

Making a Difference: Setting up Classroom-Based Projects in Chile

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Introduction

This article describes the impact of UK training on four cohorts of Chilean teachers of English who came to Marjon as part of a national programme of teacher education. The expected outcome of the training, as spelt out by the Ministry of Education in Santiago, was that teachers would return home with “an innovation project that will improve their practice and enable them to produce a multiplying effect among their colleagues, in the surrounding community and ultimately in the whole province”.

We designed a course based on the reflective principles of Schön (1983) and the experiential approach of Kolb (1984), and embodying the nine principles of all our international work (see Introduction). The course we developed gave a key role to the design of projects by participants for implementation within their own classrooms.

In this article I want to assess how valuable the project approach has been in helping teachers make a difference to their professional situation. To do this I will describe the programme itself and Marjon’s involvement, present the key elements of context, then address issues relating to projects, networking and follow-up, all of which were regarded by both partners as essential components of the programme.

I am writing this as the Marjon coordinator of the programme, and although the conclusions are mine they are based on testimony, information and feedback from many of the Chilean teachers who came to Marjon, notably Nadina Zegarra from our first cohort. I have also drawn on documents produced by the Ministry in Santiago provided to me by Marcia Fuenzalida, the national coordinator of the programme (2001-2005).

Programme (*Pasantía*)

First then some information about the *Pasantía*, the Chilean government’s scholarship programme which every year since 1996 has sent groups of teachers abroad to learn about good practice and new ideas within their own field.

This programme of national development is open to teachers at pre-school, primary, secondary or adult education, working in the public or private sector, specialising in academic subjects, vocational or special needs education. Teachers interested in participating are invited to apply, and places are filled by a selection process. The ratio of applications to selections has varied over the years between 6:1 and 10:1. According to Ministry figures, about three quarters of training places have gone to teachers in the state sector, and teachers from sparsely-populated regions or places with fewer opportunities for development have received a fair share.

Normally in groups of 20 or 25, the teachers selected for training spend up to 8 weeks on a course provided by a host institution in the Americas, Europe or elsewhere. In the first seven years of the *Pasantía* over 5000 teachers received training in 17 countries, with English language teachers going to 4 of them. In 2003, the last year for which figures are available, a total of 415 teachers

received training on 16 programmes. The range of offerings included Spanish, Mathematics, Adult Education, Management and IT in Spain; Maths and Spanish in Cuba; History & Geography in France; English and Special Education in Canada; Science in the USA; Music in Germany; and English in the UK.

Bidding for the programme is a competitive process, and institutions are invited to submit proposals in March each year. Teachers must apply by July, and the courses take place between October and December (though the cycle was brought forward by a few months from 2005).

Marjon's involvement with the *Pasantía* goes back to 1998, when it ran a course for Chilean teachers of Art & Design. The College received a second cohort of Art & Design teachers the following year, and groups of English language teachers in 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2005. These 91 English teachers are the subject of this article. They spanned a range of ages from mid-twenties to late fifties. Two thirds of them were female, and nearly all were practising secondary teachers. Many had not travelled outside Chile before, and as far as I recall none had previously visited Britain.

The Chilean context

Chile is an extremely long country: to fly from Arica on the Peruvian border in the north to Punta Arenas on the Strait of Magellan would take you six hours on a direct flight. Relative to its length it must also be the narrowest: the population is spread across a coastal plain which extends no more than 200 km inland to the Andes mountains. This geographical distinctiveness places its own difficulties on travel and communications, and lends a sense of isolation to the people.

In the 1990s Chile was emerging from two traumatic decades of military rule. This period had had a strong polarising effect on society and had made people naturally cautious of each other. It may also have caused existing elements of self-reliance and individualism within the national culture to be exaggerated.

Chile's nearest neighbours (in Peru, Bolivia and Argentina) are other Spanish speakers, so the English-speaking world is far away, psychologically as well as geographically. Chilean teachers of English repeatedly refer to low motivation levels and discipline problems amongst their pupils, who are unlikely to spend time in English-speaking countries and seem convinced they will have little use for English in their working lives. Low motivation translates into low expectations of achievement, a vicious cycle familiar to teachers of modern languages in the UK.

These pupils' perceptions however do not match the official view of English as "indispensable to exploit the new opportunities offered by the internationalisation of the Chilean economy" (*Plan de Inglés*)

Expectations of Chilean teachers

For teachers with few opportunities for professional development or international travel, coming on a course to Britain was "like a dream".

The dream metaphor was repeated to me frequently by participants, perhaps reflecting a perception that there was no necessary connection between the course in Britain and their professional lives in Chile. My colleagues and I stressed repeatedly from the beginning of their stay that the course was designed to give them the time and space to think about the problems they faced as English teachers in Chile, and develop strategies for dealing with them. While in

Britain it was therefore vital that they should remain mentally connected to their home situations and be preparing to return to them. The innovation projects they were required to develop depended on this connection: they could not just go back to their schools and carry on as if nothing had changed.

The course we originally designed contained sizeable strands on language awareness, methodology and materials, British life and culture, as well as IT skills and project planning, leading up to project presentations at the end. We discussed their projects with them in weekly tutorials. We took them into local schools to talk to teachers and pupils and observe classes. We laid on a programme of excursions to places of interest and evening social events which brought them into contact with course participants from around the world. This social experience reinforced the notion of English as a global language.

We were conscious that this course might appear to some participants to be a series of products offered for their consumption: a language improvement exercise, a set of “recipes” for classroom activities, a digest of current ideas about methodology. What we intended that they should experience was a process designed to “get their feet wet”, engaging them personally and individually, forcing them to reflect on their perceptions, attitudes and values. We also needed to remind them that the course was about not just their own development but making a sustainable contribution to the process of educational reform in their country.

How things changed

The *Pasantía* programme was funded initially for a period of 4 years. It was extended in 2001 but on a smaller budget, and to continue to offer opportunities for professional development to as many teachers as possible, the Ministry called for shorter courses for larger groups of participants. This is how the Marjon course profile evolved:

Year	Length	Participants
2000	8 weeks	25
2001	6 weeks	20
2003	4 weeks	30
2005	5 weeks	16

These changes had a significant effect on the design of the course and the expectations placed upon the participants, which are explored in more detail below.

Marjon had given a high profile to projects and follow-up from the beginning, even for the Art & Design teachers. Over the years the specifications laid down by the Ministry evolved to give added stress to these distinctive features. The innovation project which participants were to develop for implementation within their own institution on return to Chile was defined more tightly and given a higher profile. From 2001 host institutions were required in their proposals to spell out a system for monitoring the implementation of projects, and in 2002 this became a follow-up component, which was to include a visit to Chile.

About the same time the Ministry of Education began to encourage the creation of local networks. Groups of teachers would meet face to face on a regular basis to share ideas and collaborate on issues of mutual concern. The networks gradually took on the additional role of support groups as more and more of their

members had had the experience of implementing projects in their classrooms and were able to help and advise those who found themselves in the same situation.

On a course lasting eight weeks there is time for settling in, building up a sense of community among the participants, travel and socialising, as well as providing substantial input on language and methodology, with time left over for focusing on designing projects.

By 2003, when the course had shrunk to four weeks, things were more hectic from day one. Course strands had to be pared down to give proportionately more attention to project design and development. Consequently the balance shifted away from course input towards course output, from content to planning, and from training to follow-up. The focus for the participants shifted away from present experience in Britain to future experience in Chile, and they were forced out of any remaining view of themselves as passive recipients. Amidst these shifts the project became not just the outcome, but the central element of the course.

The *Pasantía* was remodelled in 2005 to include an extra orientation week in Santiago attended by the Marjon coordinator. This had a positive effect on group bonding and made it easier for participants to settle in quickly on arrival in the UK.

Designing projects

A good project aims to enhance the quality of the student learning experience by taking issue with some difficulty or deficiency of the local school or classroom context. The most popular topics chosen over the years have been:

- Learning English through songs or drama
- Creating an English resources room or website
- Motivation as a tool to learning
- Developing materials for technical English

Participants know in advance about the requirement to develop a project, and in many cases they have discussed it with their head teachers and colleagues. Some teachers bring projects on which they have already started working, and some arrive in Britain with project ideas which may have been imposed upon them, but others only begin to think seriously about their project on arrival.

We have to get the participants focused on their projects as quickly as possible, so in the early stages of the course we negotiate individual topics and create small groups of teachers whose projects have common features. The reasons for doing this are both pragmatic and idealistic. Firstly we need to allocate tutors to groups of teachers for tutorials, as one-to-one tutorials are unrealistic with a group of up to 30 participants. We also need to make the most of the time available for presentations at the end of the course by teaming up individuals to present together.

More idealistically, we aim to discourage any preference for working alone, instead persuading teachers to look for similarities with other projects and affinities with other participants. The “multiplying effect” that the Ministry is looking for is unlikely to be achieved by individuals who don’t like working with others. Each group then becomes a mutual support cell, both during the preparation of the projects in Britain and at the implementation stage back in Chile. Predictably, some groups bond more easily than others. Most of these

alliances survive the course in Britain and - with the right fit between projects and their implementers - some flourish, though insurmountable differences can occasionally occur, and individuals go their own way.

We can't expect fully-fledged action plans to emerge whole from a four-week gestation period, so the project presentations are really a statement of intention. Teachers set out the common ground within their group and explain why they have chosen their project topic and how they hope to implement it within their own schools, all within 20 or 30 minutes per group.

Prior to the course in Plymouth, few teachers have had training in managing projects, and inevitably the first ideas are seldom the best. As a framework to get them thinking about what might work in their own context we introduce them to the **SMART** criteria (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, **T**imebound) which are widely used in project design.

a. Specific

Making your project specific means thinking through the detail of what you can hope to implement by yourself, how you are going to implement it, and what sequence of activities you propose to carry you towards your outcomes. Most projects start large and vague, and course tutorials are often about sharpening the focus and cutting down to size.

b. Measurable

You need to define measurable outcomes for your project in order to know whether you have achieved them or not. A project aimed at improving pupils' reading skills, for example, would need to assess those skills in isolation in order to show that any improvements are a result of the project.

c. Achievable

Are all the factors in place? Are there any preconditions for success? Do you have access to the resources needed for your project? The most important resources are time (a reduction in teaching hours), space (a room may be needed), learning and teaching materials, and of course money.

d. Relevant

Your project needs to be relevant to your context, which includes the syllabus and the broader outcomes of the education system, the aspirations of your pupils, their parents and the school community. An example of a relevant project is one involving cross-curricular links to other subjects, or developing materials for vocational students.

e. Timebound

The project should be broken down into clear stages with a deadline for each. You should plan for a twelve-month period, which we regard as a logical and manageable period in a school system, though some projects are completed before that and many take longer. Setting staged targets also allows you to monitor progress.

What happens next

It has been said, most memorably by John Lennon, that "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans". At the end of the course the teachers leave Marjon and return home with their project designs, varying degrees of confidence and inspiration, and a burgeoning sense of group identity which geography is about to put to the test.

We can imagine they are greeted warmly by their colleagues, who are only too pleased to hand their classes back to them. Soon it is the summer holidays, and classes are over until the end of February. When the new school year begins other priorities may seem more pressing than the project dreamed up in Britain three months before.

Implementing a project is the true test of how well it has been designed, though even the best projects are likely to bend and buckle under the impact of reality. Circumstances vary considerably, but some teachers have complained that they are expected to carry out their projects without any allocation of time to do so, and without adequate support or interest from their head teacher or colleagues.

The teachers with the strongest sense of commitment or confidence are those who are most likely to achieve something worthwhile from implementing their projects. But the programme's success does not depend merely on strength of character.

Successes and failures

Nadina's project, the first of many of its kind, consisted of creating a file of ESP materials for use at the third level of professional and technical schools in two suburbs of Santiago. She and Myriam, a teacher in another school, developed the materials around themes of general interest, but the objectives, content, activities and assessment procedures were adapted to the specialities of each school, which in Nadina's case were telecommunications, chemistry, electronics and administration. Myriam's materials were finally published in 2006.

One of the teachers I was able to visit as part of our follow-up, Paulina, was based at a semi-private Catholic school in the south of the country. From her senior English classes she had drawn together a group of 16 volunteer "monitors" who once a week travelled to a rural primary school half an hour's drive away to teach English to the 52 children there. This was the only English tuition that the children received.

Paulina's project was very interesting because of the different levels at which it worked. It provided a little English learning for pupils who would otherwise get none. The monitor students had the experience of teaching English as well as learning it, and Paulina was responsible for training as well as teaching her students. The project also fitted the mission of the school and therefore had the clear support of the head teacher. It is easily copiable and transferable, and there is a shortage of English teachers in rural schools up and down the country.

Not all projects have been as successful or innovative. Laura, living a thousand miles to the north of Paulina, was working in two rural schools on the same project. She found her students less motivated to work as monitors, and with up to 45 pupils per class they faced discipline problems. The project was discontinued.

Two projects to create English resource rooms in the same city suffered diametrically-opposed fates: one was achieved within a matter of weeks because there were no obstacles, and the other never got started because the room was no longer available. Nadina's materials development project flourished in part because her head teacher gave her a teaching reduction of three hours a week, but others were not so fortunate in obtaining the support they needed.

Keeping in touch

Establishing a network, providing mutual support and encouraging the sharing of experiences and ideas are all important to the sustainability of projects.

Although we take care to create a network and stress the importance of keeping in touch with Marjon and with one another, every year some teachers “disappear” back into their schools and are never heard from again.

In 1998 only one or two participants had e-mail addresses, but by 2003 they all had them before arriving in Britain and were nearly all familiar with the internet. We were able to exploit this advance in technology (and technological awareness among participants) and encourage the use of e-mail as the preferred means of communication, with Marjon and with each other back in Chile. E-mail is the ideal professional tool: fast and cheap, informal and not intrusive. Not all participants had computers at home, however, and many only had limited access to a shared computer at school. This made regular contact difficult, especially during school holidays.

Other means of contact include telephone and face-to-face, fax and – *in extremis* – snail mail. None have been used with anything like the frequency of e-mail. Other valuable forms of professional communication exist - workshops, conferences and writing articles for professional journals – and teachers have to be encouraged to use them. The 2002 and 2004 follow-up visits were held to coincide with the IATEFL Chile conference, giving many their first taste of a national professional forum.

We moved from a shared list of e-mail addresses to a webpage on Yahoo!® Groups, and in 2003 a shared area was created in the interactive zone of the Marjon International website. Access to the zone (by password) allowed participants to read and post messages and project updates. However the zone was used most frequently when planning my follow-up visit, and thereafter the postings petered out, thus demonstrating that technology is invaluable in facilitating communication, but communication is likely to happen only when participants are motivated to stay in touch with one another.

Following up

The use of e-mail underpins one element of Marjon’s follow-up strategy: e-mail support from the coordinator is constantly available. In turn teachers are asked to provide periodic updates on project progress. The quality and quantity of these reports has gradually improved, as teachers have gone home with projects which match the SMART criteria more closely – a reflection of a clearer grasp by teachers (and by Marjon tutors) of the realities of their situation.

The second element is a visit to Chile for meetings with Ministry officials, teachers and visits to a small number of individual schools to observe teachers in their own professional contexts, and to meet their head teachers, colleagues and pupils.

Teachers who have kept in touch and provided updates on their projects, and those who have developed their projects beyond their original plan and established links with other schools or projects, are more likely to be visited than those who haven’t. Inevitably schools in the Santiago area are easier to get to, but I have also travelled to provincial cities – Valparaíso on the coast, north to La Serena, and south as far as Puerto Varas – visiting two or more schools in each

city. Teachers are invited to lobby for visits, which means that struggling projects may be visited as well as more successful ones.

The visits help to gain a better understanding of the varied reality of Chilean teachers, and how their projects work in their context. Demonstrating interest in the progress of a project by meeting colleagues, students and head teachers not only gives a moral boost to the teacher but also underlines the crucial nature of professional relationships to the viability of projects.

When the programme began the role of the Ministry in Santiago consisted primarily in the scrutiny of course proposals from overseas institutions and the processing of applications from teachers. The appointment in 2000 of a national supervisor responsible for follow-up has helped to some degree to shift the focus away from what happens *before* and *during* the programmes and place equal emphasis on what happens *afterwards*.

Long-term impact

To get a snapshot of the long term impact two or three years after the training in Britain, I sent out an electronic questionnaire to all 45 teachers from the 2000 and 2001 courses. 14 sent back responses, half from each year.

From about 10 more I got an instant reply saying the message was not deliverable ("mailbox no longer valid" or "mailbox full"). The other 21 did not respond, perhaps through pressures of work, insufficient motivation, technological failure or infrequent checking of their e-mail. These figures already tell us something about the long-term relevance of the programme. Despite the modest size of the sample and allowing for the likelihood that those who did respond were more favourably disposed to the programme in any case, a few interesting points nevertheless arose:

Professional development

All felt that the *Pasantía* had contributed "a lot" to their professional development, though few gave clear reasons why or how. The most eloquent response was "the ability to get psychologically closer to my students, especially the ones with more difficulty to learn". Over half reported increased participation in professional activities outside the school (such as workshops, regional meetings and conferences) since the *Pasantía*.

81% said their English improved "a lot", with nearly all citing either speaking, listening or both as the main area of improvement. The most positive aspects of the UK course were contact with native speakers (6 responses) and exposure to British culture (4 responses).

Networking

In the previous twelve months 70% of teachers had had no face-to-face contact at all with other teachers. Telephone contact appeared to be minimal: only one teacher had phoned more than two others in this time. 60% had been in e-mail contact with more than three other members of their cohort, but only 12% knew more than five teachers from other Chilean cohorts at Marjon. These figures point to relatively little networking beyond the cohort, though steps taken by the Ministry (such as the creation of local networks and the increase in organised workshops) have given recent cohorts more opportunities to keep in touch.

Success of the programme

Respondents were asked to assess the success of the Ministry programme, and to suggest changes the Ministry could make to the programme. More than three out of four described the programme as successful, but there was a long list of suggested amendments. Predictably the most common responses were “more time in the UK”, and “more time for implementation within schools” (each with 3 responses), “more money”, and “official recognition of the training”, i.e. in the form of a salary increment (each 2 responses), “more Ministry-organised meetings for the exchange of information, checking up on project progress, and cascading training”.

Some unforeseen developments have arisen from the projects. Nadina and Myriam became involved in a project giving support to all the English teachers working in the schools of their municipalities at primary and secondary level. They were invited to take part in a follow-up project to find out what happened to teachers returning from overseas training, and in workshops to local primary teachers were able to pass on some aspects of the training they had received.

With financial support from their local authority, two Marjon course participants from La Serena established an English network, providing support for teachers in rural schools.

One teacher has set up a webcam link between her students in Chile and a class of English language students at Marjon. The students have quickly gained in confidence and have developed some valuable skills in conversation management.

Other gains are equally significant though more difficult to quantify. “The head teacher of one of the schools where I work once told me she perceived me positively different and better,” wrote Victoria.

From time to time teachers still write and tell me their news – a promotion, a new responsibility, participation in their local network, the development of new classroom activities that have motivated and excited their students – and it is gratifying to see how they themselves trace back the changes in themselves to their training at Marjon.

Conclusions

Based not only on the results of the questionnaire, but also on other formal and informal contact with participants during and after their training, I would like to draw some tentative conclusions:

On a shorter training course there is a strong case for placing greater emphasis on developing project design and management skills, arguably at the expense of input in the areas of language awareness, British life and culture, and even professional development.

The programme has had some success in overcoming individualism and developing a network mentality amongst participants. Communication amongst themselves and with Marjon has improved over the years. In an individualistic culture the benefits of the programme may still appear to accrue to the individual teacher. More can be done by all involved to strengthen a sense of responsibility for sharing the benefits of the training.

The most successful projects depend on the coincidence of a number of key factors, some outside the immediate control of the teacher. These include tangible and moral support from head teacher, students and colleagues (especially those who have also received training overseas on the same programme), a well-conceived project design and a determination to see it through in the face of adversity. Sustained enthusiasm is key: if a teacher feels her project is going well we feel that is sufficient indication of success.

The support of local, regional and national education authorities in Chile is essential if the system is to gain full benefit from the efforts of individual teachers. These include ongoing mentoring and monitoring, further training in project implementation, overseeing and providing material support for self-help groups, broadcasting the achievements of teachers and sharing their expertise through meetings, workshops and seminars. The fact that many of these things have started to happen since the Pasantía was introduced are perhaps the most significant and sustainable achievements of the programme.

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