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The Expatriate Teacher of English

Susan Barduhn, SIT Graduate Institute

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The Expatriate Teacher of English

Dr. Susan Barduhn
SIT Graduate Institute
Brattleboro, Vermont U.S.A.

Why do those of us in the ELT profession not only go to live in other countries, but why do we continue moving on to new ones? And what has been our influence on the spread of English and on trends in teacher training? I was fortunate to receive over 200 responses from Americans, Britons and seven other nationalities to such questions. The respondents needed to have lived outside their country of origin for at least six years and in at least two different countries. I looked upon this research as a puzzle, and my starting point was looking at cultural identity.

Cultural Identity

Singer (1987) depicts cultural identity in terms of perceptual groups and identity groups. Perceptual groups consist of individuals who perceive the world in similar ways, but who are not a group because they do not communicate these perceptions among themselves. Once they do, they become an identity group. I wanted to find out in what ways teachers who choose to live outside their countries of origin are an identity group.

One feature I considered was cultural marginality. Antevasin is a Sanskrit word that means ‘one who lives at the borders.’ It originally referred to people who chose to leave the safety of their homes and venture out to the edge of the forest where the spirits dwelt, in order to uncover the answers to the sacred in their lives. In Eat, Pray, Love, Elizabeth Gilbert describes it as ‘living on that shimmering line between your old thinking and your new understanding’ (2007: 203). Janet Bennett (1993) considers marginality in terms of encapsulated marginality and constructive marginality. Encapsulated marginals are persons who allow the dominant groups to ascribe their identity. Constructive marginals are persons with avowed identities, not dependent on particular group affiliations, who are capable of moving among all communities. They can be described as being conscious of choice, intrigued by complexity, and never not at home wherever they go. These distinctions helped me decide on the questions to ask in my survey.
Overview of results

My starting point was wondering what motivated expatriate teachers to go and live in each country. I compiled a list of 19 reasons and asked the respondents to choose all that applied for each country. The top three choices for each year, in this order, were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country 1</td>
<td>Travel, adventure, Peace Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 2</td>
<td>Professional development, culture, love of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 3</td>
<td>Love of teaching, professional development, career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 4</td>
<td>Career advancement, economic reasons, professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 5</td>
<td>Professional development, career advancement, economic reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 6</td>
<td>Family, attracted to change and risk, professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 7</td>
<td>Love of teaching, professional development, attracted to change and risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country 8</td>
<td>Looking for greener pastures, attracted to change and risk, personal development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Reasons for moving countries

I compiled another list of 19 descriptors of personality and skills, and this was the order of their top eight choices: I am curious; I am self-reliant; I have a willingness to communicate; I like helping others; I have empathy; I am perceptive; I am self-motivated; I have a strong sense of self. The three factors that were rated the lowest were: I am able to let to, to manage stress, to access supports.

I asked who the respondents’ closest friends were in each country, and the majority answer was other expatriate language teachers. I asked about language learning, and discovered that the respondents tended to reach a very high level in the language of their first foreign country, but that this happened rarely in subsequent countries. When asked what the primary reason was (or would be) for returning to their country of origin, one reason stood out: family.
Many wrote of the gratitude they feel towards having been able to live such interesting lives. Foreign countries became part of them, like rings on a tree, stretching them and expanding their humanity and tolerance, including towards their country of origin. They developed professionally through being able to experience different contexts and then use this knowledge of multiple contexts in their teaching, thereby expanding their students’ worldviews. Expatriate teachers have created a huge community of teachers around the world and have contributed to the spread and popularity of professional teacher organizations. Regarding the spread of English, one respondent spoke of serving a need more than creating it, and another wrote that if English were a drug, expatriate teachers would be the dealers. The phenomenon of expatriate English teachers could be considered a historical, cultural movement.

Sources referred to in this presentation


susan.barduhn@sit.edu