visa sponsor, in the exchange teacher and educational intern categories, under the U.S. Department of State and its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Amity's Intern program "offers structured training for aspiring international educators in addition to an opportunity to share their native language and culture" [6]. It "provides participants the opportunity to live in the U.S., gain teaching experience and serve as informal ambassadors for their country in U.S. schools" [6] for a maximum of ten months. Interns assist a certified teacher in the foreign language classroom and perform other related duties for approximately 32 hours per week. They live with volunteer American host families. As stated in the Screening Officer's Handbook, "each intern offers a native perspective on his/her language, culture and home country. This perspective will increase students' understanding and appreciation for the world languages they study" [7]. Nowadays, approximately 350 intern participants coming from 29 different countries in Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa, are placed in primary and secondary schools in 32 States for one academic year.

The application procedure is relatively straightforward. Eligible candidates must complete a 7-page application and provide supporting documentation. In addition, they are interviewed by a local Amity Screening Officer who "volunteers as an international representative to promote cultural understanding" [7].

In order to qualify for the Intern program, candidates:

- Must be currently enrolled full-time in a post-secondary, degree-issuing academic institution (college/university) outside the U.S. or have graduated no more than 12 months prior to program start date;
- Must be preparing for a career in the field of education;

- Must have sufficient English skills to successfully participate in the program and function on a day-to-day basis;
- Must be enthusiastic about sharing their culture and native language with U.S. students;
- Must be between 21 and 29 years of age at the start of the program;
- Must have a clean criminal background check
- And understand that they will act as teaching assistants, working in the school and regular extra-curricular activities for a minimum of 32 hours per week

In turn, the participating host schools recruit host families who provide “free room and board in exchange for active involvement in family life” [6]. Therefore, interns are able to live with a native family, practice their language skills, share their culture and participate in the family’s daily activities, spiking their curiosity and interest in international communication.

Once the application *dossier* is complete and accepted, the Amity Program Coordinators begin a process of “matching” the requests from host schools, who have previously filled out an Intern Request Form and a Training/Internship Placement Plan, with appropriate candidates. Host schools normally interview the candidates via Skype and if approved, notify Amity who then sends an official invitation to the candidate for acceptance. This process may take several months since it is a very individualized method and aims to make the candidate-school match as successful as possible.

Here at Villanueva, our senior students begin the application process in the month of October, for a placement the following academic year. Most candidates receive an invitation from a school by the month of April or May. This gives them time to plan their pre-travel months ahead, research the host school and area where they will be living, and contact the school coordinator and future host family.

3 METHODOLOGY

We determined that the best way to gather the information and data required for our study was to create an online anonymous survey (using Microsoft Office’s forms application), which could be answered in a fairly brief amount of time, less than thirty minutes. The reason why we decided to make it anonymous was to obtain more direct and sincere answers. The survey was written in English. An email was sent to our body of Amity alumni who had already finished the program, from the years 2010-2011 to 2017-2018, in total 76 participants. Our aim was to analyse the impact that their Amity experience had had on their lives, once they returned to Spain after the 10-month program. We understand that a possible outcome of their internship abroad is IC acquisition. Thus, we included in the survey such areas of IC as linguistic progression, integration into American culture and adaptability/cultural knowledge, facing challenges/resilience, learning new methods/curiosity, and the impact of their Amity experience on their present occupation/productivity.

This study involves a mixed-method approach. We analyse yes-no and multiple-choice questions as quantitative data; and text questions as qualitative data.

3.1 Survey design

The online survey consists of 36 questions, focusing on five specific areas: general information about the Amity intern’s overall impression, language skills, information about their professional development and knowledge acquired during the internship, adaptability and cultural diversity, and benefits gained in their personal and professional lives. Each section contains five to eight specific questions.

The questions are of two types: quantitative (yes/no and multiple-choice questions) and qualitative (requiring free-text answers). Out of 36 questions, 13 require a yes/no answer; 8 are multiple choice answers, usually yes/no with an additional option such as “perhaps” or “mostly”; and fifteen are text boxes where respondents can write in a free-text format. Included in each Table is the definition of the type of each question: Y/N (yes/no), MC (multiple choice), and T (free-text).

Under the section on general information, the Amity alumni were asked about their overall feeling towards the experience and whether they would recommend it to other students, as well as other questions about their host family. Table 1 shows these survey questions:

Table 1. Amity survey questions 1-7. General information.

	Type	Question
1	T	In what year did you participate in Amity's intern program?
2	MC	Do you think the whole experience was worthwhile?
3	Y/N	Would you recommend it to other students?
4	MC	Did you have a good relationship with your host family/families?
5	T	If you had some difficulties, please specify
6	Y/N	Are you still in touch with your host family?
7	MC	Would you go back to the States to work in a school in the future?

Under the section on language information, the alumni were asked whether they felt their level of English had improved, in what skill, and if so, if they had taken some type of official exam to certify this. The actual questions, as seen in Table 2, were:

Table 2. Amity survey questions 8-12. Language information.

	Type	Question
8	Y/N	Did your English improve after your Amity experience?
9	MC	Which skill improved the most?
10	Y/N	Did you take an official English exam upon returning?
11	MC	If yes, which one?
12	Y/N	Did you pass?

Following, we asked, in the section on professional development and school information, whether or not they were currently working in the field of education and if their Amity experience was responsible for, or directly related to, their current job. Additionally, there were questions about their relationship with their former colleagues at the American school and about the methodologies and didactic skills learned. Table 3 shows the actual questions:

Table 3. Amity survey questions 13-20. Professional and school information.

	Type	Question
13	Y/N	Are you currently working in the field of education?
14	Y/N	Did your Amity experience help you to get the job?
15	Y/N	Are you teaching any subjects in English?
16	Y/N	Are you applying any of the methodologies you learned about in the USA?
17	Y/N	Have you kept in touch with your colleagues from the American school?
18	T	What aspect of the teaching profession did you value the most?
19	T	Name one teacher-related skill that you acquired in the USA
20	T	What was the most challenging situation you had to face at the U.S. school?

Next, we asked about more social and cultural aspects of their experience abroad, including suffering from culture shock and their adaptability to the American society and integration in their community, which are topics relevant to IC.

Table 4. Amity survey questions 21-27. Cultural diversity information.

	Type	Question
21	Y/N	Did you suffer from culture shock when you arrived in the USA?
22	T	How long did it take you to get used to your new environment?
23	Y/N	Did you make American friends?
24	T	If no, why not?
25	T	What did you learn from the American people?
26	T	Which traditional American festivity did you enjoy the most? Why?
27	T	What aspect of Spanish culture did you enjoy sharing the most?

And finally, the last questions had to do with personal and professional IC related benefits, about how the experience had specifically affected their lives, whether it had made them more independent, and what advice they would give to someone interested in participating in the program. We allowed respondents to add any additional comment, at will, in response to the last question.

Table 5. Amity survey questions 28-36. Personal and professional benefits.

	Type	Question
28	MC	Do you feel that you've matured after your year in the USA?
29	Y/N	Are you living at home?
30	T	What benefits did you gain from your experience in the USA?
31	MC	Would you say that living a year abroad has helped you in your professional life?
32	T	If yes, in what way?
33	MC	Would you say that living abroad had helped you in your personal life?
34	T	If the answer is yes, in what way?
35	T	What advice would you give to someone who is interested in becoming an Amity intern?
36	T	Please add any comment you would like to make

4 RESULTS

The responses given to the Amity alumni survey demonstrate that spending an academic year as a Spanish language assistant at a local school in the United States has an unequivocally decisive impact on the participants' lives, both personally and professionally.

4.1 Quantitative Data Results

The following analysis of the survey is divided into two parts: quantitative data, abstracted from the Y/N and MC answers, as seen below in Tables 6 and 7; and qualitative data taken from the T answers, as seen in Table 8. Quantitative data is gathered from questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 23, 28, 29, 31 and 33. Qualitative data is gathered from questions 1, 5, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 32, 34, 35 and 36.

Table 6. Amity survey results: Y/N answers.

Area	Question	Percentage of answer "Yes"	Percentage of answer "No"
General information	3	100%	
	6	97%	3%
Language information	8	100%	
	10	78%	22%
	12	96%	4%
	13	97%	3%
Professional/ School information	14	75%	25%
	15	90.6%	9.4%
	16	53.1%	46.9%
	17	69%	31%
	21	44%	56%
Cultural diversity	23	87.5%	12.5%
	29	62.5%	37.5%

In the section under general information, the results clearly show that the Amity Intern program is highly recommendable to students of education. If someone who has lived the experience first-hand can recommend it 100%, undoubtedly it has many advantages, especially in the area of IC development. Linguistic outcome is indeed one of the gains of participation. All of the respondents are convinced that they have made linguistic progression, and what is more, 78% sat for an official Cambridge exam, and 96% passed it. Here, it is important to mention that linguistic skills constitute an important part of their professional preparation, since the majority of respondents are employed as teachers of English and/or the teachers of subjects in English (e.g. Natural Science, Social Science, etc.) in primary schools. Of those who took the CAE exam (64%), all of them passed it and obtained Cambridge's official certificate, which has definitely enhanced their job prospects since bilingual schools in the Madrid Community demand a C1 level to teach the English Language subject and other subjects in English.

As can be seen from the answers to professional development questions, the majority of Amity alumni work in the field of education (97%), and for 75% of them, it was the Amity internship which helped them get their job. The linguistic skills they acquired during their *sojourn* were decisive, since 90,6% are currently teaching subjects in English. As far as the use of new methodologies is concerned, the results are not that outstanding, as only 53,1% are currently applying the new methods they learned about in the USA. Having said that, 69% formed strong ties with the American teachers and have kept in touch with them. These professional ties are important, since they may lead to future cooperation and methodological exchange, let alone their continual use of English for communication and thus, linguistic progression.

Questions 21 and 23 dealt with cultural diversity and adaptability. The results about culture shock were rather surprising since 56% state that they did not experience any culture shock, which may be due to that fact that our students had previously travelled abroad and American culture may have been familiar to them. On the other hand, we can only presume that this result was influenced by a thorough preparation stage and also by the safe and supportive environment *in situ*: Amity's coordinators, the American school teachers and the host families. Besides, 87,5% established bonds with American people and made friends, which guarantees cultural interchange, linguistic progression and a change in mentality. Moreover, as the results to question 6 show, 97% of Amity alumni still keep in touch with their host family, which demonstrates that they have established a very strong intercultural bond.

Question 29 pertains to the area of personal benefits, though it was rather delicate since we attempted to measure the maturity gained from living abroad by alluding to economic independence and living on your own in your home country. Here, 62,5% stated that they have “flown the nest”. This result is considerable, taking into account the age of the participants (24-29) and their country of origin, Spain. It is of our knowledge that some Amity alumni found a job abroad or in other cities in Spain, and others formed their own families. Although, it is uncertain whether it was the Amity experience which brought about the change in their current lifestyle.

Regarding multiple choice (MC) questions, the answers varied depending on the question asked and the information that we were interested in knowing. Table 7 shows the responses.

Table 7. Amity survey results: MC answers.

Area	Question	Answer: Yes	Answer: No	Answer: other
General information	2	87.5%	0%	Mostly: 12.5%
	4	81.3%	0%	I has some difficulties: 18.7%
	7	53%	3%	Perhaps: 44%
Language information	9			Speaking: 69% Comprehension: 28% Reading: 3%
	11			CAE: 64% FCE: 12% Other: 24%
Personal and prof. benefits	28	90.6%		Perhaps: 9.4%
	31	94%	3%	I don't know: 3%
	33	94%	3%	I don't know: 3%

In answer to the question about whether the experience was worthwhile, nearly 90% said yes, and the remaining said that it was mostly worthwhile. None of the participants marked “No” as the answer to this question. Additionally, and based on the answers to many of the survey questions, it is only logical that 94% of respondents (question 31) claim that the Amity experience has helped them to obtain their job and broaden their professional prospects.

Questions 28 and 33 belong to the area of personal gains and the results are rather conclusive, 90,6% state that their Amity experience was decisive in raising their maturity, and in combination with the results to question 29 about living independently, we can state that 10 months abroad made a great impact on the participants’ current lifestyle. Besides, judging by the answers to question 33, 94% assert that the Amity internship helped them in their personal life, in some way or another.

4.2 Qualitative Data Results

Certain survey questions required detailed information, and thus, allowed respondents to provide more lengthy answers in the form of text. Table 8 shows which questions were T type, and to what area they correspond. A sample of answers which reflect the nature of the responses are included.

Table 8. Amity survey results: sample T answers.

Area	Question	Sample answers
General information	1	2010-2011, 2017-2018, etc.
	5	“The first 3 months were complicated, probably due to culture shock and my lack of maturity” “The family wasn’t the right one to be a HF but the kids were awesome. Even though I have great memories about it.”

Professional/ school information	18	<p>“Motivation”; “Patience”; “Creativity”</p> <p>“The communicative approach rather than grammar-translation”</p> <p>“Being open-minded to new ways of teaching”</p> <p>“Critical thinking skills and values”</p> <p>“Authority connected with caring and loving always”</p>
	19	<p>“Cooperative working”; “Role-playing”; “Flip-classroom”</p> <p>“Listening more to the students”; “Problem solving”</p> <p>“Engaging students’ interaction”; “Confidence”</p> <p>“Cognitive skills in the classroom”; “Flexibility”</p> <p>“Classroom management and teambuilding”</p>
	20	<p>“To take the initiative”</p> <p>“Helping a disruptive student”</p> <p>“A play in Spanish learned by heart by 4th graders”</p> <p>“Working with a difficult teacher who didn’t like anything I did”</p>
Cultural diversity	22	Most answers ranged from one to three months
	24	The 12% who said they did not meet people their age was due to lack of opportunity
	25	<p>“They are more autonomous than us and they mature earlier. The sense of community at school: fundraising, family night out, etc.”</p> <p>“They are more open minded”</p> <p>“The hospitality of the host families and the generosity and commitment of the people with the education.”</p> <p>“I learnt how important is to make people from different countries feel at home when they are in my country.”</p>
	26	Practically all of the respondents mentioned “Thanksgiving”, a few said “Halloween” or “Christmas”
	27	<p>“The food, our character, our festivities here, our architecture, our history...”</p> <p>“Christmas traditions, like the three wise men... They didn’t know about it.”</p> <p>“Sevillanas”</p>
Personal and prof. benefits	30	<p>“Having my Amity experience on my cv opened me lots of windows, when schools see you’ve been working in the US they appreciate and value it a lot!”</p> <p>“Maturity/responsibility/multicultural environments/open mind”</p> <p>“A job, a more mature personality, the C1...”</p> <p>“I have developed as a teacher and person.”</p> <p>“An overall positive A+++ personal and professional aspects of myself.”</p>
	32	<p>“I am pretty sure it is the point that makes the difference between my resume and the other candidates that apply for the same job.”</p> <p>“After living in US I moved to China, thanks to the resume I made in the US I got an offer to teach in China and here I met my husband!”</p> <p>“The program added more value to my CV”</p> <p>“Losing fear of public speaking”</p> <p>“Expanding my professional connections.”</p> <p>“I have a job because they saw in my CV that I lived in the USA for the whole year and teaching in a school.”</p> <p>“As I worked in different classrooms, I had the chance to see different ways of teaching. Today I’m using the ones that I liked most in my classroom. I became more proactive. Students don’t only learn by heart but also they do experiments. I love the “learning by doing” which you don’t see very often in Spain.”</p>

34	<p>“Everybody should leave their homes and live abroad. That year for me was a good chance to mature. To confront different people and different situations. Now I am more open minded, more understanding and more sociable.”</p> <p>“This helped me to believe in myself, to mature, to live my own life, to make my own decisions and live with them if I made them wrong. Live with my own problems and solved them like a real adult.”</p> <p>“I stopped thinking about 'English' as a requirement to find a job and I started enjoying it as a huge possibility to grow up personal and professional.”</p> <p>“I valued things I had in Spain that I took for granted.”</p>
35	<p>“Do it. You will not regret it. It is going to be hard at the beginning. I'm not going to lie to you. But you'll see that little by little you'll get used to it and you'll make new friends, you'll meet new people. Also you can travel a lot, know new places, and have the most amazing experiences you'll ever have.”</p> <p>“Try not to be alone and make friends. Be open to new lifestyles and try to understand them.”</p> <p>“That if they are having any doubt just do it because they are going to grow personal and professional!”</p> <p>“Do it, you won't regret it.”</p> <p>“Go and enjoy every day. It's only 9 months and you would not have a year like that again.”</p>
36	<p>“It really depends on the positive attitude of the Amity intern to enjoy this experience and recognize it as a really worthwhile experience.”</p> <p>“Thanks Amity and my coordinator in Spain who helped me to join this amazing program.”</p>

As shown above, the responses were extremely positive in aspects concerning the intern's personal and professional growth. It is clear that living and job-training abroad made a significant impact on participants' lives and has greatly influenced their outlook on life in general.

5 CONCLUSIONS

After analysing the survey results, we consider Amity's intern program a worthwhile experience highly recommendable to students with a recent degree in Education.

For our Villanueva interns, obtaining the Cambridge Advanced certificate after their Amity experience opened doors for them to find a teaching position in a school in Spain. Amongst the four linguistic skills, speaking was highlighted as the one which improved the most. Culture-wise, all the participants in the survey exchanged their cultural traditions during their stay in the U.S., while engaging in the American way of life. As a result, they learned to appreciate other customs alien to their own culture, became more open-minded, flexible and mature.

Regarding professional gains, there is no doubt that this international experiential learning and training period was an eye-opening experience, as evidenced by the comments to the T type questions under personal and professional benefits. Although as far as new methodologies' application is concerned, there is still room for improvement.

The Amity experience helped our young teachers-in-the-making to grow, become more responsible and resilient, and learn to deal with life's frustrations and proved to be a turning point in their lives.

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