

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Introduction

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The Competition: Celebrating International Mobility

In January 2018, as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of Ca' Foscari, and to reflect the growing international vocation of a higher educational institution which from the beginning has always been 'open to the world', the university launched a competition in which students were invited to write about their international mobility experiences. The rules were simple. The competition was open to all students enrolled at Ca' Foscari who had, or would have, completed a mobility experience abroad as part of their studies, by the end of the spring semester. They had to write between 500 and 1000 words, in English, focusing on a learning experience, not necessarily a formal experience, which characterized the mobility for them on a personal level.

Why English? For the simple reason that English is, for most students, the *lingua franca* which makes the mobility possible. Naturally students of foreign languages (and Ca' Foscari offers forty two!) who go to a country where they can practice the languages they are learning are an exception. But for most students, especially those who are not majoring in a foreign language, the B1 English level entrance requirement for undergraduate study at Ca' Foscari, and B2 for postgraduate courses, should be a guarantee for survival in an academic context abroad, and should make interaction on campus and in daily life possible. This is more than borne out by the high quality of the writing in the competition, which at times is astonishingly good. We shall return to this later.

More than a hundred students sent in an account of their mobility, ninety three of which fulfilled the entrance requirements. They came from every department of the university, making it a truly university-wide competition. Perhaps unsurprisingly there were large numbers of participants from courses delivered entirely in English (such as Economics and Management, and Philosophy, International Studies and Economics). There were also lots of entries from students of Oriental Languages, reminding us that in Asia, too, English may be needed by students, alongside their fledging competences in Chinese, Japanese or Hindi, to reinforce their communicative potential.

From the beginning it was clear that the level of writing was high, and that deciding which were the best would not be easy. The three members of the jury (Gregory Dowling and David Newbold from the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, and Elisa Gamba from the Office of International Relations) began with a subjective rating of each text, which led to a long list of 39 which were considered by each component of the jury to be at least 'very good'. A further reading established a short list of 22, which we all concurred were 'excellent.'

This is where things got difficult. It is not easy to decide on outright winners when all the entries being considered are excellent. We opted for an objective, analytic grid which evaluated texts for content, communicative efficiency, and use of English. By 'content', we meant that accounts should focus on an appropriate learning experience, and be, in some way, original or creative; by 'communicative efficiency' that the writer should relate to the reader, using appropriate discourse features and structuring; and with 'use of English' we were referring to formal features such as syntax and morphology, but also lexical range. Inevitably there is some overlap across these categories but the one to which we gave the most weight was 'communicative efficiency', the means by which the writer was able to touch, and maybe move, the reader.

The three students with the highest evaluations won cash prizes put up by the Office of International Relations, while seven runners-up were presented with copies of the *Oxford Dictionary of Academic English* generously donated by Oxford University Press. But all twenty two short listed entries would have been worthy winners, and readers can make up their own minds about which ones they think best capture the mobility experience. In this volume we present all thirty-nine long-listed entries, which together reveal a great well of creative resources within the university. As for the more than fifty entries which did not make the long list, there was not a single contribution which did not in some way add its own insights towards a collective understanding of the mobility experience, and which was not worth recounting. Every student who entered the competition is thus to be thanked for participating and sharing their own experience with the wider community.

The Content: the Meaning of Mobility

The dominant theme which emerges in students' accounts of their mobility, and which was solicited by the invitation to focus on 'a learning experience', is one of personal growth. This may take different forms, such as an increase in self confidence or cultural awareness, or cross-cultural insights into human nature. The accounts may be triggered by a single incident and take the form of an anecdote, such as a chance meeting in a train in Morocco (Caterina Battilana, *A circle and a cross*) or the unintentional gate-crashing

of a wedding party in India (Rocco Tonilio, *My big fat Indian wedding experience*). Or they may be a reflection on the whole mobility experience, as in the account which won the first prize, ... *to the sky*, and which is a distillation of nine months spent in Madrid, 'the same length as a pregnancy', the author, Chiara Bergonzini, notes, during which 'a new me was born'.

A few students, only a few, write about what happens in the classrooms and the lecture halls, but the focus is more on survival study techniques than the lessons being delivered by lecturers. Thus Silvia del Soglia hones her writing skills in the university library in Seoul (*At the end of hardship comes happiness*) because, faced with the choice of sink or swim, she realizes that 'sinking was not an option'; while Cecilia Spassini, (*Another side of China*) decides that the only way to survive her mobility in the remote north east China, with its draconian regulations, is 'by talking a lot in class, and by asking questions.' There is also an interesting account of a night spent in Hull University Library by Fabio Grattoni (*A night at the library*), in which the author observes and classifies his fellow readers as *night owls*, *lost students*, and *desperate students*. He identifies himself with the first category, with just a hint of the desperate. Fabio doesn't however make any reference to his illustrious predecessor: Philip Larkin, possibly the greatest post war English poet, was Hull University librarian from 1955 until his death in 1985, and may have reached similar conclusions about the night-time inmates.

A few students reflect on language issues, such as the use of English as the world's *lingua franca*, or the curiosities of the local language, whether Chinese or Dutch. Giorgia Frigerio (*The unexpected virtue of imperfection*) overcomes her fear of making mistakes in English, since 'The point isn't that I stopped making mistakes, but that my approach to them changed.' Beatrice Sarto (*Where are you from?*) extols the virtues of having a non-native speaker accent because 'accents tell stories, they tell people where you have come from, where you have been, and where you are going... and there is no shame in that.' In the Netherlands, Elisabetta Gobbo tries to work out the meaning of *The most beautiful word of the worst language* - the Dutch word 'gezellig'.

Mostly, though, students write about the people they meet, the friends they make, and the value of tolerance and solidarity across cultural divides. They recount voyages of self discovery as students leave the 'comfort zone' (an expression which features in numerous accounts) of home, family, and the security of the daily routine, for the unknown. Only rarely is the theme of tolerance and international relations approached from a different angle, from a critical, impersonal viewpoint - one outstanding exception being Silvia Pin's image of revolving doors in a hotel in Hebron, occupied territories, and the two men on either side of them, one of whom, we suppose, is Palestinian, the other an Israeli Jew (*Two men*).

Lasting friendships are formed, such as the one which inspires Chiara Bergonzini's tattoo (...*in the sky*), or the intense relationship which Irene Melinu forms with a Japanese girl, Minako (*A matter of beauty*) and which revolves

around a discussion of the contrast between western and oriental canons of beauty. Sometimes the friendships are unlikely: Asia Mariuzzo (*Do not ever judge an Aussie by his accent*) meets an Australian boy from along the corridor in her student residence in Reading who tells her almost as soon as he sees her that ‘tattooed, cranky and sassy girls are not my type.’ And yet...

But sentimental adventures, and close encounters of a sexual kind, keep a low profile in these accounts; which is not to say they do not happen. A recent article in *Sette*, the weekly supplement of *Il Corriere della Sera*, published a series of statistics about the Erasmus generation, and the two million or so European students which have been on mobility over the last thirty years.¹ Of these, 33 per cent are likely to end up with an international partner (compared with just 13 per cent of non Erasmus ex students), accounting for more than a million ‘Erasmus babies’, at least if we are to believe a claim made by European Commissioner Jean Claude Juncker.²

This may provide a reason for rejoicing in Erasmus, as Junker suggests, but so too do the many accounts of volunteering which Ca’ Foscari students have been involved in as part of their mobility. In Southampton, Marta Lucente (*Limitless music*) discovers the power of music to help the physically disabled in a dance therapy group, and in a children’s hospice, while on the other side of the world, in China, Chiara Spassini (*Another side of China*) gives up some of her time to help the disabled in a similar project. One Ca’ Foscari mobility programme, *Ca’ Foscari for the World* offers students the chance to participate in an NGO programme in northern India, and this is enthusiastically taken up by Filippo Spaliviero (*Do not bring medals with you*). On the last day he reports back about the recycling project he has been involved in, only to receive a sobering comment from the local supervisor: if you think you’ve done a good job, she says, don’t let it go to your head, and don’t take any medals away with you.

Disillusionment is part of the bigger picture which emerges; mobility does not offer instant gratification, but it has to be earned, and swallowing pride, as well as making mistakes, may be part of that process. A graphic account of this is provided by Maria Chiara Truttero (*Like a piece of cake*). Challenged to make a cake by a friend of her hostess in Tbilisi, she decides to make a *tiramisu* (for which she has to make a phone call to her mother to be sure of the recipe). The next day just before dinner, on the table where she had placed the finished product, she finds a ‘big brown cake’, definitely not her tiramisù, and an embarrassed hostess. The problem, it seems, is that the hostess cannot offer her guests a cake which has not

1 *Sette*, weekly supplement to *Corriere della Sera*, 3rd May 2018.

2 Reported by Reuters news agency, 13 June 2017: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-students-babies/a-million-euro-babies-eu-fetes-30-years-of-student-exchanges-idUSKBN1941PX> (2018-11-27)

been baked. The shock is great, but there is only one way out: Maria Chiara has to set aside her wounded pride, and her account concludes: 'I would never prepare tiramisu abroad again and I would always eat my cake with tolerance and understanding'.

Ultimately, tolerance and understanding are the key to a successful mobility, and the students who wrote these accounts are well aware of it. For many of them, this awareness triggers a reflection on pride and prejudice: to be proud of one's own cultural heritage is one thing, but to break down the barriers of stereotypes and ignorance is essential if international understanding is to take place. Time and again this has been a liberating experience for our students, and the real lesson learned from the mobility placement. In the words of Chiara Bergonzini: 'I literally felt like the world had finally opened its door to me, and I had never felt so Italian, and so much of a world citizen at the same time.'

The Communicative Factor: English *Lingua Franca*

All participants in the competition had to write their accounts in English. We did however specify in the rules that entries would be judged for their communicative efficiency in English lingua franca, and that we were not looking for 'standard' British or American English, although we expected a level of communicative competence at least B2 on the Common European Framework. In this way we hoped to encourage students who were not necessarily students of English to participate; the competition was open to *users* as well as *learners*. In other words, we were not going to penalize participants who used non-standard forms which did not compromise the communicative thrust of their writing.

In fact, the ability of entrants to express themselves fluently and convincingly in English, turned out to exceed our expectations. Of course, there are plenty of non standard forms, and some low level 'errors' (such as incorrect verb forms, or lack of agreement) creep into a few texts, but these are in the minority, and they do not compromise understanding. What was more noticeable to the judges is the sophisticated use of the language (for example in the creation of images and metaphors) and the sense of structure and organization which are a feature of all the entries presented here.

Often those non standard forms which might, in another context, be considered as errors of grammar or lexis, such as

«I felt like a lost luggage patiently waiting on the carousel» (*Lost and Found: The journey of a caterpillar*)

or

«I read, dreamt, travelled, believed, lived adventures» (*Dear Me, Breathe and love*)

can be seen as useful, rather than problematic. *Luggage* is a count noun

in standard British English, and so cannot be used with the indefinite article, but *a piece of lost luggage* would have been awkward and *a suitcase* too specific for the writer's purposes; while *living an adventure* (presumably transferred from Italian) gives the idea rather more successfully than the more usual *have an adventure*.

Such departures from a norm are a recurring feature of *lingua franca* English (ELF), of which much has been written over the last decade or so; the authors of these accounts are non native speakers of English, they are using the language to communicate with other non native speakers, and their mobility experience, like that of most of their companions, was made possible by the availability of English as a *lingua franca*. As such, these two small examples can be seen as creative uses of the language, rather than errors, and they would probably pass unnoticed to many non native eyes.

More noteworthy is the range of writing strategies employed, and the linguistic means by which they are achieved. This includes the descriptive bravura of accounts such as *Two Men* and *Beijing Nights*, the shifting narrative viewpoints of *A Letter from my Future Self* and *A Matter of Beauty*, the experimental approach of *Wet Hair* and *Dear Me, breathe and love*, the exquisite sense of focus and unity of which the outright winner... *to the sky* is perhaps the best example. Contestants had to provide a title to their accounts, and these, too, are often pungent and illuminating, as in *Do not bring medals with you* or the pun in *Like a piece of cake*. And who could resist reading an account of a mobility experience entitled, simply, *Wet Hair*?

Behind it all, holding everything together, is a competence in English which, as we said, exceeded our expectations. Some of the accounts (*A circle and a cross*, for example) come close, very close, to a level of expression which a highly competent native writer would display, and clearly require no editing. But even for those which offer a number of non-standard forms (not to mention the occasional typo) we have decided not to intervene, but to publish the finished accounts as they were submitted by contestants. After all, it is becoming increasingly common for publishers of academic articles NOT to require texts submitted by international authors to be mediated by a native speaker (which in any case poses a problem of definition: what is a native speaker?), since comprehensibility, and interpretability, not native speaker norms, are required for an international audience. And it is not by chance that a number of entries focus on precisely this topic.

So, if you spot any 'errors' in these texts, please be indulgent, and consider that they shed more light on the writers, and ultimately the mobility experience that they are writing about, than an edited text would have done. They provide proof that today's students, perhaps most of them, are highly competent users of the world's *lingua franca*. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did!