

Gambles & gains

An internship in Reading, UK

S. (SOPHIE) SLAATS

RMA Linguistics, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands.



Sophie went to the University of Reading for an internship on L3-acquisition and language transfer.

“Towards the end of my internship, I realized I had gained a lot. [...] This internship had given me things I had not expected!”

Last November I took the train to England. I was going for a 10-week internship in the Psycho- and Neurolinguistics Lab at the University of Reading. I had only been to the United Kingdom once before, a long time ago, and I had never heard of Reading. Logically, it was a bit of a gamble. Still, I was enthusiastic, and rightly so: it was a great experience. In this brief article I hope to show that it is not necessary to have an explicit idea of your favourite field within linguistics to make your internship a success.

LOOKING FOR AN INTERNSHIP: THE PROCESS

For a long time, what my internship would look like was everything but clear. At the start of my search, I knew I wanted to go abroad, but I did not know where; and, even more importantly, I did not know in which subfield of linguistics I wanted to end up. Of course, to be able to look for and choose an internship, these things are quite important to know. I spent a lot of time thinking about in which direction (physically and linguistically) I wanted to go. After months, however, I was still not sure, so I decided to use my internship to get skilled in a neuroimaging methodology. This could be useful for me in the future.

For practicality's sake, I then decided to look at language acquisition research. I got in touch with Luisa Meroni as my supervisor, and she had quite a few contacts abroad. One of them was prof. Jason Rothman. His response to our e-mail was very positive, and he immediately outlined two possible projects I could work on. Both projects would allow me to learn to use EEG. His kindness convinced me: Reading was where I

would go. This is how I ended up working as a research assistant on a project about the acquisition of a third language (L3-acquisition).

TOPIC, WORK, AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the University of Reading I worked within the Psycho- and Neurolinguistics Lab. The project was (is) focused on determining what happens right after the first exposure to the L3 in terms of *transfer*, which is the 'copying' of grammatical representations from a previously known language to the *interlanguage*, the developing L3. This topic has been studied extensively from an L2-perspective: does the L1 transfer or not? The difference in L3-acquisition is that there are two possible sources of transfer: both the L1 and the L2. Now the question is: does one of them transfer holistically, and if so: which one, or do both of them form potential sources of transfer for specific features? The project uses an artificial grammar to simulate L3-acquisition, and monitors participants' responses to the grammar. This monitoring is done with EEG and a grammaticality judgement task.

Let it be clear that this question and setup were not things I thought of. It was a pre-existing project, and my role in it was not fixed from the beginning. Upon arrival, my supervisors told me to read all the materials and e-mails that had been written throughout the process. Doing this made it obvious to me what needed to be done, so I created my own work. Although I talked to my supervisors several times each week, I was given a lot of freedom and responsibility in this process. This eventually led to me designing a major part of the stimuli and building the whole experiment in the presentation software. In the meantime, I used some time to orientate in the field of psycho- and neurolinguistics: I witnessed fMRI-scans, attended a lot of talks, practiced the use of EEG-caps, and even went to Oxford to meet with a professor I saw at one of the talks.

Towards the end of my internship, I realized I had gained a lot. In terms of knowledge and skills, I found that I was able to create an experiment and test participants with EEG (!); in terms of ideas and goals, I understood that I was most interested in the neural aspect of language acquisition; and, finally, in terms of network, I met many amazing researchers: PhD-students and professors alike, from different areas within the field of psycho- and neurolinguistics. This internship had given me things I had not expected!

If it was not clear enough yet, the moral of this story is this. It may seem a difficult task to find an internship abroad if you are not sure of what you want to do, but I recommend you to try it anyway. Just pick something. I did not have the slightest idea about what I wanted to do or where I wanted to be before departure, so taking the train to England was indeed a gamble. My time in the new (research) environment, however, has helped me tremendously in forming my own ideas and interests; I gambled, and I gained. ■