



Study abroad: face-to-face or virtual?

Many readers of *Modern English Teacher* will be teaching students who are studying abroad, or are hoping to. Some students do this individually and some as part of a group organised by an agent, a language school, a university, a secondary school or similar. In most cases there is some type of preparation before studying abroad. But what type of preparation – logistics? cultural? location-specific? Who is responsible for it? And what about learners who are not able to go abroad for various reasons? Online or virtual study abroad experiences existed long before Covid-19, but increased in number and size during it: do they still exist? Are they still useful in 2025? Let's briefly have a look at some of the above.

Specific destinations?

Many schools and language centres have relationships with partners overseas, where they send or receive students to and from regularly, often in groups. It seems to make sense to prepare these students for the language variety and local culture they will meet, being careful to avoid stereotypes (Cutting, 2015). Knowing locally relevant pronunciation, language and cultural behaviour has obvious uses when arriving somewhere. It is quite natural for students to hope to sound local, 'fit in' with peers and potential friends, and increase job search success chances (Walker & Archer, 2024). For example, introducing themselves with 'What's up, Cobber?' in Liverpool or Texas might get interesting responses, potentially meant

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looks at two kinds of course and discusses who is responsible for preparation.

as teasing, but perhaps not taken that way. Using language appropriately is as important as knowing the language (Byram *et al.*, 2002), and this might involve greetings, whether or how to use teacher titles, or taking turns.

Examples to illustrate local preparation needs from my own experience include:

- a student in New Zealand using a supermarket human cashier on their first day in-country, hoping to practise a few words. They were greeted with, and confused by, 'Flybuys?' (a local loyalty club programme), in a strong New Zealand accent.
- a summer school programme in the UK with students from many countries

getting confused over whether someone planning to go to Greece for a 'holiday' meant they intended to go for a week or a daytrip. Students understanding the latter told the intending holidaymaker that they had a silly plan. The intended trip was twelve days, a 'holiday' if previously taught in British English, but a 'vacation' if taught in American English where 'holiday' tends to mean a single day public holiday.

- an American colleague telling an all-British-until-then teaching team in the UK that he had a girlfriend 'still in school'. He meant working on her PhD as she approached 30, but the British colleagues initially understood something rather different.
- misunderstandings around the meaning of 'no thongs' signs at Australian bar entrances, around the meaning and pronunciation of 'sweet as' ('all OK!') in a Kiwi accent, and classmates standing (or not standing) as teachers enter the room.

Numerous other articles discuss in greater depth differences between varieties of English in pronunciation or vocabulary (e.g. schwa, placement and amount of /r/, and the meaning of *jelly*, *aubergine* and *football*).

If it makes sense for students to have destination-specific preparation, then who is to do it? Where is it to be done?

Before departure or on arrival? Perhaps both. Some type of communication is important to avoid conflicting information or duplication of effort, although repeat exposure is usually useful.

Many schools already do this preparation in some way, and many online resources exist to help, but it is worth considering whether materials or information is out of date. Up-to-date advice and information can come from students who have recently returned from studying abroad (Edwards, 2024), and video clips of the local destination culture or English variety could be used. Once at the destination, perhaps the actual locale can be part of the learning, with homestays, social activities, field trips and students doing research projects on something local (Doi & Agullana, 2025; Kimura & Hayashi, 2019). It is also worth keeping in mind that some external providers may be more focused on profits than education (Shapiro *et al.*, 2014).

But is destination-specific too focused for 21st-century needs?

Many English learners do their study abroad individually, in various countries, and those in groups may have future plans to use the language in other places. English is a global language, used in many contexts often

as a lingua franca (Walker & Archer, 2024). While teaching in New Zealand on a programme which uses New Zealand English (NZE) pronunciation and vocabulary (and NZE has Māori vocabulary sprinkled throughout), teachers have experienced some students asking for more international English because they planned to find employment or do further studies elsewhere. Further, students may have future travel plans for personal interest to visit locations related to Harry Potter, hobbits, Bluey or Gossip Girl.

Also, students on the same study abroad experience will not all have the same journey. They will meet different people, interpret situations differently and have different feelings (Byram *et al.*, 2002; Cao & Newton, 2019; Du, 2019).

Raising student awareness of the global use of English, and the varied contexts it is used in, can help them see wider uses for English in their lives, improve motivation to learn it, and help them develop useful skills for a global world that uses English as an international language (Davidson & Garas, 2023; OECD, 2024; Walker & Archer, 2024). Students might also move away from seeing a specific standard variety of English as a prestige or success marker, and move towards communicative effectiveness as a goal (Walker & Archer, 2024; Wu *et al.*, 2024).



Preparing students to study abroad from this standpoint might involve using samples of English from famous role models with varied accents (Lorde, Jackie Chan, international soccer stars in the UK premier league, international Hollywood stars) and developing intercultural skills (Edwards 2024; Walker & Archer, 2024). This might better prepare students for experiencing and reflecting on cultural interactions *anywhere* (Byram *et al.*, 2002) and prepare them to use English in a globalised world.

Further, this does not need to be done only as preparation for studying abroad, but can be part of English learning even for those with no immediate plans to travel overseas; it is useful, relevant and contemporary learning – knowledge and skills.

So, what do to? Do we prepare students linguistically and culturally for their specific study abroad destinations? or provide more general training in, or awareness-raising of, Englishes around the world and English as an international language with general cross-cultural skills? This article cannot tell readers one best answer to the questions, but maybe the above can be part of your conversation.

But what about online exchange or study 'abroad'?

Not everyone is willing or able (physically, financially or due to life factors) to study or travel abroad. Using the internet to make international connections is not a new idea. Neither is using online platforms as a way to meet teachers, language learning peers (students or language exchange buddies) or take virtual tours of museums and cultural sites as an organised element of education. This type of activity expanded in 2020–2022, and such programmes still exist in improved form today.

They still exist because there are benefits: language practice; intercultural interaction; and, for many, financial and environmental savings. They can also help students develop digital skills and, if there's a multinational collaboration, exposure to and use of English as an international language experience (Alberola Colmar & Menn,



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2024; Davidson & Garas, 2023). Looking briefly at some example programmes and ideas might inspire readers with options for their own learners.

It is worth reiterating that although online or virtual exchanges existed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, they increased in size and adapted their methodology during the pandemic years. Various schools, agencies and platforms advertised them and there were also published articles on how (and how well), they worked. These usually focused on student confidence and willingness to use the target language; development of autonomy; cultural interest; study motivation (e.g. to communicate with people rather than to pass a test); collaboration; and also on levels of teacher involvement (Podlesnik, 2023; Roarty & Hagley, 2021; Skidmore, 2023).

Another group of programmes are the face-to-face study abroad programmes which moved online with adaptations, initially in haste and later with better planning, as borders closed in 2020. Activities and approaches here included live, recorded or virtual reality tours of historical, educational, cultural and tourist sites, aiming to encourage discussion between students from the 'destination' country and those visiting via cyberspace.

Discussions might have used some type of asynchronous video clip recordings or a chat forum, or, if time zones allowed, might have been live. One example of time zones aligning pretty well was Japanese students virtually visiting New South Wales (Otaru-Wollongong, 2020).

Scores of programmes existed and many still do, and a lot of them have been reported on. Some examples are described by Medel (2023), who outlines students and teachers in different countries collaborating on projects (including team teaching), negotiating in a common language and experiencing different teaching styles. A further example is Liu and Shirley (2021), who employed a mixture of local students, websites, maps and cameras, among other resources, to provide students on multiple continents with virtual experiences which led to discussions both locally and internationally. Discussions covered aspects such as language and culture, but also hobbies and amenities, such as libraries and sports facilities.

Overall, if you are considering using or starting such programmes, there are several considerations. Planning and teacher presence and engagement are considerable, as is the need to adapt as

you go. Students were generally aware that online or virtual exchanges were not the same as physically going to the places despite many of the same learning outcomes being achievable (Davidson & Garas, 2023; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Medel, 2023). The future might be a mix of shorter physical study-abroad programmes with before and after online phases.

Despite Covid-19 restrictions fading to history, there are still more online or virtual exchange opportunities now than before, enabling students to experience some elements of other countries' people, culture, local sights and language exposure. However, they are not simple direct substitutes for in-person exchanges and travel, they do need planning, and are most effective if students choose them rather than have them imposed by circumstances (Skidmore, 2023). Face-to-face programmes also tend to bring in more money, raise profiles for institutions and lead to higher levels of personal development (Medel, 2023). Hybrid options with both modes available, as choices or combined, might be one way forward.

So, what will you do?

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