

# 3 Preparation for the year abroad in the second-year language module at the University of Manchester

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## Abstract

Every year, around 120 students of French at the University of Manchester (UoM) prepare to go on their compulsory Year Abroad (YA). They are free to choose between different options: studying in France and the French-speaking world, working in diverse sectors throughout the French-speaking world, or becoming a language assistant. This wealth of choice can make pre-departure decisions difficult. Furthermore, once students are abroad, there seems to be a gap between their expectations and the reality of living abroad. This can result in anxiety and a lack of engagement with the target culture and language. This chapter presents the ways in which the Department of French Studies at UoM is helping students prepare for the YA by including specific activities and topics in its language module curriculum. It first examines the issues students encounter before and during their YA, then the solutions that have been implemented, and finally the impact of this programme.

**Keywords:** year abroad preparation, curriculum, intercultural competences, self-efficacy, employability, French studies.

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## 1. Introduction

There are around 500 students currently taking a degree in French at the UoM. This means that every year, around 120 students prepare to go on their compulsory YA. The UoM offers over 30 degree programmes with a major or minor French component, a majority of which are joint honours. Students have either obtained an A Level or equivalent in French or, since 2014, have followed an *ab initio* pathway. All reach B2 (CEFR, 2018) level before they go on this compulsory YA.

Students are free to choose between different options. They can study with one of 14 partner institutions in Belgium, Canada, France, or Switzerland. Approximately half of them choose to study, around 40% choose work placements in French-speaking countries around the world, and around 10% opt for an assistantship.

This wealth of choice can make pre-departure decisions difficult. Furthermore, once students are abroad, there seems to be a gap between their expectations and the reality of living abroad (Robson, 2015). This can result in isolation, anxiety, and a lack of engagement with the target culture and language (Heitlinger, 2015). This chapter presents one of the ways the Department of French studies at UoM has devised to help students prepare for this very special year, including preparation in the language module curriculum.

## 2. Presentation of the project

Students encounter a variety of issues before departure. Firstly, some students find it difficult to make choices, with the following questions coming up repeatedly in preparation meetings or individual consultations with the Residence Abroad (RA) tutors: where will I go? What will I do? Which course or work experience will benefit my French language, develop my knowledge of French society, give me useful professional experience and look good on my CV? Perhaps most importantly: will I enjoy myself? The pressure of preparing

for what students feel should be ‘the best year of their lives’ as well as a useful part of their degree, can be enormous. As a result, many feel anxious that they may make the wrong choice.

Fear of the unknown adds another level of anxiety for many. They worry about the differences they are going to encounter and think they may not cope. Dealing with some of these differences, such as experiencing difficulties understanding the French system (university registration, teaching style, life/work balance) can become a real issue during the YA and can lead to culture shock, which in turn can create social isolation for students. This may consequently mean that some students come back with erroneous information about the countries they lived in. They still have misunderstandings and even heightened prejudices towards the target culture (Coleman, 1998). They also say that they feel they have learned little.

For all these reasons, UoM French Studies language team<sup>2</sup> started by investigating the RA preparation UoM was already offering. Copious documentation from the International Programmes Office and the RA team (UoM, 2019a, 2019b) is available online via the My Placement platform, on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and on paper. Information meetings detailing the possible choices and requirements are organised in Semester 1 of the second year by the RA team, RA tutors and careers office (UoM, 2019c). In addition, the same teams run information meetings in Semester 2 to discuss the target culture, provide practical advice (safety, medical provision) and the required Erasmus documentation. Additional information is also available through peer advice, and via testimonies written by students on their experiences and posted on the VLE. All this is very useful but perhaps not enough: anxiety among students is a rising phenomenon nationally (Weale, 2019) and some find it very challenging to even think about going abroad (Ashenden, 2014).

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The solution we devised was to include YA preparation in the core language module. All our students take this 20-credit module (two semesters; two-hour writing seminar, one-hour oral seminar) as part of their degree in French. Moreover, it is the only French module some students have to take for the French part of their degree, in particular those on joint honours. To complement the sources of information mentioned above, the second-year core language module was expanded to include further help with decisions on placement type and destination; with practical skills (CV writing and interview techniques); and with more information on French culture and society in domains they are likely to encounter. Staff and senior peers also gave explicit encouragement to students preparing for departure, to boost their imaginal experience on the model of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) so that they felt they ‘could do it’. We hoped that this language course would prepare students to be able to function in the ‘outer circle’ of Coleman’s (2015) concentric circle model (i.e. not only with other native English speakers or foreign Erasmus students, but also with locals). Coleman’s (2015) research indicates that students who come out of their close circle develop their language skills further and progress linguistically, culturally, and personally, leading to feelings of fulfilment.

A significant factor in the design of this module was that it had to be relevant to all students, regardless of their degree pathway and their plans for their third year. Despite the fact that this course is taken by all students studying French, not all go abroad. Since 2015, minor students join this course for their final year of French. They do not take a full YA but have to complete an eight-week RA period. Moreover, rising mental health issues are resulting in increasing excusals among students taking French as the major part of their degree. Therefore, preparation for the YA is intended to double up as a preparation for the world of work, as employability is very high on the UoM (2011) agenda .

The team also needed a certain variety in the themes chosen and tasks undertaken: looking uniquely at the YA can become boring. Other cultural and historical content needs to be studied in this course in order to provide key cultural knowledge, especially for the students whose programme requires that they take solely this 20-credit course in French. How much content should be included in

a language course, and how to include it, is an ongoing debate as each tends to be taught separately in higher education (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Risager, 2007). However, one cannot teach language in a vacuum and content has to be used as a carrier for language activities. The prevalent issue was how to combine meaningful work with the four language skills and still have a solid content programme that would fit into three hours per week. The team also had to create adequate assessment at B2+ level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2018).

In Semester 1, the aim was to develop skills in applying for work and/or study placements. In writing classes, students examine job or university course offers, CVs, and cover letter techniques; in oral classes, they prepare an oral examination in the form of a job or university entry interview based on their personal plans. This latter assessment was inspired by the work of Rachel Bower at Sheffield Hallam University who kindly shared her idea. The task obliges students to think of what they wish to do early enough to allow time to research companies or universities. Students are prepared with mock sessions every three weeks, during which they have to perform role-plays based on specific interview scenarios (work placements, English Language Assistantship, or study placements). These activities allow for the study of grammar and targeted lexical points, translation into French, and pronunciation issues.

To be able to give a context to these employment-based activities as well as a working knowledge of the world students will encounter on their YA, the same themes are studied in both the written and oral seminars. These are: the world of work (the 35-hour law; the Sunday work controversy); studying in French higher education (grants and fees; French education as a public service; lack of entry selection; ‘redoublement’). Students are also invited to reflect on teaching and learning by discussing the roles of a language assistant and a teacher (what makes a good teacher; staff-student relationship in a hierarchical system).

These ‘specialised’ topics are scheduled from September to November of the second year, to help students decide what they want to do in their third year and prepare for real applications. The programme then concentrates on French

regional cultures and policies, especially regarding minority languages. This again helps students focus on where they would like to go on their YA.

The first semester ends with discussing accommodation alternatives, especially house sharing, in the hope that this will help students make an informed choice and encourage them to live with French native speakers the following year.

The second semester is slightly less YA-focused, but still contains useful topics such as the French language in France and around the world, looking at the case of Quebec and discovering African and Caribbean literature through literary extracts, press articles for reading comprehension, and free and argumentative writing activities. The aim is also to make all classes relevant to students' future experiences. For instance, when looking at the theme of sustainable development, examples from French cities where students may go are used. Volunteering is the last theme discussed, in order to highlight the importance of participation in the social environment of the host country, as a way to enter [Coleman's \(2015\)](#) outer circle. The terminology for these topics is also used in tailor-made grammar exercises.

### **3. Discussion of the outcomes**

The success of a programme such as this is difficult to measure. Has the team helped students prepare for their YA? What is a successful YA (linguistic improvement; personal development; employment experience)? When do students realise the benefits they have gained? This can happen years later. However, various metrics are available. The first possible measure of success is before students go abroad, with the yearly course questionnaire. The questions are the same for all modules at UoM; the relevant one here is: 'I have acquired intellectual and practical skills which will be useful in further study or employment'. In the first year of the programme (2014-2015), 77% agreed; in 2015-16 100% agreed; in 2016-17 96.88% agreed; and in 2017-18 71.43% agreed. This last result could be due to the teaching staff strikes that took place that year, combined with a response rate from students that was lower than the usual 40%.

Students' comments also suggest positive results:

“I appreciated that the work we covered this year was tailored to the YA next year which made it easier to relate to the work thus more enjoyable”;

“the first semester revolving around CVs, covering [sic] letters, email exchanges, etc. was a huge help, along with the January interview exam”.

Moreover, the oral exams during which students have a personalised job interview are enjoyed both by students and staff. Students like talking about their own plans and skills, prepare well, and obtain high grades.

Semi-guided interviews were also conducted over four years (2014-2018) with more than 200 students before, during, and after their YA. They generally thought that the course had helped them decide which activity to undertake for their YA and to prepare for it. The CV, cover letter, and interview were particularly appreciated and some students mentioned that they felt well-prepared for the telephone or Skype interview they had with potential employers. Students also said they had become more aware of their surroundings once abroad, for example understanding the rather hierarchical lecturer-student relationship in French universities. They therefore felt that they had developed intercultural competencies easily, as they understood that other cultures work differently.

Preparation helped students adjust their expectations and generally be more content; it resulted in them being able to manage culture shock (Winkelman, 1994), feel less frustration, and go beyond prejudice. For instance, instead of getting frustrated with their lecturers for being unapproachable and hence putting themselves in the position of victim, understanding power relations in France (Hofstede, 1984, 2001), especially in education, helped give students an ethnographer's detachment. Understanding the principles and philosophies behind the facts and habits they encounter helps students become not only

knowledgeable (in view of their final year) but also more inter-culturally aware and inclined to think critically and thus become engaged citizens in an ever-changing world (Hampton, 2016).

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the second-year language module provides a common framework for all students. It also offers a useful employability agenda, provides what Bandura (1997) describes as mastery experience, and prepares for self-efficacy with suggestions of coping behaviours when facing obstacles. We hope that the cross-cultural training we offer leads to successful adjustment in the host countries by boosting students' self-confidence in accepting differences and adapting successfully to life abroad (Winkelman, 1994). However, the module remains a foundation upon which students must develop their own autonomy. It cannot completely prepare students for social interaction in the host country: efforts are still necessary, and success will also depend on the student's environment abroad, their mental well-being, and their personality.

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