

TEFE CASE STUDIES

The positive impact of internationalisation activities on the employability of young people as well as on their personal and professional growth cannot be overstated. Over the course of the three-year project, we asked pre-service teachers, NQTs, and teacher mentors what impact internationalisation activities, in general, had on them and how TEFE, in particular, influenced them. To gather this information, we created an online form of questions using the TEFE Framework as its foundation. Thus, it has three sections, each asking about various events and activities they participated in internationally and how that related to the three TEFE competences, ICC, PTCL, and GCC. All participants were requested to fill out the form, with far more student teachers responding than teacher mentors.

Based on the depth of their responses, these twelve were chosen to represent the dozens more who participated in the ISTs and ISPs from the five EU TEFE partners. Where responses were unclear, respondents were requested to clarify via email. These are their stories, in narrative form. Some names have been changed as requested but most of these TEFE student teachers and teacher mentors wanted their real names used. More stories are available on the TEFE website.

More than inspiration, these narratives are intended to be used for critical reading, discussion, and reflective activities in preparation for ITP. They also testify to the power of internationalisation on the lives of teachers of English.



TEFE STUDENT TEACHERS

Petra (Czechia)

Petra is a 25-year-old university student in her final year of an MA ELT programme in the Czech Republic. She has been teaching English and Czech for a language school and tutoring privately for three years and, as a student teacher, she taught under the supervision of a mentor in a primary and lower secondary school in Spain for 3 months this past winter.

Petra's intercultural and international experiences include holidays in Croatia and Italy and rare visits to relatives outside the Czech Republic when she was a child. She has since travelled to many other EU countries and, when she was 21, she interned at the tourism office of the Czech Embassy in London for three and half months. She still enjoys communicating with British friends she met through others prior to London or while there.

Petra has *"always been in awe of other cultures"* but admits that she never gave her own culture a thought when she was a child on family holidays in other countries. As she grew older, her curiosity led her to travel as much as she could and all that changed: *"With that and the obvious privilege of knowing English, I can with certainty say that my perception of my culture has changed rapidly."* She now has a more critical perspective and can identify not only the differences between her culture and another, but she is also able to identify those things in her culture which other cultures might consider *"unlovable"*. Petra also says she learned the importance of cultural differences in shaping individuals' communication styles, decision-making processes, and problem-solving approaches. She has noticed how individuals from different cultures prioritize either collectivism or individualism, and how communication styles vary from direct and assertive to indirect and polite. *"An individual's cultural background can significantly shape their thinking, values, and behaviour,"* she says, *"which is why it's important to recognize and appreciate cultural differences."*

Petra is convinced that ICC should be part of every language classroom, as students need to *"be made aware of the cultural differences between their own culture and the culture associated with the language they are learning."* But she has come to the conclusion that only teaching country facts is not enough: *"Students should be encouraged to develop empathy for people from different cultures. This can involve exposing learners to different cultural perspectives, encouraging them to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases, and teaching them to recognize and respect the perspectives of others. It also involves developing the ability to adapt expectations and communication styles to different cultural contexts."* Based on her own intercultural experiences, she believes that the best way to achieve that is international experience: most influential factor influencing a person's ICC: *"If there were a scale of how different factors influence one's ICC, international experience would be on the top position."* If she is unable to provide that for her future learners, she now knows how to improvise focusing on various competences while using a variety of authentic materials and techniques.

Petra learned a lot about teaching, the teaching profession, and school culture while doing her student teaching in Spain. She found teachers and students more open-minded, working in tandem and accepting of her from the outset. In addition, although she has always thought CPD important, she was motivated to be even more involved by the keen interest of the Spanish teachers in such training. And finally, she became more open and receptive to feedback, even on a personal level while learning to work together with her mentor teacher.



Petra's intercultural and international experiences have uniquely equipped her to address cultural differences in the classroom as well as work in a group with diverse members. As a Czech student teacher in Spain, she has learned to be mindful of the diversity of students and what steps can be taken to ensure that all students feel heard and valued, including creating opportunities for students to share their unique perspectives and experiences, encouraging respectful and open dialogue, and addressing any instances of discrimination or bias. This also entails providing a safe space in which that open and honest communication can be facilitated, to the benefit of all involved.

Petra has gained valuable experience, knowledge, and skills through her intercultural and international experiences, including her student teaching in Spain. Apart from developing a deeper understanding of a range of perspectives and communication styles while working on diverse teams, she has also developed greater open-mindedness, adaptability, empathy, willingness to learn, critical thinking skills, cultural competence, language proficiency, and motivation to deepen her own learning. These attributes and values make Petra a strong candidate for a variety of job positions in the EU, not only in education.



Anna (Slovakia)

Anna is a 24-year-old university student in her final year of a Slovak MA teaching programme, majoring in teaching EFL and Hungarian, in Slovakia. As a part of her studies, she has completed several practicums, including her teaching practice for two months in September and October 2022 at a Slovak upper secondary grammar school where she taught L1 Hungarian learners. Outside of her studies, she has been teaching at a local language school and tutoring for over a year.

No matter where, Anna has always loved visiting other countries, learning about their history and culture, and considering what it might be like to live there. As a child she spent many summer holidays at children's camps in Hungary and, as an adult, has travelled to numerous other countries. She has participated in two TEFE Intensive Study Programmes: the first in Czechia in September 2021, the second in Germany in September 2022.

As a member of Slovakia's Hungarian minority, Anna's intercultural experience begins at home. Anna identifies culturally as Hungarian simply because her family has always been Hungarian and it was not her ancestors who moved, but rather the border. Yet, she still feels Slovak in some ways and believes that her bilingual Slovak-Hungarian community has its own culture that belongs to both nations equally. She recalls those summer camp experiences with her Hungarian Slovak friends as a child: *"we felt so exotic."* They taught their Hungarian peers some Slovak and compared their versions of Hungarian. She became the *"personal translator"* for a Slovak peer who spoke no Hungarian but kept going to the same summer camp in Hungary. It impacted her significantly: *"My norms and perception of norms are fundamentally different from [others'] norms, and this is more than ok, it's fascinating."*

Anna believes that seeing one's own behaviour in light of others' provides insight and *"healthy boundary-pushing"* and says that is what she experienced through TEFE. On the lighter side, she was amused to discover that some stereotypes she had learned were surprisingly accurate, e.g., Spanish lateness, German confidence, and Czech easygoingness. But she also recalls how the Slovak TEFE team were also treated differently by students from another TEFE-partner country because of their ethnicity: *"[They] knew that we were the Slovaks and were neutral towards us, but when they heard that there were Hungarians among us, they immediately got interested, as if they thought that the Slovaks weren't 'exclusive' enough."* It was a situation, she says, she has experienced numerous times in the reverse in Slovakia, with L1 Slovak speakers asking if she is an exchange student or when she moved to Slovakia but then becoming less interested in interaction once finding out she lives in Slovakia. She is no longer offended by such reactions but as a result of them, and her upbringing, she realises that most of one's attitudes are rooted in their own cultural norms and in how history is interpreted by different cultures: *"We identify the individual person with the 'whole nation' towards which we usually have some ill-founded (historically-based) attitudes."* But Anna is convinced that these attitudes can be changed through intercultural and international experiences, she says, *"it is possible to stretch one's thinking system [...] throughout our whole life."*

Anna has learned a lot about intercultural communication during her experiences. Naturally curious and outgoing, she has learned that even a simple conversation is a two-sided process, requiring conscious effort on the part of both participants to understand each other. It requires observing and adapting to others' communication norms. For example, if one's culture is more direct than the person's they are talking to, they need to adjust their speech, so they do not offend, and their partner needs to concentrate on being more to the point. *"We need to adapt [...] a little for the purpose of better understanding."*



Anna's intercultural experiences have had a significant impact on her approach to teaching. Apart from learning about other education systems, more than anything, she has realised that her students will be using the English she teaches them primarily to communicate with other non-native English speakers. Thus, she has decided to incorporate ICC topics and skills and elements of ELF into her lessons, building on her students' experiences, instead of focusing on typically-idealised British and American cultures and standard language varieties. In addition, the importance of CPD has become more and more apparent to her. She is much more motivated to seek it out now saying, *"I see the benefits, the personal gain and a strong sense of community that we all need so much."* Her involvement with TEFE has shown her how such training, in community, is always beneficial. Because of her desire to grow, she has every intention of continuing: *"There is so much more to learn and explore, it is possible only with the right amount of humility."*

"I am convinced that a teacher should be educated culturally, especially in the field of humanities. In Europe, nationality is a strong component of identity; it is often even a driving force for some, and if expanded with historical biases, it can lead to dangerous political agendas. That is why we should teach our students about the uniqueness and respect of 'others'. And I am sure the more genuine our experiences are, the more credible we are."





Viktoria (Poland)

Viktoria is a 24-year-old university student in her final year of an MA ELT programme in Poland. She has been tutoring or teaching English off and on for nine years and currently teaches part-time at a local language school.

Viktoria's intercultural and international experiences began at the age of 11, when her family immigrated from the United States to Poland. She has good memories of conversations with an Australian exchange student who spent a month at her school five years later. More recently, she participated in the first TEFE ISP in the Czech Republic in September 2021 and spent a week in the UK as a scholarship student at the Cambridge Summer School in 2022.

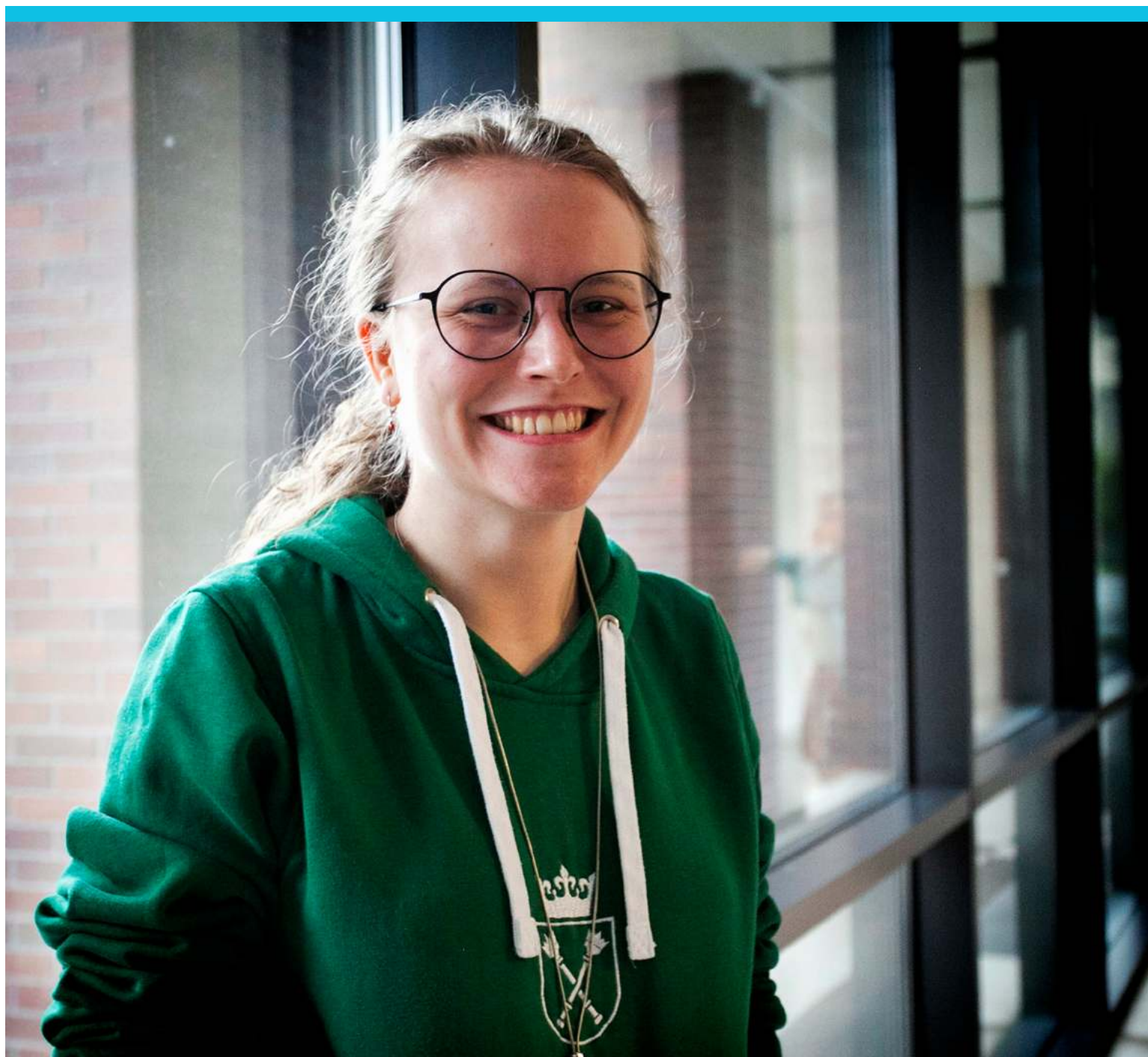
As a Third Culture Kid (TCK)¹, Viktoria has a unique perspective on her intercultural and international experiences. Growing up in the US surrounded by *"people who were of different skin colours, religions and cultures at elementary school,"* she does not remember a time when she was not aware that culture begets thinking, attitudes, and behaviour. But then, when she started school in Poland, she was bullied by her classmates for her weak Polish language skills and inability to communicate well. In an effort to include her, her teachers *"overcompensated"* by favouring her she says, having the opposite effect and making the situation worse. These experiences as a child, and other intercultural experiences since then, have strengthened her conviction that teaching and learning about diverse cultures is a crucial part of education, *"as important as learning English"*. Already as a child, she knew this: *"As a future teacher, I realized how important it is to teach children about other cultures and being kind to those of different cultures."* That is something she also applies to herself as she actively learns about the geography and history of other cultures, especially those not in the curriculum. And engaging other cultures has tempered her perception of Polish culture, one which she now views as her own. *"I try to be more open-minded when I see different cultural practices,"* she says, *"focusing less on judgement and more on understanding and curiosity."*

Interacting with others outside her own culture has taught Viktoria several things about teaching, the teaching profession, and communicating well with others. Firstly, her approach to teaching has been influenced, with her being more patient and open-minded, she says. In addition, Viktoria has learned that CPD is a *"never-ending process,"* one she is eager to continue even after her studies. And as she invests into others, she has also learned that maintaining her own wellbeing and that of others is important. This became clear to her while volunteering at an afterschool programme for children from underprivileged households: *"helping others learn require[s] me to take good care of myself and [...] be kind to others because often, students (and work colleagues) are going through invisible struggles."* Moreover, as a communicator, she has become a better and more willing listener because she is more and more aware of how much she does not know. She believes this allows her to participate in a discussion to the full and avoid unnecessary conflict. And finally, she says she has learned to adjust her language in order to overcome any communication barriers by using *"more 'universal' version of English."*

¹The concept "Third Culture Kid", aka TCK, refers to a person who has spent a significant part of their formative years (usually up to age 18) living outside their parents' culture due to their parents' work or other reasons (cf. Useem and Useem, 1963; Pollock and Van Reken, 2009). TCKs often develop a unique cultural identity that is a blend of their parents' culture and the culture of the country they grew up in. They are called "Third Culture" because their cultural identity is neither fully their parents' culture (the "first culture") nor the culture of the country they lived in (the "second culture"). TCKs often have diverse and enriching life experiences, but they may also face challenges related to identity, a sense of belonging, and adjusting to new environments. They tend to be adaptable, culturally aware, and capable of bridging different cultures, making them valuable contributors in global and intercultural contexts.

Victoria's intercultural experiences have helped her to further GCC and implement some of its principles into her teaching and community. In her teaching, she uses current events from other countries and cultures as a point of interest to promote language learning. When dealing with learners and their errors, she encourages self-correction by creating a safe space, free from ridicule, and using scaffolding. She is now also considering taking on a leadership position in her faculty's volunteer programme which offers EFL to those in difficult situations, like hospitalisation or poverty. More than anything, Viktoria says, *"I believe [my intercultural experience] has made me more open-minded [...and] encouraged me [to teach], because I realized how many doors teaching English can open"*.

The skills that Viktoria has gained from her intercultural experiences – from her open-mindedness and empathy to her intercultural communication skills and her belief in the value of CPD – qualify her for numerous jobs across the EU, both inside and outside education.

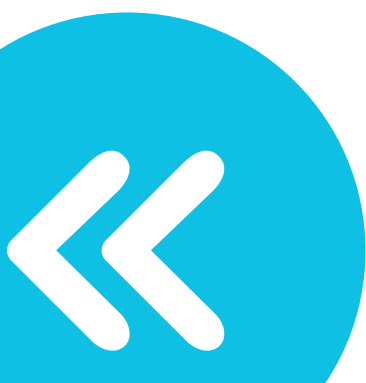


Paula (Spain)

Paula is a student of English in a BA primary education programme in Spain. She participated in the TEFE Intensive Student Programme in Germany in September 2022.

Paula's intercultural TEFE experience taught her a lot about teaching and the teaching profession and how different cultures approach it. Although she was "*shocked*" to discover how demanding, different, and difficult it is to become an English teacher in Bavaria, she says she learned a lot of practical things she can apply later when she teaches. From observing English lessons in a German primary school, she learned how to apply classroom management techniques and how to deal with students and their problems. From a session with a German teacher educator, she says she learned how to recognize and use different skills needed for teaching and, maybe more importantly, "*what to do in the classroom, when, how and why*". In another practical session with a Slovak teacher educator, she learned how to develop intercultural communicative competences in English language lessons using various activities. And then, working in her transnational group, she learned that other cultures have varying views on lesson planning. Listening to each other and negotiating through those differences, and then learning to incorporate feedback from a TEFE staff member to improve their lesson plan was something Paula found particularly helpful.

Paula's intercultural and international experience in TEFE have opened her up to new possibilities. It has provided her with qualities that future employers are looking for, among them adaptability, a willingness to learn, problem-solving skills, communication skills, teamwork, and the ability to receive and incorporate feedback.







TEFE TEACHER MENTORS

Monika (Germany)

Monika is a 43-year-old, full-time teacher with 20 years of experience at the lower secondary level in Germany. Aside from EFL, she also teaches her pupils other subjects, such as German, Maths, and History.

Most of Monika's intercultural and international experiences have been limited to spending her holidays in either Austria or Italy. However, she has had non-German pupils in her class, most recently a Hungarian child. This past winter, Monika also mentored a Spanish TEFE exchange student for their three-month student teaching practice.

The intercultural experience of mentoring the Spanish student teacher had a significantly positive impact on Monika and her pupils. Being open to new experiences and cultures, Monika welcomed the opportunity to have the student teacher in her classroom, despite having few students from other countries in the past. Monika and her pupils were able to adjust to the situation smoothly, with Monika noting that her own English has improved due to having to communicate in English only with her mentee. The same was true for her pupils, as their language skills were stretched, and their cultural perspectives broadened. Monika's enthusiasm for the project and willingness to participate in the TEFE mentoring scheme "*again and again*" highlights the benefits of TEFE's objective to internationalise teaching practice.

Monika gained valuable insights about teaching and the teaching profession from her experience mentoring her Spanish student teacher, all of which benefitted her pupils' learning. Perhaps the most important was the collaboration: "*It was a great pleasure. We learned from each other. Teamwork: 2 teachers in class are perfect.*" She also realized the benefits of learning from a younger colleague who brought new perspectives and innovative ideas, such as online learning games and apps, into her lessons. And then she saw her pupils step up to the challenge as she encouraged them to use their minimal English to communicate with the student teacher. Their "*bravery*" is something that will stick with them for a long time, encouraging them to overcome other challenges. Overall, the opportunity allowed for all involved to learn from each other and grow, for Monika and her mentee, as educators, and for Monika's pupils as more confident individuals.



Jitka (Czechia)

Jitka is a 43-year-old, full-time teacher of English and Spanish at a secondary comprehensive school in Czechia. An experienced teacher of 15 years, outside of school, she also teaches Czech as a second language to non-Czechs, including a group of teenagers from Brazil, Mexico, the USA and Taiwan who are involved in a Rotary Club programme, and also EFL.

Jitka has had diverse international experiences related to teaching foreign languages since graduating from university 15 years ago. The first was a 10-day course for teachers of Spanish on Granada. A couple of years later, she was back in Spain but this time shadowing English language teachers in a secondary school for a week, observing and teaching a few lessons as well. Last summer, she spent two weeks participating in an Erasmus+ programme in Dublin, taking ELT courses on Irish culture, literature, politics, history, and ELT methodology. And finally, as a part of TEFE, Jitka hosted international student observations in her lessons in September of 2021 and mentored two Spanish TEFE exchange students for their three-month student teaching practicum this past winter.

While Jitka values respecting other people's views and ways of thinking, her intercultural experiences have helped her realize that culture can influence those beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. Despite her many trips, this really did not occur to her until last summer when, during a history lesson in Dublin, she noticed how the teacher's admiration for British culture resulted in them imitating everything British. While there, she also realized that her Austrian colleague had a different sense of humour to her own Czech humour. It did not bother her in any way; it was just different. At the same time, she found that she could more easily relate to her Polish colleagues' sense of humour and understanding of things. No matter the differences, she says, *"I am curious and always happy to meet new nationalities."* She particularly enjoys teaching the Rotary Club group of teenage international students, hearing their perspectives and opinions on everything from culture to politics.

Perhaps more than anything else, Jitka's intercultural experiences have influenced her professionally. What she particularly noticed were the differences, both positive and negative, between Czech and Spanish language lessons. While in Spain, she *"perceived Spanish people as very communicative but [...] they didn't practise speaking with students."* She found a similar attitude in language schools while there. She says of the shock, *"I realized I had done [sic] my job well [and] Czech students are provided [with a] good education."* It seems that previous to that experience, Jitka's perception of the Czech educational system, of which she is a part, was primarily negative. Having something to compare it with boosted her confidence as a teacher. At the same time, she discovered that language teachers in Spain have teaching assistants, something non-existent in Czechia. So, when the opportunity arose through a TEFE-inspired project this past winter, Jitka was happy to take on two Spanish students of English language teaching. While she mentored them as pre-service teachers, they helped her in lessons: *"They even helped with communication activities in class, so when I put students to groups, they also monitored their speaking or helped them with vocabulary."* In another situation in Dublin, Jitka learned the negative influence a teacher's attitude towards their students' learning can have on those students: *"I was quite disappointed that they didn't try to encourage us to explore their culture more, I mean some teachers, they simply didn't care what impression they would make on us."* This in turn led Jitka to reflect on her own learning and motivation as a teacher.



She recognizes the importance of intercultural competence in teaching and respecting other people's views and ways of thinking in everyday life, so she frequently engages her students in debates and role plays, using country facts, course books, and authentic materials to promote intercultural competence. Jitka finds working with people from diverse cultures enriching and believes her intercultural experiences have encouraged in her a deeper respect for colleagues. They have also deepened her love of learning and motivated her to invest into her own professional development – she is even considering joining a teachers' association.

Jitka's international and intercultural experience have provided her with skills most employers seek out. She is able to work effectively with people from different backgrounds and cultures and is respectful of other people's views and ways of thinking. Her strong sense of curiosity and love of learning mean she is always looking to expand her knowledge and experience new things, which makes her adaptable and able to take on new challenges. Jitka's skills and competences not only make her a more effective teacher but also a top candidate for positions in many fields.





Alaia (Spain)

Alaia, who has been teaching for 10 years, is a 36-year-old full-time teacher of English as a foreign language at an upper secondary state school in Spain.

Alaia has travelled widely, having visited Australia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Peru, the UK, and Denmark. Her first trip abroad was born out of the desire to “*have a different experience in an English-speaking country*”. So, at the age of 25, she spent six months with ‘WOOOFers’ from other European countries volunteering on organic farms around Glasgow, Scotland, in exchange for room and board. A year later, when her then-partner got a job in Ecuador, she spent a year teaching middle-school English at a middle school there. Six years ago, she accompanied a group of her students on a week-long trip to a partner school in Copenhagen, Denmark, as part of an exchange programme her school is a part of. And this last year, she mentored a Czech TEFE student teacher for their student teaching practice in at her school in Navarra.

Alaia’s interest in and openness towards other cultures has had a profound impact on her life. In fact, it was that passion that led her to choose to study English at university: “*English studies meant learning a new language, a new culture and an eagerness to relate to English speakers.*” Wherever she goes, she immerses herself in learning everything about that country. She feels that learning things about the culture first-hand helps her communicate well with others as well. She has found working on diverse teams enjoyable, learning how to interact with various personalities from different cultures and keeping in mind that people cannot be forced to change: “*We shouldn’t be afraid of sharing our ideas and points of view; however, it is true that you cannot always push someone to be what you would like them to be.*” Being aware of “*the strengths and weaknesses they may have*” allows a person to “*value the strengths more*” which in turn brings better “*understanding [of] the way in which they do things or the reasons why they act in a certain way.*” And “*having this background knowledge allows us to understand their difficulties or the points where we don’t see eye to eye*” resulting in true intercultural communicative competence.

Alaia is aware of culture’s influence on values and thinking as it is passed down from parent to child, school to students, and generation to generation. But during her stay in Guayaquil, Ecuador, she realised something that she would not have understood if she had not lived it.

Even if Ecuadorians and Spanish people share the same language, the use we make of it can be different in some situations. While in Spain the expression “en un momento/momentito” means that things are going to get done quickly, in Ecuador it means just the opposite. When I was first told this expression in Ecuador, I thought that I was going to get what I wanted very fast. However, it came as a complete surprise to me when I had to wait for longer than an hour to get what I was expecting. I felt really upset about this fact until I realized that they were doing things the right way and it was just me feeling upset, not understanding their way of behaving.

This has taught Alaia to not make assumptions when talking to others, whether from her own culture or another. She says she tries to keep an open mind and although some topics are still difficult, she has learned to listen. “*We all are different,*” she says, “*and can have different opinions on a given topic, but there’s always a lot to listen to and there’s usually a reason behind every act. That’s why it’s important to listen and then analyse the different views.*” She tells of one situation that arose when she met an international student with political views quite the opposite to her own: “*I listened, and I tried to understand her opinion. The most recent historical events of her country led her to see things in the way she explained so I was able to understand her a bit more.*”

As someone who loves teaching and wants to improve as a teacher, Alaia believes that her intercultural experiences also help her grow as a teacher, causing her to reflect on her own teaching, pushing her to innovate her teaching practice, and learn new things which she later implements in her lessons:

“International experiences always give you a new perspective of your own teaching methodologies. You get to see different ways of doing things and that encourages you to apply the positive ones in your teaching practice. It is also beneficial to see what your strengths are to maintain them as well as to become aware of what does not work so well in order to enhance it.”

The week at the Danish upper secondary school is a case in point. It also taught her to view her own culture differently. While she saw that some things were very different in Denmark – such as 90-minute blocks of two dynamic 40-minute lessons with active students, sitting in a U-shaped arrangement and responding in fluent English to the teacher’s questions, who could then easily determine their level of proficiency – she realised that other things were not. She had always held the view that “old-fashioned methodologies” which were sometimes used to teach subjects such as history or languages had to change. And that was her experience in Spain: “We were working hard to try to implement new methodologies [...] we’re trying to make the student the centre of attention, we are the makers of his/her learning experience.” But that was not what she observed in Denmark: “I was impressed to see [...] Danish teachers were not so concerned about this. Teachers led the most important role in the class while students listened. [And those] Danish teenagers seem to be more eager to listen to the teachers and maintain an interactive communication with them while in class.” It made her think how important students’ activity or behaviour is in the classroom. That made her consider her own students and their lack of activity: “Maybe, our students sometimes lack that ease to say what they think using a foreign language and give their opinions.” This capacity to reflect on and learn from her experiences and apply them to improve her teaching also enhances her employability in other professions.

Knowing how much she herself has benefited from her international and intercultural experiences, Alaia regularly incorporates knowledge about other places, podcasts, tutorials, and authentic materials into her lessons. Role plays that reflect culture, she admits, are enjoyed the most. But she believes that interacting with people from different countries is unique, enriching her students’ education more than anything else as it offers them opportunities to learn how other people think and what they value. Referring specifically to the TEFE student teachers, she says, “getting to know someone who made the decision to come to a foreign country and teach is very encouraging for them.” And she hopes that these interactions influence her students “to do the same in the future.”

Alaia’s intercultural experiences have equipped her for her profession and beyond in further ways. They have reinforced her commitment to democracy, justice, human rights, and the rule of law. The diverse nationalities and backgrounds in her classroom seem to make her proud of what can be accomplished together:

“Some of them came to this country looking for a better life and some of them really take advantage of the opportunity which they are given here. They work hard and I feel that they value the equal treatment and equal opportunities they are given. Both these students and their families are contributing to build a multicultural society where equality and inclusion become key concepts.”

She creates safe places for these students to grow in community saying, “In my classroom everybody is more than welcome to make mistakes if they are trying to work hard. I try to teach my students that making mistakes is a natural step of their learning process and we all make them.”

Alaia’s experiences outside her own culture have equipped her with employability skills and competences that many employers value today. She is not afraid to face new challenges believing she is adaptable to whatever comes her way. But today, her objective is to be a true educator: “I always hold an open attitude towards young learners and try to motivate them. I know I treat them with kindness, and this is one of the most valued attitudes I can offer them.”



Elise (Germany)

Elise is a 44-year-old, full-time primary school teacher in Germany, teaching pupils from numerous migration backgrounds. An experienced teacher of 20 years, she also teaches pre-service teachers at a state university.

Elise's intercultural and international experiences are varied. While in university, she was a teaching assistant at a secondary comprehensive school and a hotel and catering college in Northern Ireland for 8 months. More recently, she spent a week back in that country teaching German to primary school pupils as a part of a school partnership project. In between, she has spent holidays in countries from South Africa to Thailand. Elise was a TEFE project staff member for a year and a half and also hosted TEFE students for observations in her primary classroom during the Intensive Student Programme in September 2022.

Elise's interest in and perception of her own and others' cultures has grown over the years, providing her with skills and competences that she uses daily. Prior to her stay in Northern Ireland at the age of 22, she had seen other countries only as interesting holiday destinations but sharing a flat with other university students from Greece, Spain, France, and Canada helped her to see cultures in a different light. She also realised that if she could not and did not compare and contrast her own cultural background to other cultures, her own thinking, values and behaviour would not grow. She strongly believes that *"This is why we all need intercultural encounters: in order to question our own thinking, values and behaviour."* One thing she noticed and began to question was how *"Germans tend to be very direct which can lead to misunderstandings."* As a result, her perception of her own culture changed and she now tries to view it from a meta perspective, for instance *"how [the] kids with migration backgrounds [in my class] and their parents might feel about German traditions and culture."* At the same time, she views other cultures through a more faceted lens: *"I try to be more open-minded and see other cultures from several perspectives."* Elise is a firm believer in the importance of learning about a language's culture: *"Learning a language without learning about its culture is useless for enhancing mutual understanding in today's globalized world."* Consequently, she uses all kinds of authentic materials, cultural topics, and techniques in her lessons to teach her young learners' intercultural competence. Elise's ability to view her own culture from a meta perspective and to be open-minded towards other cultures not only makes her a better teacher but would make her an asset in any workplace that deals with a diverse customer base or a multicultural team. Her knowledge and understanding of different cultures which now help her to effectively communicate with students and parents from various migration backgrounds would also help her build rapport with clients in another setting.

Elise believes that her intercultural and international experiences have made her a better teacher: *"personal intercultural experiences definitely improve your teaching not only content-wise but also method-wise."* She also considers such experiences and school partnerships a part of her continuous professional development, not only to learn more about other school systems and observe best practice but to improve one's English language skills. She has also added to her feedback skills. In Northern Ireland, she observed that *"positive reinforcement was valued much higher than in Germany, [for instance] the kids were awarded special 'letters' during assembly every week, [and] every kid is good in something so everyone gets an award several times during the school year, e.g., for nice handwriting despite a broken arm."* Creating a positive learning environment is important to her and she admits that not giving the direct feedback commonly found in Germany but using the positive reinforcement she observed works – including feedback she receives. And what Elise learns elsewhere, she brings back to her colleagues, sharing new methods and ideas and encouraging them to also participate in international partnership schemes.

Elise's international experiences and the lessons she learns from them equip her for any profession that values cross-cultural communication, inclusivity, diversity, and a positive work environment. Her exposure to different teaching structures, methods, and techniques, as well as her knowledge of working with diverse students and diverse partner schools, can be particularly valuable in today's globalized world.



TEFE NQTs

Andrea (Slovakia)

Andrea is a 24-year-old full-time teacher of Biology (in English) and English as a Foreign Language in a secondary grammar school in Slovakia, where her students include Slovaks, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Austrians. Having graduated from a teaching education programme at a national university in June 2022, she has just entered her second year of full-time teaching in public education in Slovakia. Andrea is hoping to mentor future TEFE student teachers after getting some training in mentoring.

Apart from holidays in other EU countries, Andrea's intercultural and international experience is drawn primarily from two long stays in the US, both times due to her father's job. The first was for a year when Andrea was six and she attended first grade in an American elementary school. Roughly two years after returning to Slovakia, the family moved back to the US, this time for three years, and Andrea completed fourth through sixth grade of her schooling while there. Andrea was also one of the first students to participate in TEFE as a student teacher consultant during the first Intensive Staff Training in November of 2020.

Andrea believes that one's cultural background can affect their perceptions of their own and other cultures, as well as their worldview to a great extent, but that there are also other factors at play and that the end result varies from person to person. In her own case as a child, her intercultural experiences caused her perceptions and understanding of, and attitude towards her own Slovak culture to swing like a pendulum. She could identify differences, both positive and negative, between the two cultures and a bit later, felt that Slovak culture was *"poor and xenophobic"*.

When she returned to Slovakia, the pendulum moved, and she found herself defensive about US culture. As a TCK, Andrea experienced that *"dissonance between how I felt about other cultures and how some of my classmates felt"* and felt like *"a blend of two cultures"*. She has since grown to understand that it is *"less about the polar opposites and what's better here or there but more about how things from both cultures can blend to make a situation better."* Listening to others share their own perspectives and experiences *"humbles"* her, she says, and helps her understand that situations are often more complicated than they first appear and rarely straightforward. It is an attitude she seeks to facilitate and foster in her own classroom.

Andrea's first-hand experience as a pupil in the American education system has given her, she says, a unique perspective on how education can be done differently. Although she was too young at the time to realise how much it would influence her, she says that valuing others' work and intellectual property is the thing that has stuck with her from her US primary school experience and the value she is determined to pass on to her own students. More recently, she has been able to provide constructive insights on the proposed school reforms in Slovakia which include the teaching of science at the primary level for the first time. As a Slovak biology teacher who experienced a primary science class as a child in the US, Andrea is better able to analyse and understand how such a change can fit into the Slovak education system.



Andrea believes that intercultural experiences have taught her valuable lessons about feedback, reflection, teamwork, and effective communication. In the US, her knowledge and skills differed from those of her classmates because she came from elsewhere. As she has reflected on that since, she has become *“more aware of the need for feedback and reflection, and understanding that this process is helpful.”* Such reflections *“are put to good use”* when talking with colleagues to deal with a complex situation or solve a problem. And this is when she realises her experiences have taught her how to listen better and avoid conflict. *“It is sometimes difficult and maybe a little bit overwhelming because you might not understand everyone’s point of view at first and where they’re going with what they’re saying and everyone wants to chip in with their experience, but sometimes it’s important to listen and to hear what the people are saying and ask questions.”* This includes diverse groups where she says she learned that people can *“express [themselves] with respect towards the other person and with an understanding for where they’re coming from.”*

Andrea’s intercultural experience as a child have had an indelible impact on her global civic competence. Interacting with peers from all over the world who were facing various issues made her aware of the importance of equality, inclusion, fairness, and justice. As a teacher, providing a safe space for students is crucial for her as she remembers how she felt as a child, *“when there were situations where I felt judged and those feelings of shame stick with you”*. Moreover, she says her intercultural experience helped her build an open-minded approach towards teaching as a global practice. *“In other cultures, it might look different,”* she says, *“but we’re all basically trying to achieve similar things and connect with students and make them feel safe.”*

Andrea says that participating in intercultural and international activities have impacted her as a teacher: *“It has encouraged me to incorporate things from my experiences with people from various cultural backgrounds into my classroom; to be more observant of behaviour that may be perceived as xenophobic and try to deal with it; and to understand that teaching itself can be done in a different way since I have been able to compare my own experiences when I was a child.”*



Max (Slovakia/UK)

Max is a 29-year-old, full-time learning mentor at a college in England. Originally from Slovakia, he has taught learners at every level of education except university, either as a supply teacher or a teaching assistant, but still considers himself a novice teacher as he is only entering his second year of full-time employment in education. He is currently taking a Level 3 SEN Teaching Assistant course and continues to work towards qualified teacher status in the UK.

Max's first significant intercultural and international experience was during his bachelor studies in Slovakia when, at the age of 25, he spent a semester taking primary education courses at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia as part of the Erasmus+ programme. Two years later, also through the Erasmus programme, he spent a semester taking MA courses on ancient history at the University College London's Institute of Archaeology. Having completed his MA studies, Max moved to the United Kingdom in November of 2021 and, that month, also participated in the first TEF Intensive Staff Training which was held online due to pandemic restrictions.

Max's intercultural experiences have enabled him to broaden his understanding of different societies, their values and norms, and how they function. As a result, he has developed a strong awareness of how cultural biases can impact one's mindset and mental wellbeing. He recalls the first time he realised *"how much the negativity present in my own culture can influence personal mental well-being and willingness to pursue new challenges."* He had mentioned to a British friend that *"not a lot of students [aged 11-15] are particularly interested in what's going on in the classroom."* His friend's sharp response, challenging his attitude as conflicting with his chosen career path, stopped Max in his tracks. He realised what he had said *"wasn't even my own opinion or how I personally feel about teaching, but rather a package of negativity and discouragement I carry from discussions with my older colleagues in my home country."* The awareness he has gained has made him more receptive to different perspectives and adaptable to new challenges.

Max's exposure to different education systems has allowed him to appreciate the importance of professional development and professional standards. Based on his experiences, he has concluded that in competitive environments, competence and professionalism are highly valued, regardless of one's cultural background. *"Especially in large countries with multicultural populations, the only relevant factor in employment is competence and professionalism, as the competition is bigger. This competitive environment is something that pushes professional standards higher and ensures the quality of professionals in all fields of employment."* As a direct result, his desire to be professionally competent in his field has motivated him to pursue opportunities that offer him the chance to improve his skills and expertise.



Max's international experiences have grown him to the point where he says he is *"much more comfortable with my personal and professional life."* He has become more confident, proactive, and independent in professional settings. As an employee in another country, he has learned to navigate the legal and professional aspects of his position, availing himself of all the support available to him. Always curious about and open-minded, he says these experiences have also made him more adept at identifying what aspects of the other cultures he encounters are relevant for him to do his job well. As a member of a diverse team, he has also developed a greater understanding of various education systems and the importance of inclusion. Because of what he has already learned, Max believes that *"ICC should always be present in teaching, as intercultural experiences are not exclusive to travelling abroad"* and points out that even small nations like Slovakia have ethnic and language minorities. For Max, the significance of ICC is that it plays the *"vital role in maintaining healthy relationships and effective communication."*

Max's experiences have helped him become a better education practitioner by pinpointing the gaps in his own training and as well as allowed him to contribute to the collective knowledge at his workplace with experiences from his home country. His interpersonal skills have grown, and he is able to recognize the value diversity brings to any professional or personal discussion topic. He is more mindful and aware of his own choice of words and has developed a habit of strictly focusing on the problem at hand from a professional perspective. He says, *"My experiences have taught me to always to use appropriate, professional and inclusive language, as that is the only way to communicate effectively, regardless of whether the environment is diverse or not. Intercultural experiences help everyone realise the importance of decency and professionalism."*

Max's many intercultural experiences have made him more aware of global civic competence and the importance of its values. As a result, he has been able *"more able to adapt to different professional requirements and I'm more aware of implications of living in different cultures."* His experience managing diverse and inclusive classrooms, including collaborating on lesson plan adaptations for his SEN learners, further demonstrates his ability to not only work in multicultural settings but do so well in a diverse team. Additionally, Max's openness to learning about whatever new situation he enters and his recognition of the importance of CPD highlight his commitment to personal and professional growth.

Overall, Max's intercultural and international experiences have equipped him with skills and attitudes that are essential for success in today's multicultural workplaces.