

# 10 Moving the year abroad online: ready, steady, go!

**Sonia Cunico<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Exeter students who had their 2019-2020 Year Abroad (YA) cut short by the COVID-19 health crisis were offered alternative online language provision to support their learning. This contribution discusses the students and staff's experience in the light of 'learning is a journey' metaphor.

**Keywords:** year abroad, online teaching, learning metaphors.

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COVID-19 has had a seismic effect on everybody and, although the cost in terms of human lives and economy will not be known for many years, its implications for teaching and learning are already palpable to everyone working in education. If there is a silver lining in the very dark COVID-19 sky, it is that the pandemic has accelerated a process which was already on the distant horizon. From January 2020 Modern Languages and Cultures at Exeter offered a YA online provision on Microsoft Teams to the students who had to return earlier than planned to the United Kingdom due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Even if limited in time and scope, and designed as a one-off experience, the provision was instrumental to help us navigate the stormy waters which engulfed us in the following months.

In this contribution I will build upon the metaphor of 'learning as a journey', which students undertake with the tutors and classmates, and discuss the feedback we received from students who took part in the YA online provision.

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1. University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom; s.cunico@exeter.ac.uk

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These reflections and considerations will help us shape our YA provision in the future and might be of inspiration to others.

The link between language and cognition, and hence the role of metaphors in communication and cognition, is well recognised in cognitive and linguistic research because the way in which language is used expresses, as well as reflects, creates, reinforces, or opposes, ways of making sense of aspects of our life and human experiences which are often difficult to express.

*Metaphors We Live* by [Lakoff and Johnson \(1980\)](#) offered a new cognitive conceptualisation of metaphors in which they are not simply linguistic embellishments used mainly in literature, but a way to make sense of complex and abstract human experiences through much more concrete ones to which we can more easily relate. From Ulysses to Dante, the ‘journey’ is a key metaphor for many of our experiences, and it also plays an important role in the way learners, as well as language teachers, talk about their own experience of teaching and learning a foreign language ([Block, 1992](#); [Ellis, 2001](#); [Cortazzi & Jin, 1999](#)).

The YA experience naturally lends itself to be expressed in terms of a material and psychological journey which thousands of students undertake each year. As I write, many students had to reconcile themselves with the fact that their YA plans have been disrupted since either travelling to their destination is impossible, or the experience is online.

Like any successful journey, the move online requires preparation and planning to ensure time is well spent and every aspect of the experience is considered and addressed. Teaching online leaves little room for improvisation: instructions must be shared beforehand, activities must be structured, well-paced and linked, and connections made all the time to ensure all participants are on board and able to follow the information given. The intensity of it is stressful and tiring; online synchronous teaching is highly performative for students, but above all for tutors who must map out the students’ journey very carefully. The road map of the lessons must be shared with students who need to understand the direction of

travel. This element comes out clearly from students' comments, with frequent references to 'structure':

“It was very **clearly structured** and we knew what every session was going to be about and what to prepare” (R1).

“Really **well thought out**, engaging classes with enthusiastic teachers” (R2).

Although it is clearly not possible to replace the YA experience with a virtual one, some steps were taken to ensure that the move online put students at the centre of it, offering them a strong experiential involvement crucial to the success of the project.

The virtual YA required, therefore, opportunities for cultural growth and expansion of one's cultural boundaries and understanding in ways which are meaningful and realistic, like a material journey. A virtual reality was explored and built upon the many resources made available online for free: museums were visited, cities were toured, and people met online.

Although the tutors were the tour operators who behind the scene were planning the journey, the emphasis was on students' involvement and co-participation. Working alone or in small groups, they had to complete three hours' preparation work before the Teams synchronous contact hour. The students were not just taken to a place; they had to get there by using the map of resources provided by the tutor. This commitment was an important aspect of the course to ensure deep learning and engagement with the resources and it was noted by students:

“The sessions had quite a lot of preparation which was good because oral classes often need structure to sustain a conversation” (R7).

“The tasks we were set involved watching films, documentaries, studying significant periods in the countries' history, learning about

music etc, and a lot of this I wouldn't have known about or looked into by myself" (R34).

The last comment (R34) highlights the role of the tutor/tour operator who guides the participants and takes them to places they would not have visited alone. The emphasis on a full immersion learning experience with virtual tours was at the core of some resources and activities which allowed students to move virtually to new places. Thus replicating (as much as possible) the real journey experience, to the point that for one student the boundaries between the real and virtual experience of living abroad became blurred:

"I enjoyed the opportunity to learn about Spanish culture and **live in two beautiful cities** (Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca)" (R37).

For learners of a foreign language, one of the most pleasurable and important moments of our travels is meeting 'the locals' and engaging in social interactions through the foreign language. But how could we possibly recreate such encounters for students 'locked' in their bedroom or living at home with their parents? At Exeter we felt it was important not to miss out on the opportunity to engage on a daily basis with native speakers; in the case of Chinese, for example, we paired the Exeter home students who were forced to cut their YA short with our Chinese postgraduate students. Rather than being pre-packed with fixed and pre-designed syllabi and learning outcomes limiting students' agency, the sessions aimed to develop genuine communicative needs. Overall, students' feedback was positive especially because the contact was very intense (one hour per day) in order to ensure daily contact with native speakers:

"We were given language partners with which to speak to for 5 hours per week, so me and my language partner would speak for one hour a day. **This was invaluable!!**" (R6).

However, the student's comment below also points to a mismatch of expectations which can lead to dissatisfaction:

“Using Masters students from China as a substitute for oral classes is not a good way to learn. Sometimes **they feel too embarrassed to correct all of our mistakes and are also not qualified teachers so aren’t always able to verbalise what we have done incorrectly to help us learn from our mistakes**” (R22).

The aim of the matching was to increase fluency rather than accuracy, and it is important that in the future we (1) put in place some training for the native speakers (for instance, in error correction, etc.), but at the same time (2) ensure that their role is clarified to the YA students so expectations are managed.

The move online of the YA offers the opportunity to engage learners with real language use in meaningful social contexts, but this entails setting up innovative ways to put students in contact transnationally. In 2020-2021 Exeter students will be able to take advantage of EUniTa<sup>2</sup>: a dedicated and self-contained online platform accessible to any student from our EU Partner Institutions. Students will easily sign up for a tandem language exchange, get matched automatically, and find all the needed communication tools within the platform itself. This requires a reconfiguration of our understanding of where and how students engage with language learning in tandem language schemes, what linguistic and specific knowledge they can develop autonomously, and how their specific discipline interests and competence should be considered in a language tandem scheme to help students become part of a wider community of language learners.

One of the biggest challenges we face with online teaching is creating a sense of purposeful group identity in which learners feel safe and trust each other. As with real journeys, feeling comfortable with each other is key to the experience, but creating personal relationships online may be problematic due to the lack of opportunities for small talk and casual exchanges from which deeper ones can grow. Tutors, therefore, must ensure that preference is given to the design of small group work or one-to-one activities to allow personal relationships to develop within the ecosystem which is the language class. It is important to

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2. <https://www.eunita.org/>

recognise that the virtual language classes are an important social occasion for many students who may rely on them to feel part of a reality outside the four walls of their bedrooms as the following comments exemplify:

“My class bonded so much and I really loved signing into our daily calls. When we are back in Exeter you will all receive some Finnish chocolate when the COVID-19 situation allows it!” (R15).

“The classes were very structured [...] we also had time to converse more informally which I think helped us all to relax in such a new type of teaching environment” (R17).

Preparation is key to the success of the journey, but after the overnight shift to online teaching and learning caused by the pandemic, this now requires massive investment by universities; not just in terms of Information Technology (IT) infrastructure, but also, and very importantly, pedagogical training to be set up quickly to facilitate staff’s planning. The sector at large has also intervened to facilitate as smooth a transition as possible with a great spirit of collegiality. Since April 2020, both the University Council Modern Languages<sup>3</sup> and the Association of University Language Communities<sup>4</sup> have organised training sessions and also weekly open catch-up sessions for professionals to exchange, not just ideas and best practice, but also concerns and worries about the transition online (UCML, n.d.).

While we continue moving our teaching online, we may feel overwhelmed by the challenges that the transition requires. The international health crisis also calls for constant adjustments and quick changes of plans, and more than ever staff and tutors alike need to be resilient. To use another travelling metaphor, we are in uncharted waters. Like tour operators, tutors must map the journey and identify the learning goals and destinations; but also be ready to change route if needed, while keeping an eye on their travelling companions, the learners, to

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3. <https://university-council-modern-languages.org/>

4. <http://www.aulc.org/>

ensure they are having a positive learning experience. More than ever before the teaching and learning process must embrace virtual realities which have become a common experience during the lockdown period, and which are now part of our new normal.

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