
In the Classroom without Walls

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Abstract

Going abroad can be an interesting and exciting adventure for anyone, let alone for a young adult student from a totally different language and culture with pre-set goals and aims to utilise and build their English language skills through direct contact with others beyond the confines and simulation of the classroom. This study follows and reflects on such an experiential learning narrative of a Chinese student on a short inter-cultural journey travelling around Bulgaria in a variety of integrative settings and encounters that were designed to be both educational and recreational through real live interaction. Adopting a reflective evidence based approach to the narrative, the study, which lasted one month, emerged out of the subject's own curiosity as to how much, if any, their English language skills would develop immersed in a foreign culture far beyond the confines of any classroom or the gates of any higher learning institution. What emerged from the dynamics was a unique cross-cultural, exploratory-social interplay within a positively relaxed, non-judgemental, stress-free learning arena. These conditions not only reinforced the subject's already acquired classroom knowledge and skills, but also effectively accommodated an extraordinary platform within legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in a clearly defined community of practice, (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The result of this experience enhanced and developed the learner's self-confidence and personal growth while raising their preset personal goals with English language via purposeful, 'real world' communicative interaction. The outcome of this experience potentially supports the notion that participation through socialisation in socio-cultural activities even in a non-native English speaking community can have a significant and transformative effect. The results found that by increasing the learner's cultural and intellectual development, via direct interaction and socialisation, effectively improved communication goals and increased success with the target language.

Keywords: Experiential learning, community of practice, transformative pedagogy, learner autonomy

"Change and growth take place when a person has risked themselves and dares to become involved with experimenting with their own life."--Herbert Otto

I. Introduction

Over the last few years and ever since I started teaching EFL to adults at university level in South Ko-

rea, I have persistently tried to shift, often with varying degrees of success, beyond the traditional Confucian teacher centred pedagogical model of input-output, say-and-repeat rote memory methods of the audio-lingual technique. In my endeavours, I have always favoured a more learner centred environment, which to some might resemble a more communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, although for my own part edges more towards the development of critical thinking through a closer attachment to co-operative individual and collaborative group project work.

Why I favour a learner centred approach is not that I believe it is the ‘best’ pedagogical approach, but perhaps it has more to do with my own social-conditioning (Cote, 2011) as a typically Scottish working-class high school pupil in the 1980's where classroom desks, perhaps with the exception of mathematics and exam rooms, were grouped together by default. Working with classmates in groups or pairs was an integral part of the educational process. Later, as an undergraduate in the 1990's students were expected to be completely autonomous and responsible for their own studies. However, it was also, commonly accepted that at some point, in most courses, you would be required to collaborate and share ideas with your student peers, perhaps in a seminar session, or present an assignment or even collaborate on a large project together. The transition from formal to tertiary education for most students in the UK who have walked this well-worn route, feels like an almost seamless one. This is partly because by the time student reaches university, they have already emerged from an education system that has firmly entrenched normative processes that foster a strong socio-cultural relationship that values constructivist theory and the ethos of team-work generally. This approach in turn, is normally an attempt to balance instruction with social interaction in macro and micro forms of a classroom as a community of practice (CoP), which theoretically facilitates a space for learning to take place or what Lev Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the ‘zone of proximal development.’

I would also deduce, that just as I tend to favour and adopt a more learner centred and sometimes often spontaneous and experimental approach in my own teaching as a product of my own schooling and education, that for most middle aged or older East Asian teachers their approach to teaching is also a similar product of their social-conditioning, educative training, and constructs that relate to a compliance within their own cultural and societal norms (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007). However, despite this common assumption, of ‘if it worked for me [the teacher], it'll work for them’ [the student], attitudes, methods and the theories embedded in them, especially in an age of the globalised knowledge economy, are not only changing and increasing, but accelerating the pace, frequency and deployment of new and different ideas. In this respect, there has never been such fertile ground globally for an exchange of ideas on pedagogical practices and theories as comparative education and cross-cultural studies continue to blossom.

Therefore, the conditions for change are not only ripe to utilise and extend contemporary learner centred practices or even possibly revive older teacher centred practices (perhaps even considered obsolete or outdated) coupled with newer technologies. Furthermore, with continued research and discussion into both teacher and learner centred approaches, it also raises an exciting opportunity to transcend national and cultural boundaries through the dissemination, sharing and engagement of traditional and innovative ideas on a more pragmatic level (rather than accept or reject one particular approach over the other). Therefore, we could view both approaches as not only acceptable, but also accessible at a teacher's disposal, and not the typical east/west or oriental demarcation construct.

A recent example of the contrast in east-western pedagogical approaches was a study depicted in the UK reality TV/docusop *“Are Our Kid's Tough Enough?”* (BBC; 2015) where a team of Chinese teachers were invited to teach using Chinese style (teacher centred) pedagogy for one term in an English comprehensive school. However, this television programme, some have argued, appears to be an attempt to conjure up a rather misleading generalisation of a decades old stereotypical image of Chinese and East Asian secondary education as being hard, oppressive, anti-social and a purely rote-memory focused arena. This is also a

view that the BBC and British elitist establishment figures like Sir Antony Seldon (Richardson; 2015) seem to be finding hard to let go. The reaction to the BBC program in China however by teachers and students (New China TV, 2015, Epic Chinese Girls, 2015) who work and study there, counters the impression it tried to espouse to British audiences. This televised experiment it could be argued, perhaps give us a better insight into the psyche of the British television media, rather than a serious attempt to understand Chinese secondary education pedagogical practices in a British schools context.

Nonetheless, China (as does any country including the UK) has problems with educational approaches and practices, and in reality, it is these problems, which should unite rather than divide us. However, trying to find and unravel what national state or cultural system has the best educational practices to mirror and adopt could be a futile endeavour, as many operate in different contexts with different end goals. The UK, Chinese, and even the US secondary education systems all differ from each other. UK pupils for example, select and specialise in elected subjects for standardised exams (GCSE/SQF) then pursue more advanced studies (at A Level/Highers), while Chinese, Korean, Japanese and American students focus on one large general knowledge scholastic ability test (SAT) for university entrance and college exams. Furthermore, while East-Asian and American students work towards a similar aim in terms of testing, the methods of testing and classroom practices are radically different. Additionally, while it might seem common for western teachers to have critical views of East Asian classroom methods for being 'too teacher centred', paradoxically, there has also been a lot debate (mainly on social media), claiming that American classroom practices have become 'too student centred' and lack the thrust of the teacher in a more pivotal and controlled role. This discussion arose from an outburst of an American high school student that went viral online complaining to his teacher at her lack of involvement in the class (Bliss, 2013).

Perhaps, now in the foreground of these events with global public attention and concern about classroom and learning practices we should be moving closer to examining a more common ground, built on successful evidence. This would also involve being more aware of the varying contexts and objectives of the learning itself, while understanding the complexities of transnational pedagogical methods and strategies.

Ultimately, one size (method/approach) does not fit all, regardless of whether we utilise teacher or learner centred approaches or even the current fad in blended learning, which seeks to bring various learning strategies to our arm, mainly through the utilisation of online technology. However, being able to balance and distribute a variety of pedagogical approaches certainly takes us further down the road to empowering students with specialist knowledge or language (or both in my own case). One could argue that the arrival of presentation software is merely a sophisticated extension of the old 'teacher centred method' of a chalkboard and stick, and is simply a means to explain principles and ideas via graphics and text. Similarly, the internet itself, with a wide range of video content, helps bring the real (or even imagined) world into the classroom for student centred activities and exercises to discuss issues and ideas/or even replicate and create simulations in response to them. Another important consideration, is that the driving force behind such technological transformation to adapt and adopt different forms of educational practices however, shouldn't necessarily rest solely at the teacher's feet, and demonstrates that students can (and should) also be agents for change as the primary stakeholders.

This paper follows the journey of an East-Asian student who, through their desire to learn English, embarked on a short experiential learning trip abroad with a teacher/mentor. The narrative, however, takes an unusual turn, because the destination for this language learning experience was not to a 'native' English speaking country, but to an Eastern European country where English is considered a foreign language as it is both in his home country (China) and his current place of study, South Korea. The experience of the event not only, in his own words, 'broadened his horizons', but also has appeared to increase his socio-linguistic skills. This in turn has opened up a more confident and vocal use of English in the subject. The

study will attempt to understand and discuss how and why the participant has made such a clear transformation with his English language skills by looking at what, other than being in another country, are the differences and similarities in his regular classroom instruction to those of simply a month's holiday with his teacher/fellow traveller and mentor. It will also examine and discuss some of his own beliefs and views on the experience, including his expectations and results, along with my own input as an ethnographic observer and co-participant of the 'Travelling University' we attended that formed the basis of this short study. After a discussion of what the findings of the study imply in terms of varying pedagogical approaches, I will also reflect and conclude on ways that this knowledge could be used, altered or adapted in regular classroom instruction with predominantly East-Asian students.

II. Contextual Background

Prior to writing this essentially reflective narrative report, the foundations for it stem from a conversation course I taught two years ago in a university English department in South Korea. At that time, I was teaching both English writing and conversation without the aid of a textbook. The basic format normally consisted of presenting, topics, themes and forms via either board-work or a Power-Point presentation, normally supported with some form of handout literature or a worksheet. I would then ask the class to write or discuss their own ideas or views based on the initial instruction, while I monitored the interaction offering assistance and advice or error correction as and when required. The culmination of the class would be that students could develop a better sense of confidence, through the engagement of a suitable topic that was appropriate at an undergraduate level, and to facilitate a platform for them to share their work, ideas and views openly to and within the classroom community. Assessment was structured around each student's overall contribution to the classroom community, along with a self-directed individual and group presentation in order to give the student more autonomy over their work, and an opportunity to exercise their own voice, creativity, organisation and academic skills based on a model of work we had been doing and discussing in class.

This approach was considered by not only my more experienced colleagues, but also even some of the students themselves, as not only unconventional, but indeed a risky and perilous venture. One student even wrote in a course evaluation once that, "it can't be a proper English language course without a course-book and a test on that book". This was very different from the view I originally envisaged, that students would rejoice that not only had they gained some kind of intellectual confidence to use the language more freely and productively, but also I had attempted to liberate them from the clutches of English language textbook publishers. Furthermore, having taught in both public middle and high schools, and, private language academies, it seemed to me that most textbooks were just regurgitating the same topics, themes and structures in different forms in a cookbook style with a range of stereotypical characters, banal dialogue and situations that resemble very little like real life interaction. However, most university English language departments still insist and demand the use of textbooks to satisfy the differentiated needs and demands of students. Other reasons for this dependency might be located where students are not culturally accustomed or understand the science of a holistic and organic approach to learning, and/or feel they have not attained the confidence to practice English without one, or prefer testing where there is a more definitive answer rather than a creative or subjective one.

Added to this is another obstacle, in countries paradoxically known as 'collective cultures' (Kim, Park, & Suzuki, 1990) because of the nature of formal education, which is pivoted around an individual's effort in a single scholastic ability test (SAT), there are not many subjects (other than sports perhaps) that call for students to work on learning goals together (Lee, 2005). This doesn't mean they don't connect or engage with each other, on the contrary, when the bell goes and the class ends in any school yard it's not unusual to

see students congregate together to chat, share text messages they've received, or play sophisticated hand games. Go into any public library on any evening and you will see students studying, sharing notes and generally helping each other. Therefore, there is a time and a place for co-operative learning and socialising; however, traditionally the classroom environment is not often viewed as the appropriate place to do that. Although, as I stressed earlier, because of the speed of educational reform and change many new, innovative and creative ideas are progressively finding their way into classrooms in East Asia. However, for some students, arriving at university, walking into a learner centred, CoP environment, to give their contribution and share ideas, in a method and language that is quite unfamiliar and irregular to them, can still be something of a culture shock against the traditional conservative norms of their formal schooling. This, from the learner's view, can be quite a daunting and quite possibly an uncomfortable learning space. From a foreign teacher's point of view, a similar uneasy strangeness ensues in a kind of non-communicative stand-off, rendering a class more like a poker game where students are reluctant to reveal what knowledge and understanding they have of the target language, playing their cards very closely to their chest. The irony and challenge of a situation is that the fundamental problems most East Asian university students have is in the use and practice of productive skills.

From these direct personal experiences, observations, discussions with colleagues, and reading articles of teachers who describe similar problems of student engagement in East-Asia (Hu, 2011), I had often wondered, what would happen if a student were taken out of the simulation of the classroom and completely out of the social-cultural domain of East-Asia and placed in a western context? I often used to joke with students, and say, "what would you do if you found yourself alone outside a New York subway station, hungry, standing next to a hot dog stand without a textbook? (Chiu, 2009) Naturally, in a classroom setting in East Asia you might be met with a long sea of silence and a lot of puzzled faces, wondering why you [the teacher] are asking them [the students] such a question (that's not in the book), and not just simply telling them how to order a hot dog. My hypothesis to this dilemma would be that the student's needs (or hunger) in this case would far outweigh the desire to request food and negotiate the price and all the trimmings with it in perfect, grammatically sound, native-speaker like pronunciation. In a sink-or-swim, fight-or-flight situation, in a real live experiential event, the chances are they would succeed in obtaining food with even the most basic linguistic skills, whereas in a classroom role-play the motivation to succeed might be lower, as the reality has to be imagined, and does not quite pack the same weight as the real-life situational event. However, the reality factor, does not undermine the classroom simulation (Smith & Van Doren, 2004), but reinforces it as an ideal opportunity to prepare and practice for this or other real situational events in the target language, as some key knowledge is better than none for successful communicative goals. However, due to the complexity and unpredictability of the real social world, it can only really function as a foundation and not an exact replication of it.

From a constructivist perspective and the Vygotskian theory (1978) being anywhere within the zone of proximal development can have a significant impact on learning. However, in order for any learning to take place the learner has to connect or engage with the experience (directly or indirectly). Therefore having any kind of real linguistic experience can greatly enhance a multitude of learning strategies that can benefit language development, in a live environment.

III. Method

3.1 Objective

The primary goal of this study is to measure and evaluate the participant's productive and receptive English language skills level under the conditions of an experiential learning trip, to ascertain what causal effect (if any), being immersed within such a learning environment has on the subject's social and aca-

ademic development with the language. It also seeks to identify and investigate what factors and elements might drive or limit language success between different variables, and to consider if these occur greater or less in a more free productive and open environment in contrast to tighter controlled conditions within a classroom setting.

Although this study aims to examine all four main language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) as the main variables dependent under the specific premise of experiential learning beyond the classroom (along with sub-skills, such as grammar, vocabulary and discourse management, that operate as factors in the evaluation process of such variables), the sole participant involved in the study expressed prior to the study that his own personal inquiry and language goals were to focus in the areas of speaking and listening. In light of this endeavour, and with the view that he is the principle stakeholder in this study, I will try to dedicate more attention to the results and discussion of these two variables (speaking and listening), while attempting not to neglect or brush over other key areas that give any indication or a good overview of the subject's general status with the language. Therefore, one of the objectives here is to try to understand what the subject's complete command of the language is before and after the study, within the parameters of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.2 Setting

Despite being essentially an experiential learning study that is centred on a participant's interest and development of English language skills, the setting for this inquiry is not, as one might expect, within the immersion of a place where English is the mother tongue or even an official language. The primary location for this study took place in a variety of settings and situations in Bulgaria over the course of 4 weeks in July. These ranged from participating in a short week-long academic summer event in the rural heart of the Bulgarian countryside, to travelling as a tourist visiting various towns and cities of cultural and historic interest.

While all of the learning took place in Bulgaria, the testing and evaluation for both the pre-test and the post-test were conducted at a university office in South Korea. The university was not the same institution regularly attended by the participant.

3.3 Participant

The participant in this study has chosen the alias of 'Peter', and, is a 25-year-old Chinese male. Originally an Art and Design transfer student, from a higher education institution near Beijing, he has been studying English Language and Literature at a Korean provincial university for the past two years and acquired enough subject credits to graduate in the autumn of 2015. However, one of the requirements to complete his studies, and to successfully obtain his bachelor's degree, is that he must obtain a valid external international certificate that verifies that he has the relevant English comprehension skills at the specific level (or above), set by the Korean Ministry of Education and Science (MoE). Normally, the assessment for this level is completed 'in-house' by Korean universities, during the foundation (or freshman) year. However, because Peter entered his university in the second year, he did not have that opportunity. Therefore, any student who does not complete the foundation/freshman English program, which includes doing both a separate writing and speaking class (commonly facilitated and graded by a qualified foreign native speaker 2 hours a week for a complete academic year spread over two 15 week semesters), must receive a valid internationally recognised English certification to meet the MoE requirement. The most common route for students who have not completed foundation level English courses is to do the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) certificate. This is a purely receptive listening and reading skills test and the current accepted benchmark set by the Korean MoE is 650 out of a possibly 990 (66%). Peter's last attempt at the test was 450 (45%).

The problem for Peter is, that even though he has been an English Language and Literature student, he has spent most of his last two years learning Korean. Not only did he have to assimilate into Korean culture to socialise with other students and carry out his daily affairs, but, with the exception of the occasional English ‘native speaker’ class in the university English curriculum, most of his other classes were taught mainly in Korean. All credit to Peter, in two years he has developed a very good level of Korean and this has equipped and enabled him to do a handful of part-time jobs in the retail and service industry in addition to advancing his studies at a Korean university.

Peter was in two of my classes (one for English conversation and another for English composition) when I worked at the same Korean university he attended during his first two semesters. During that period, he also came to my office regularly for consultations and assistance to help him with the assigned work to complete the courses. In addition to this, we both did a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on the ‘Philosophical History and Foundations of China through EdX at Harvard University. He helped me understand some aspects of Chinese history, while I helped him with English to pass the course. Therefore, we became good friends and fellow students, shared our knowledge and enjoyed the occasional lunch together. This suited me, as I am interested in mentoring and advising students to help them get the most out of education and to empower their lives further.

3.4 Data Collection

Although the study ensured that the participant had many enjoyable memories and enjoyed going different places, doing a wide range of different things and meeting people together, the main focus of this study rests on measuring the participant's English language skills as a result of the experience of being abroad with a native English speaker as a mentor for that duration. In order to get some idea of how the experience worked out for the participant as an English language learner, a series of tests were conducted that attempts to measure both their receptive (reading, listening) and productive skills (writing and speaking). Testing of all four skills were done as a pre-test one day prior to departure to Bulgaria, and a post-test a few days after returning to South Korea. A small mid-test, that covered only listening and reading, was conducted around 15 days into the trip.

3.5 Stage testing

In line with the overall objective of the study, to measure if an experiential learning trip abroad had any significant impact on the participants English language learning level and in view of the subject's goals to improve his speaking and listening, the study concentrated on two main stages, the pre-test and post-test in all four skills. Additionally, a mid-test for listening and reading to maintain consistency with the TOEIC test for reading and listening, also took place. The tests varied in size and length, but took approximately the same amount of time to conduct in their entirety. The tests were staged progressively, in an attempt to gauge and increase the student's level at various junctures in the study. Below is an explanation of what each test involved, the materials used and the main aim of each stage.

3.7(a) Pre-test.

The initial diagnostic-test involved a short level test from ‘Linguahouse’ (2008) of 60 questions, this blank-fill style questionnaire, focused directly on two sets of sub skills of grammar & vocabulary. This was followed by a pre-test gauged at the participant's level in each individual productive and receptive skill.

- Listening: A set of 30 multiple-choice questions. Time: 15 minutes
- Reading: 50 Questions from a mock TOEIC exam paper. Time: 45 minutes
- Writing: A statement on “University Life/Experience”. Time: 20 minutes

- Speaking: Video-taped interview. Time approx 25 minutes

The pre-test functioned to establish where the participant's current level of English fluency is at and what command they have at that level before the trip abroad.

3.7(d) Mid-test.

- Listening: 100 TOEIC Questions. Time: 45 minutes
- Reading: 15 selected questions from TOEIC. Time: 10 minutes

The main aim of the mid-test was to keep Peter focused on TOEIC and to give him some preparation and practice for the test, while at the same time monitoring to see if he was showing any signs of improvement in listening and reading through developing constant interaction with myself and other people he had encountered on the trip. Throughout most of the duration of the trip, I accompanied Peter, as his host, guide and mentor, while he also had opportunities to take part in leisure and recreational activities, and meet other native and non-native speaking English speakers throughout the month long journey. This also gave me a chance to monitor and assess his interaction with other people.

3.7(e) Post-test

- Listening: 100 TOEIC Questions. Time: 45 minutes
- Reading: 50 Questions from a mock TOEIC exam paper. Time: 45 minutes
- Writing: A short statement on "Travel Experience". Time: 20 minutes
- Speaking: Unstructured extended interview/conversation Time: 25 minutes

The post-test was set at a slightly higher and more progressively level of discourse. Therefore, the post-test aimed to challenge the participant to demonstrate a higher volume of language interaction and exchange. This gave them a slightly stronger role, without increases opportunity for student talk time (STT) and ultimately a better sense of responsibility to articulate themselves more freely, beyond the normative textbook style of testing.

3.8 Data analysis

Results from the test were measured and assessed for each skill individually, then grouped for each set (receptive and productive), and then collectively over all to evaluate the participant's position on the CEFR scale. In the case of receptive skills, these are weighted quantitatively, not only highlighting the individual scores (the volume and result) but also in terms of percentages (out of 100). Based on the quantitative data analysis, it was possible to make an approximated calculation and prediction of participant's TOEIC level. One of his objectives and goals was to complete the TOEIC gate-keeping exam and graduate, therefore I paid particular attention to monitor and study the listening and reading (receptive skills) variables closely before giving him any advice on whether he was ready for the exam or not.

Productive skills are always something for a cause of contention, because unlike question papers with a definitive answer they are often difficult to quantify and normally based on the subjective view of the assessor's judgement (Adams, 2014). However, with this in mind, the deployment of rubric sets that measure values in individual categories and elements of the production gives some indication of the two writing and speaking variables. Furthermore, it is also useful to have an additional qualitative assessment of the production based on external observations that perhaps alter or enhance the evaluation of skills. The rubric sets I used were based on the following: For writing it was weighted based on three specific areas related to the 'organisation', 'mechanics' and 'register,' along with time taken to complete the task (20 minutes) to evaluate the participants level within the CEFR on a 5 point scale (out of a total of 15) within each category. While speaking is marked within the criteria of the International Association for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and the Canadian Language benchmarks in the following 5 areas; Range (vo-

cabulary and grammar); Ease of speech (fluency); Attitude (self confidence, motivation, reduced anxiety/nervousness); Delivery (volume, pronunciation, intonation, word-stress, speech-rhythm); Interaction (body language, communication strategies, social conversation skills). Each of these factors were measured within a 4-point scale (out of 20). To ensure a closer examination of the video tapped data for analysis, the speaking tests (pre and post-test) were also transcribed and analyzed.

The examination of the results of both the quantitative result and taking a qualitative review of the components provide an opportunity to determine where (if any) improvement of the subject's English language skill has occurred between the pre and post-tests.

IV. Findings

4.1 Diagnostic

Using an online level placement test from 'Linguahouse (2008)', that claims to measure grammar and vocabulary (*Table.1*) and locate the test-takers approximate position within the CEFR, Peter scored 70% overall in both grammar and vocabulary. The total score of 44 out 60 (73%) Linguahouse estimates that anything over 65% as B2-C1 level in the CEFR. However, because this is only a very basic test of grammar and vocabulary, from this data, I initially placed the participant at the B2 upper intermediate CEFR Level. However, more comprehensive testing in all four skills level would also be need to be conducted, to get a better picture of where Peter's overall level on the CEFR stood.

The Linguahouse diagnostic test is based on the overall score out of 60 questions, these are broken down into 36 grammar questions and 24 vocabulary questions. From *Table.1* we can see that Peter has scored marginally better at vocabulary (75%) than grammar (72%), although this is a balanced score 44/60 (73%) in the diagnostic test overall.

Table. 1 Level Placement Test

Sub-Skill	Score	Percentage
Grammar	26/36	72%
Vocabulary	18/24	75%
Overall Total	44/60	73%
Estimated CEFR: Approx B2		

4.2 Receptive Skills

From this initial diagnostic test, the next test was to delve deeper into Peter's overall comprehension level of English, by examining his receptive skills in listening and reading (*Table.2*). This was done by comparing the results for all the tests that he did over the course of the experiential learning journey from the pre-test to post-test stage. In *Table.2* we can see the results for the mid-test (in TOEIC practice) and while the scarcity of reading questions is not enough to register any kind of significant improvement from too small a sample of 15 questions, the listening in the middle test is a full listening test of 100 and is set to a higher (Non-TOEIC B1 textbook) level and from this mid-point listening result we can see he has done rather well with 65% of the questions answered correctly, which is an improvement even on the 30 lower level questions he answered in the pre-test where he scored 57%.

The listening segment in the pre-test also indicates perhaps that Peter is just slightly below the B2 level at B1. While the reading score in the pre-test (which was originally gauged at B1-B2 level university stu-

Table. 2

Receptive Skills	Pre-test (%)	Mid-test (%)	Post-test (%)
Listening	17/30 (57%)	65/100 (65%)	74/100 (74%)
Reading	27/50 (54%)	12/ 15 (80%)	30/ 50 (60%)
Combined Score	44/80 (55%)	77/115 (67%)	104/150 (69%)
CEFR	B1-B2	B2	B2

dents), also indicates a firmly placed B1 level score. Based on these results at the pre-test stage I would not recommend the participant take a TOEIC test with a combined receptive skill score of 55%. However, by the end of the trip and almost a full month in Bulgaria, the listening score has jumped further, answering 74 of 100 questions correctly. The reading score in the post-test, which is from a TOEIC test book (designed to place B2-C1 level university students), it reads a more realistic 60% from 50 questions answered. When we combine the receptive skills scores for both listening and reading in the post-test (of 104 answers out of 150 answered correctly) this equates to 69%. This would place Peter at 680 TOEIC points, which would be just enough to pass the TOEIC benchmark for Korean university graduation. It would also indicate he had reached the B2 upper intermediate level (around an IELTS 5) for receptive skills. However, the data shows that while his listening is at a satisfactory standard, he could really secure a firmer footing in that stage by putting more focus on reading comprehension skills. Then, he would clearly be over the 650 TOEIC/B2 minimum benchmark required by the Korean Ministry of Education and Science to graduate.

4.3 Production Skills

4.3(a) Writing

The organization of the pre-test shows some coherent attempt to describe what being at university has meant to Peter. It is cohesive in that it introduces the topic of university life as being something ‘special’ and ‘important’ and has brought different experiences together. It has a fairly satisfactory logical flow, and explains how the participant entered university as a transfer student, only requiring two years of study there, and how he felt when he entered the university, the difficulty they had adapting to using new languages. He then gives an example paragraph of his first day and how he eventually settled into his new environment by working on a task, before reinstating that ‘university life is very meaningful in life’ and how appreciative he feels to have had the experience. As for the mechanics of the statement although it is very clear what Peter is trying to say, there is some difficulty with sentence structure, in terms of grammar and syntax, such as the use of definite and indefinite articles and a lack of conjugated past tense verbs. However, the message is clear and we can understand from the tone of the piece that university in Korea for the last two years has been an interesting and fulfilling challenge.

In the post-test writing, we can see much more discourse to something that resembles more like a standard college 5 paragraph essay which in retrospect, for 20 minutes student writing time for a foreign language learner to turn out pretty much ‘off the cuff’, is not a bad effort at all. The organisation follows a chronological order of the participant’s trip, there’s quite a lot of build-up in the first three paragraphs dedicated to going to Sofia in the first couple of days, while the other three and a half weeks are crammed into the last two paragraphs. The mechanics are pretty much the same as the first attempt in pre-test and there appears to be some struggle with pronouns, however, the sentences are getting more extensive and despite some typical errors, more coherent. There also seems to be a much louder kind of voice bursting out of it and you can really sense the excitement and impression the trip has made on him in the overall mood and

Table. 3

Writing	Pre-test	Post-test
Organisation	3/ 5 (60%)	3/ 5 (60%)
Mechanics	1/ 5 (20%)	2/ 5 (40%)
Register	3/ 5 (60%)	4/ 5 (80%)
Total	7/15 (47%)	9/15 (60%)
CEFR	A2-B1	B2

tone of the writing. These statements were marked out of a total 15 points in three categories (*Table 3*).

To verify my assessment, I asked a learned colleague from my office (with 10 years EFL) experience teaching university students to examine Peter's writing as a secondary marker. This colleague was completely independent, they had never met Peter and had no knowledge of his identity. I simply passed them the writing, and asked for their professional opinion, without even discussing any of my notes or findings with them, and asked if they would kindly assess the CEFR level by comparing the two pre-test & post-test writings. Their assessment of the first writing was slightly lower than my own evaluation at A2 level (I had positioned it somewhere between A2 and B1). Their opinion of the second writing from the post-test was that it had made a significant improvement to B1 again just slightly below my final registration of B2 level. My colleague also commented that it was 'more fluent', that the form had improved, with a good opening and closing structure, and it was a more thoughtful, stylised piece of writing overall in contrast to the first attempt. Therefore, while the second marker was slightly less generous in their evaluation of CEFR levels, it was close and similar to my own assessment of the writing, and it is clear Peter has made some movement forward in his writing into the B1-B2 CEFR Level.

4.3(b) Speaking

Initial oral proficiency in the pre-test demonstrated that the participant had enough range to complete the speaking tasks with limited vocabulary and short phrases. As we saw in the writing test, a similar problem with speech is embedded in the control of grammar and structures, and there were times when the participant seemed a little lost or unsure in the tasks. In terms of fluency/ease of speech, the student supports communication almost independently, but makes pauses and relies on prompts, responding with only minimum words and sentences, however can ask and reply to simple questions with some connected discourse. There is good attitudinal response despite the fact that he did mention he felt a little nervous at the beginning of the test. This state or condition did not hamper him from using what language knowledge he had to complete the tasks and communication goals throughout the whole test. The delivery of speech was satisfactory, but there were clearly pronunciation difficulties, low volume, poor intonation, not much word-stress and the speech rhythm was rather slow and slurred. There were points when communication was difficult to understand clearly, which required listening to the video several times very carefully to get a good grasp of what he was saying. Although there was definitely good attitude and enthusiasm to keep communication going throughout the interaction, he did require frequent assistance, which made a lot of the communication rather limited. Despite these difficulties the participant did rather well, for a foreign language learner subjected without preparation to a series of tests culminating in a 25 minute recorded speech test, which indicated (See *Table. 4*) that he was somewhere at the threshold between the B1-B2 intermediate level.

As we can also see from the results (*Table 4*) that Peters sojourn abroad in Bulgaria had quite a signifi-

Table. 4

Speaking	Pre-test	Post-test
Range	2/ 4 (50%)	3/ 4 (75%)
Ease of speech	2/ 4 (50%)	3/ 4 (75%)
Attitude	3/ 4 (75%)	4/ 4 (100%)
Delivery	2/ 4 (50%)	2/ 4 (50%)
Interaction	2/ 4 (50%)	3/ 4 (75%)
Total	11/20 (55%)	15/20 (75%)
CEFR	B1-B2	B2-C1

cant effect on his speaking skills (increased by 20%). The range had improved enough for a lengthy and more in-depth speaking task, with some improvement in grammar and although there are, on a couple of occasions, some elementary speech errors this did not hamper the overall communication. Ease of speech has also improved, it seemed more relaxed, less forced and natural, there is also evidence of more connected discourse with use of conjunctions (and, but), and even some instances of self-correction. Attitude has strengthened and is reinforcing the speech making it more enjoyable and interesting. It is clear the subject is engaged with a lot of confidence and self-belief, this in turn is fuelling the expression of critical thoughts, and views are clearly apparent in the discourse. While there appears to be a more concerted effort and excitement in the participant's 'voice', delivery is still an issue and although this has to some degree slightly improved, it is only marginal and the participant would benefit greater from pronunciation practice, particularly with attention to diphthong vowel sounds along with using more intonation. Another noticeable leap forward (and this is perhaps in some way connected to the overall attitude) is that the interaction now supports the communication, there appears to be more awareness of being part of an interactive social situation with some visual indicators of attempts to show emotive response to the discourse.

When we examine both the productive skills (See *Table.5*) combined we can see there has been significant growth in both variables between the tests in the space of one month. Writing, which is the most difficult of the two skills (for most people generally) was somewhere between the threshold of A2-B1, however, has managed to pull into the B2 level by 13%. Speaking, which suggests a stronger improvement with a 20% increase has gone from the intermediate stages of B1 through the later part of B2 and almost to the entry stage of C1 advanced level transcending 55% -75%. With more effort, attention and improvement in writing, the participant could then comfortably have upper-intermediate B2 to advanced (IELTS 6) levels in English production skills tests.

Looking at the individual skill sets on their own from pre-test to post-test, speaking has had the largest gain (+ 20%), followed by listening (+ 17%) then writing (+ 13%) and Reading (+ 6%). In relation to the two skill sets (receptive and productive) we can see (in *Table 6.*) that although production skills increased (+ 16%) a little more than receptive skills (+ 14%), receptive skills finished slightly higher (69%) than production skills (67%). The good news for Peter is, both his productive and receptive skills are comfortably positioned within the recommended B2 level regardless of all his strengths and weaknesses in individual areas.

Table. 5

Productive Skills	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)
Writing	(47%)	(60%)
Speaking	(55%)	(75%)
Combined score	(51%)	(67%)
CEFR	B1	B2

Table. 6

English Skills	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)
Receptive	(55%)	(69%)
Production	(51%)	(67%)
Combined	(53%)	(68%)
CEFR	B1	B2

V. Discussion

With this information at hand, it is now clear that Peter has managed to do something significant and quite remarkable that would have taken some considerable classroom time and effort to do. In only a short space of one calendar month, through an experiential journey abroad (to a non-native English speaking country) he has managed to move successfully from the early stages of an intermediate learner of English (IELTS 4) to an all-round upper intermediate level (IELTS 6). Nonetheless, despite the data indicating that he has now reached the targeted CEFR level of B2, (which would theoretically give him enough receptive skills to pass the required benchmark of 650 of the TOEIC exam), and that his speaking skill has strengthened, I am still of the opinion that he still has a considerable amount of work and study to do to solidify that position. I will now try to outline some of the limitations of this study.

Firstly, these tests were treated, approached and conducted exactly in the same exam conditions I would give to any university student on paper, within the time limits specified, without the use of any external learning aid, equipped with nothing more than a pencil and eraser. There was absolutely no advanced information of what language forms, vocabulary or even what the test was going to be and how it would be conducted, therefore I am satisfied with the credibility and authenticity of the testing. However, one thing I will add is, because Peter and I have known each other having spent considerable time together (in different capacities, as a teacher, mentor, fellow student and tour guide) he probably felt safe, secure and comfortable testing with me, even more so after we had spent a month abroad with each other. This could be a significant factor in his increased confidence, which ultimately played an important factor in raising his English speaking skill. I am not sure how Peter would react and respond to an independent and external examiner under pressure and I am not sure if he would perform the same, better or worse. However, he has now since passed the TOEIC test at 720 (with additional study, since to returning to South Korea from this experiential trip abroad). This would indicate he has made some advances in his receptive skills to meet

650, the B2 benchmark for an upper intermediate (B2) student from his original 450 TOEIC Score, preceding his going abroad.

In addition, I would also point out that being a mentor to a student is as hard as being a teacher, as it transcends beyond the learning and becomes more focused on the person as a thinking feeling human being rather than a subject. It is as if you have a stake in them to succeed, I would imagine more like a football coach or a line manager in a factory, than the conventional model of a student-teacher relationship. The closeness of mentoring a student beyond the classroom, and not just guiding or advising a learner, but monitoring and evaluating them is a rewarding experience. However, working with a research subject in the field, the travel was not without its challenges. I had to wear many hats as a former teacher, a respected elder, a home stay host, a travel buddy, a chauffeur, a fellow participant at the 'Travelling University' and a researcher. In many respects, this research narrative was not all about Peter's journey to from B1- B2 English level via Bulgaria, but in a sense how both our stories come together as a small community of practice.

Another limitation to the study worth considering is then, would this type of experiential learning journey work with any participant other than Peter? It is hard to say, because what I did learned about Peter is that he is very focused on what he wants to do (though sometimes does not quite know how to go about it). Any advice or instructions I gave him throughout he adhered to, even in the sweltering heat of 'sunny Bulgaria' he always managed to keep his composure and remain calm. When I told him we had to clean the house each day, he got up and did it before studies, reading textbooks or writing short travel journals on his cell phone. Maybe, not all young people would be so disciplined and diligent.

Could he have learned more if he were at another home stay or in an English speaking country where he would be, surrounded and more immersed with the target language? The answer to this (I believe) would be absolutely, yes! Having more language opportunities to engage with a wider range of people and situations other than just 'travel English', would no doubt have an incredible impact on his learning. Peter really wants to learn English, and that desire to learn is a strong motivating factor. However, Bulgaria was good for his level of English as an intermediate as he was not too overwhelmed by the language and met people at a similar or marginally better level of communication, thus the experience acted as an ideal 'stepping stone' in preparation for a trip to somewhere like the UK or North America. In fact, in his last statement on his interview, he talks about wanting to go to Scotland, and maybe England or even America for his next trip abroad, so the experience has certainly fired him up with confidence to go further afield to immerse himself in a complete English language environment on his next sojourn.

VI. Conclusion

As we see in Peter's case and his commendable results, real life language usage is most effective in a real live experience through meaningful processes of socialisation and purposeful exchanges. We can of course attempt to construct, recreate and simulate the real world within the confines of a class, however, active language learning in 'the classroom without walls' in the reality of the moment creates opportunities for the learner to 'feel' and sense the real context of usage. Language learned may then be recalled in association to a time, a place, a person, a situation or an experience, which might not only support and aid language acquisition, but also reinforce the retention of it. However, as I stated at the beginning and at various junctures in this report, classroom learning can also act as a good, safe environment to practise and prepare language for the external real world, with a very refined focus on one or more particular aspects of it.

Although Peter may have reached an upper intermediate level of B2 in the CEFR with the benefit of his experiential learning trip abroad in a non-native English speaking European country, we have to remind ourselves, it was the classroom that took him through the initial A1, A2, and B1 threshold levels. What

Peter would be best advised to do now is using all the language knowledge he has gained (both in class and experientially), is go back to the classroom (or now that he feels suitably equipped and a confident learner study autonomously) and practise more reading and journal writing with attention to grammar and syntax along with pronunciation for speaking to strengthen those areas, and work more closer towards the C1 Advanced level. Perhaps, after another month long short trip to the UK or US, he could move ever closer into the C2 Proficient level and truly master English at the highest CEFR level. I wish him good luck with all his travels and learning endeavours, and thank him profusely for taking part in our joint learning projects.

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