

Breaking the Barriers



List of co-operating partners

The British Council Education and Training Group would like to take this opportunity to thank most warmly our partner organisations in 21 countries abroad. Their co-operation, commitment and enthusiasm have made the programme what it is today.

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| BELGIUM | Commissariat général aux Relations internationales de la Communauté française de Belgique |
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Foreword

This year we celebrate the centenary of a remarkable international institution. Over the past 100 years, the Language Assistants programme has broadened the horizons of millions of people, either as Assistants themselves, or as school students, to whom it has given the opportunity to learn at first hand about the languages and cultures of other countries.

When the programme started in 1905, the world was a different place. In the UK, old-age pensions and basic social security were still to be introduced. The suffragettes were only just starting the struggle for votes for women. Europe was beginning an arms race which would culminate in the tragedy of the First World War. Russia's tsarist regime was challenged by the Menshevik revolution. Much of the world was subjugated to the interests of the colonial powers.

The programme was in many ways a product of its times, but it was also visionary in its outlook, in the belief that a greater understanding of other languages would benefit international relationships.

Today, the programme has extended its reach well beyond Europe's shores to cover other continents. The selection of Assistants more broadly represents wider society than a century ago. The fact that it has outlasted empires and survived world wars and revolutions is a testimony to the power of the appetite of human beings to seek knowledge and understanding across frontiers and cultural divides.

I am sure you will join me in wishing the programme continued success in bringing benefits to many more millions of people in the years ahead.



Sir David Green KCMG
Director-General
British Council

1905
Albert Einstein proposes his
Special Theory of Relativity

1906
San Francisco earthquake

1907
Lumière brothers invent new
colour photography process

Preface

This short booklet has been produced to commemorate the centenary of the Language Assistants programme which saw the light of day for the first time in 1905. It is intended, above all, to highlight the achievements and successes of the programme from a UK perspective. The whole scheme is based on the notion of partnership and that is clearly evident not only from the way the programme operates at each of its different levels, but also from the testimony which we have received from a range of different sources.

What comes through very clearly throughout the booklet is the challenging but outstandingly rewarding experience offered to the Assistant – in whatever country she or he may be placed – in becoming an active and integrated member of society in another country over a substantial period of time. Greater facility in world travel in the last century may have encouraged visits to many different countries for a wide range of people but, as Jim Coleman, Professor of Language Learning and Teaching at the Open University, has observed: ‘With global tourism people consume the exotic – with the Language Assistants programme they must engage with it.’

The impact made on the Assistant is invariably matched by the contribution which the Assistant brings to the schools – a living, breathing and youthful representative of another culture who helps to develop in students not only more confidence and competence in language skills but also a greater understanding of how people from different countries think, feel and lead their lives. The tributes at the end of this booklet clearly recognise the unique role Assistants play.

It is this assimilation of the Assistant into a new culture which has led in an enormous number of instances to a real breaking down of barriers along with a deeper understanding and a genuine and long-lasting affection for the country concerned and, above all, for its inhabitants. It is essentially this dimension which we have tried to reflect and we hope that readers will be able to identify with at least some of the aspirations, experiences and – in many cases, life-changing – benefits which contributors have recognised as being directly linked to the Language Assistants programme.

We should like to thank very warmly all those who completed questionnaires, submitted written accounts of their experiences, sent photos, allowed themselves to be interviewed face to face or by telephone, and identified others who might be willing to contribute; we are grateful to everyone who responded so positively and enthusiastically to the idea of the creation of such a booklet which would revive fond recollections of their own experience, and encourage the next generation to follow in their footsteps.

Although it has not been possible to quote from all of the replies we have tried to encapsulate at least the flavour of all the responses sent to us. In so doing we have drawn a number of general conclusions based on the evidence presented and have endeavoured to epitomise these particular points by a selection of illustrative quotations. We hope that this will make the booklet something which not only tells a story but also strikes a chord!

David Rowles and Valerie Rowles

1908
Fourth modern Olympic Games held in London

1909
Louis Blériot flies the English Channel



Gareth Topp and Richard Girling, ELAs in Austria, 2004-05, sporting their Vienna marathon medals

1910
Marie Curie publishes treatise on radioactivity

Introduction

It is hard now to visualise the world of some 100 years ago in which the first few Language Assistants came from France and Prussia to help the children of the British elite perfect their spoken French and German. Yet ever since, young learners have been intrigued by these invariably friendly, sometimes nervous, and, for the lucky ones, inspiring embodiments of another culture.

The rationale for the original agreements is worth remembering today. In language teaching it was the time of the Great Reform, which put great emphasis on the spoken language (the 'direct method') and set itself against the 19th century grammar/translation approach to learning. The role of the new Language Assistants was therefore twofold:

- to expose learners to real ('authentic') language
- to aid their understanding of neighbouring countries and cultures.

Although the orthodoxies of language learning have changed, and changed again, these two objectives have remained constant at the centre of the Assistant's calling. Over the century the demands and priorities of language learning have altered, but the Language Assistant has always played this central role as an authentic cultural guide to the fledgling learner.

Within the curriculum languages have developed from being the rather restricted concern of educated gentlemen (and increasingly ladies) to something far more rooted in the educational experience of all children. Along with this change – the 'democratisation' of language learning – have come new challenges for Assistants, as they have had to adapt to new systems and cultures. How many of us can forget the

1911
Amundsen beats Scott to South Pole

perplexity of Danielle or Mansour, Yukka, Gudrun or José when faced with the mysteries of school uniforms and assembly, the unexplained hierarchies of the staffroom, or indeed the bizarre exigencies of GCSE oral practice? So too have our Davids, Rukhsanas and Sophias, who have made journeys in the opposite direction, been challenged by the eccentricities and unexpectedness of our neighbours and taken with them the many realities of our multi-layered UK culture.

In recent years such interchange has taken on a new dimension. As the world has grown smaller, the number of countries involved in the programme with the UK has increased from the original two to currently 21. The links are no longer just with our neighbours but with the world. Language Assistants have become a kind of avant-garde of something new – a generation which is comfortable with and capable of working across borders, the educators of a global society.

And what of these future educators? What can they expect? Certainly more change. There will be new challenges, not only in the number and range of learners and languages, but also in the nature of language learning itself. Already we can see a need for languages related to other subject areas and therefore a demand for Assistants from other disciplines. More immediately we can expect, both in this country and abroad, a significant increase in the number of Language Assistants in primary schools.

Despite this I believe that the essential characteristics of the Language Assistant will remain what they always have been since the inception of the programme – to transmit authentic language and inspire understanding of a real culture, even if that language and culture becomes more varied and complex.

1912
Titanic sunk by iceberg



Aurélie Marquer, French FLA in London, 2001-02

As we think back to the hopes and fears of those first Assistants, there is of course a rather sad irony afforded by hindsight. Just 10 or so years later many of them, along with their pupils, would have been caught up in the first great conflagration of the 20th century. Regrettably such conflict is not a thing of the past. I am, however, convinced that the underlying message of language learning is that the world is fundamentally a place of hope and that its people can understand each other in all their diversity. For 100 years young Language Assistants have been carrying that message – even to the most unpromising and reluctant learners. It is therefore fitting that we should dedicate this booklet to those Language Assistants of the past, to those of the present and those still to come.

Dr Lid King, National Director for Languages

1913
Suffragette Emily Davison throws herself under the King's horse at the Derby

Once upon a time ... how the Language Assistants programme began

Back in 1904, ministers in France and England were concerned about the education of their young people. Education was seen to be the key to improving the economic prosperity of the country and in particular there was dissatisfaction with modern language teaching in both countries. When an innovative proposal came from the French Government to the then English Board of Education to exchange Language Assistants between the two countries, it was swiftly agreed that the idea had merit and the following year a formal convention was concluded.

Shortly after, a similar agreement was made with the Prussian Government.

His Majesty's Government desire to express their warm sympathy with the proposals made in the Prussian Memorandum communicated on the 23rd of January last by Count Berustorff for the conclusion of an arrangement between this country and Prussia, similar to that already made with the French Ministry of Public Instruction.¹

The programme originally consisted of a secondment to schools of young, part-time teachers who would conduct reading and conversation lessons while continuing their own studies. Later, students, who were unqualified as teachers, joined the programme, most of them undergraduates who had completed two years' study at university.

The programme started on a modest basis. 58 English teachers (41 men and 17 women) were placed for the year 1904-05 in French schools. In that first year

there were also vacancies for six English Language Assistants in Prussia, who were not expected to exert themselves unduly.

The English Language Assistants in Prussia will be expected to hold conversation lessons with groups of scholars assigned to them by the Director, for periods not exceeding, on the average, two hours daily.²

Thought was given to how best to provide shelter and sustenance to the pioneering English Language Assistants.

The English Assistants shall receive at the Institution to which they are attached a suitable room, board, lighting and heating and household, but no personal washing.³

There were strong opinions on the key skills and competencies required of the aspirant Language Assistants.

They should be in good health, have a good and clear pronunciation, not too strongly marked dialectal peculiarities ...⁴

A report of the Board of Education in 1906 suggests that in spite of initial 'teething' difficulties, the scheme was considered a success.

It cannot be doubted that a year spent abroad in this way is of the greatest value to anyone intending to become a teacher of modern languages.⁵

Given the resounding success of the exchange programme, moves were made to expand and develop it over the ensuing years, despite its interruption by the two World Wars. As well as increasing the number of participants, and the number of countries involved (Spain joined in the significant year of 1936), policy development governing the requirements of Language Assistants became more involved and detailed.



John Cearney, ELA in France, 1961-62

1 (Memorandum from the Foreign Office 23rd March 1905)
2 (Memorandum from the Foreign Office 23rd March 1905)
3 (Memorandum relating to Exchange of Assistants English Board of Education 2nd October 1905)

4 (Memorandum from the Foreign Office 23rd March 1905)
5 (Report of the Board of Education – Scheme for Exchange of Teachers 1905-06)

1914
Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated

1915
Alexander Graham Bell makes first transcontinental telephone call

1916
Monet starts painting 'Water Lilies'

The following extracts are taken from a memorandum from the Ministry of Education on the interchange of teachers with overseas countries, 6th September 1956.

It will further assist in the allocation of Assistants if the Heads of boys' schools will indicate whether they would be prepared to accept a woman Assistant if a man is not available.

Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs) were encouraged, in this same memorandum, to participate in the general life of the schools where they were based.

The Assistants may be encouraged to take part in the games and sports of the school if they show any readiness or aptitude, but such participation should not be compulsory.

And, as the following extract from the Farnborough Grammar School Magazine, 'Al-Fa', in the summer of 1962 shows, some FLAs were enthusiastic about taking up this suggestion.

When my education at this school happened to grant me some hours of leisure, I was busy in gathering as many impressions of school life as possible. I was so successful in making new and thrilling experiences that cricketing and scoring ducks have become my favourite occupation.

Wilhelm Marquadt (German Assistant)

In Britain, the programme was administered by the Board of Education and then the Department of Education and Science until 1964, when it was taken on by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits & Exchanges (CBEVE) until 1992, when the Bureau was integrated into the British Council.

1917

Tsar Nicholas II abdicates

Until the mid 1970s there was a rapid annual increase in the number of Assistants participating in the programme, which peaked in 1973-74 at 4,578 FLAs.

The highest number of English Language Assistants (ELAs) serving abroad occurred in 1983-84, when 2,555 Assistants elected to take up the offer. However, in spite of a relative decline in numbers of students studying languages at university in recent years, numbers have remained constant with over 2,000 ELAs in 2004-05.

In the 1970s a Junior Assistants programme was introduced with France – 'Assistants à temps partiel'. This programme, which was later extended to Germany and Spain, enabled a limited number of school leavers to spend a period of six months from January to June, usually prior to going to university, in a foreign school as a support to language learning. This programme continues, on a limited basis, with Germany.

Although at the outset of the Assistants programme board and lodging only were payable, eventually it was clear that a level of payment for the Assistants was necessary to make the programme viable. As a guide to the increasing cost of living it is noted that in 1956-57, the rate of payment of FLAs was £350 over the whole period of appointment. 2005-06 sees an annual salary for FLAs of £6,240.

The support for Language Assistants over the years is probably the greatest change to the programme. ELAs and FLAs were given little or no guidance and administrative backup when they entered the programme in the early days. Now on- and offline documentation gives clear indications of what Assistants can expect and of the requirements their host institution will have of them.

1918

Armistice signed in Europe



The British Council co-operates with the Service Culturel of the French Embassy, the Consejería de Educación, the Goethe Institut, the Délégation Générale du Québec, the Japan Foundation and the Chinese Embassy, to provide training and induction for incoming FLAs, while their co-operating partners abroad provide excellent support and training for outgoing ELAs.

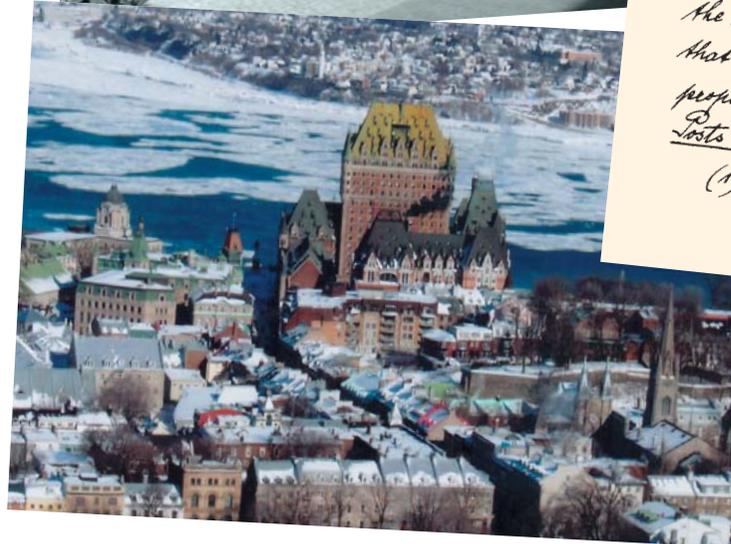
All FLAs arriving in the UK can benefit from the specialist teaching materials available online via the British Council's website, and many FLAs still have the opportunity to attend induction sessions organised by local authorities. Extensive information is also provided to modern foreign language teachers on how to make best use of their Language Assistant, through British Council documentation and CLT publications.

1919

Treaty of Versailles signed

Over the period of 100 years it is not surprising that the programme has on occasion faced setbacks. In the late 1970s for example, the number of FLA places available in the UK dropped by 20% as Local Education Authorities (LEAs) – at that time solely responsible for deciding how many FLAs to appoint to the authority – faced stringent cuts in overall funding allocations from national government. Similar problems arose due to budgetary pressures in the mid 1990s, by which time funding – and therefore the decision as to whether to appoint FLAs – had been delegated to individual schools. However, it is pleasing to report that since then numbers have continued to rise, with 2,665 FLAs in post in the centenary year.

The Language Assistants programme, 100 years of enchanting Assistants and school pupils all over the world, continues to thrive. In spite of the competition from other international opportunities and the changes in national education funding frameworks, both of which occasionally militate against the continuation of the programme, there seems to be no stopping it. 2004 saw the 50th anniversary of the programme with Austria, while co-operation with Switzerland reached the 55-year milestone in 2003. The Quebec programme celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and the EU Socrates Comenius Assistants programme, incorporating much of the very best practice of the Language Assistants programme, is 10 years old in 2005. This year we are pleased to welcome our first Assistants of Japanese and Urdu on the official programme. When you read the testimony of the many respondents to the Language Assistants centenary questionnaire in the following chapters, it is clear that the personal gains from a year as an Assistant continuously spill over into the collective good.



Memorandum.

His Majesty's Government desire to express their warm sympathy with the proposals made in the Russian Memorandum communicated on the 23rd of January last by Count Benckendorff for the conclusion of an arrangement between this country and Russia, similar to that already made with the French Ministry of Public Instruction, for the exchange of candidates for the posts of teachers of Modern Languages in the two countries.

The Board of Education to whom the matter has been referred, understand that the following are the conditions proposed by the Russian Government:

(1) Provision has been made in Germany for

1920
First meeting of
League of Nations

1921
First BCG vaccination

1922
First regular news broadcast made
from Marconi House in London

1923
Tutankhamun's tomb unsealed

The way we were – former English and Foreign Language Assistants tell their tales

The adventure begins

For many Assistants in time gone by, just getting to and from their placement required an intrepid attitude and not a little patience.

I travelled by train Leeds-London-Channel-Paris-Pau-Oloron and it took nearly 1.5 days to get there. I was the only English person for about 50 miles, apart from a rather eccentric Miss Marple figure of over 80, whose husband had been in the British Army in India and who drove like a maniac in a 2cv, and occasionally invited me to tea and cucumber sandwiches.
ELA in France, 1970s

As I came to England via Norway taking the boat from Bergen to Newcastle, the customs officer asked me at the port of entry:

'Do you have any presents for friends?'

'I haven't got any friends over here.'

'You soon will have friends in England.'

The worst thing was, after hitch-hiking down to Leicester, I found a note at the school that my trunk had been held at some seaport. So I went to school in my camping clothes. I had expected that there is a customs office, like in Germany, at all major railway stations.
German FLA in Leicester, 1955-56

It made the world bigger but it made it more welcoming.

French Canadian FLA in Wales, 1996-97

But fitting in during those first few days was not always easy.

One of the surprising moments was to be sent home by the Head on the second day and told that all teachers were supposed to wear a tie!
French FLA in Cambridge, 1973-75

1924
Lenin dies

1925
John Logie Baird creates
UK's first TV transmitter

1926
General Strike in the UK

1927
BBC broadcasts its first programme

My most memorable moment was the very first day of teaching at the Lycée. I turned up to my first BTS class (I had no idea what this was!), opened the door, looked in and closed it again – the class was full of 22/23-year-old males! I was terrified. I remember the sheer panic and wondering if I would get through it alive!
ELA in France, 2001-02

Remembering the good times

Many of the best times experienced by our former ELAs and FLAs were in the company of the teachers and students at their host institution.

I think the best experiences tended to revolve around the wonderfully enthusiastic way that the teachers and students at both schools embraced me and seemed unjaded by the fact that they were allocated a new wet-behind-the-ears Assistant each year. I felt very much integrated into school life.
ELA in France, 1997-98

But others revolved around the new lifestyles and social scenes that the host country presented to them.

During Vienna's Ball season, a small group of us (other ELAs) decided that we had to experience at least one Viennese ball in our lifetime. Obviously, ball gowns hadn't been a priority on our packing lists so the girls amongst us had no option but to make our own – out of rather lurid lining material! Having struggled with a very old treadle sewing machine (a museum piece) we eventually managed to turn out some vaguely passable dresses (providing the lights were dimmed) – and then realised that not one of us knew how to dance! Undeterred by this not insignificant fact, we set off for the ball amidst great excitement (and quite a lot of gin). The waltzes were far more fast and furious than any of us had ever imagined and not once, but twice, I landed



sprawling on my back in the middle of the dance floor, tripping up several other dancers in the process – my dancing career ended that night.
ELA in Austria, 1982-83

[Good moments] Almost too numerous to mention. On arrival at my bedsit I enquired about a shower. My landlady (who was also the proprietor of the café downstairs below my digs) told me there wasn't one, but that I could nip across the road in my dressing gown and use the public ones located underneath the theatre! Doing my washing in a bidet, where else? Riding my own Solex!
ELA in France, 1970-71

Discovered Marmite, cucumber sandwiches and cricket; blasted my eardrums with a few too many great rock concerts; got hooked on Devonshire cream teas; learnt how to block my gas meter with a spoon; collided my little Renault 4 with a double-decker bus and later with a police car on Bristol bus station roundabout; stayed with a great couple – I loved them and was sorry to leave!
French FLA in Bristol, 1972-73

Adventurous Assisting during the Great Depression

It was autumn 1934. I had graduated in French from Cardiff University, and completed my teacher training year, but in the Depression years teaching posts were very few and far between. I was unemployed and penniless, and went to the University employment office to inquire about jobs. They had just heard that the Lycée Pasteur in Besançon needed an English Assistant because the American girl initially appointed to the Lycée de Jeunes Filles had fled within days, proclaiming that 'no civilised person could be expected to work in those conditions'.

I wasn't so fussy, everything was hurried up, and in 10 days I was in the historic town in eastern France. The post was not paid: in fact once a month I had to go to the local police station to sign a statement that I was not earning any money. But I received board and lodging in return for teaching. My room was on the top floor of the old convent in the Rue des Écoles – the only single room. The surveillantes (students at Besançon University who looked after discipline in the Lycée) had to share in twos and threes. The girls slept in dormitories, with a room with washbasins and lavatories, and one small bedroom for the supervisor. The teachers simply taught: discipline wasn't their responsibility, and a teacher would wander quietly through absolute bedlam, while the surveillantes, who looked after the discipline, were always considered rather lower class. The Directrice, the Surveillante-Générale, and Madame l'Économe (in charge of financial affairs) all had their own suite of rooms.

My bedroom was just under the roof, and had a big window with a large sill on which one could sit and watch the birds. This was very popular with the other girls on sunny days, so I had plenty of company. Furniture was simple: a kitchen-type table and chair, a divan bed, and a large built-in cupboard with a rail for coat hangers – other clothes stayed in one's trunk in the room. There was a ewer, basin and slop pail. At eight, all the dormitories were locked, so no lavatories were available – hence the need for the slop pail. I don't know what would have happened if there had ever been a fire, nobody seemed to have thought of the possibility. The dormitories had washbasins (not available after eight), and there was a shower somewhere, but I never found it. Altogether a bit primitive, but the building was 200 years old even then. It was on the river bank so that when in the winter the snow in the mountains thawed, the river Doubs overflowed and flooded our cellars. The resident rats didn't like getting wet, so came upstairs. The lights in the rooms were flat against the ceiling, to stop people using kettles, but outside my door was an ordinary light bulb, so people used to climb on a chair and put their kettles on. One night there was a wild scream and water flew under my door – a girl going to put a kettle on had encountered a rat!

Breakfast was a bowl of milky coffee and bread rolls with a minute pack of butter. Lunch was a cooked meal, though I remember one rabbit stew when one of the surveillantes was put off by

finding a rabbit embryo on her plate. I saw it, but I was always so hungry I just ate mine anyway. At four in the afternoon one would go to the kitchen and get a roll and a chocolate bar – most of the girls didn't bother, but I had organised a small team to collect them and bring them to me. Dinner in the evening was quite a reasonable cooked meal, though the helpings were not large. People were expected to go out and buy anything else they wanted, which was fine if you had any money! You could never get an odd cup of coffee – the kitchen staff were sympathetic, but closely supervised.

At the Lycée, the Directrice introduced me to the teacher who led the English Department. She showed me the room where at certain times I had to be available to talk English to any girls who turned up, and that was it. The only thing the French people seemed to be interested in was our Royal Family. There was a royal wedding while I was there – Princess Marina.

There were quite a few foreign students in the town, and one kind lady invited us all round for coffee and a chat once a week: was it coincidence that she was the wife of the Police Chief? I gave some private English lessons, although the mothers of male students would remain in the room as a chaperone, and I could never be paid except in kind. One elderly lady gave me a cup of tea for an hour's conversation! But a nice family sometimes took me to their

1928
UK women get equal voting rights

1929
Wall Street Crash

1930
Uruguay wins football's first World Cup

centuries-old country house for some weekends. The room at the bottom of the house was so big the girls kept their bikes there, and would ride them around the table! One had to keep a stern eye on the girls' father – not one who would have allowed his daughter to go abroad by herself, therefore English girls who were by themselves must be 'available'. One would keep the men under control by raising an eyebrow, looking at them, and then at their wives. Just a threat of betrayal was enough.

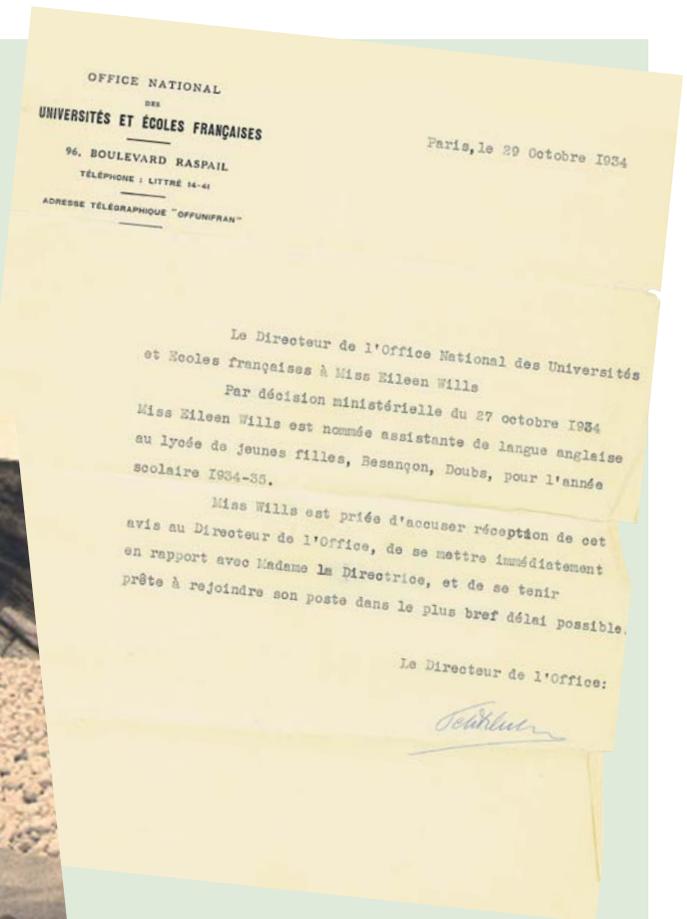
During the holidays I used to go to the kitchen and was fed by the kindness of the kitchen staff, but I didn't get my sheets changed, or washing done, because I wasn't officially there.

At weekends in the winter, a group of us would go skiing. Because we had no money, a local café owner took pity, and would keep Saturday's stale bread and cakes for us to take on our Sunday outings. If we could afford it, we would take the cheap train which got back at about five to nine. At exactly nine o'clock, the Concierge, a Mutilé de Guerre, would lock the Lycée gate and take out his hearing aid, so anyone locked out would have to pay to stay the night at a hostel. Two of the men on the trip would carry me, one on each arm, and run to get me back to the Lycée – sometimes just as the gate was being shut. If I had had any money, it would have been grand, but I had only the very little that they could spare me from home, and had to be very careful, though once I

splurged on mandarin oranges, which were cheap and gorgeous. Postage stamps were the chief expense: I wrote long letters home.

Overall, it was a wonderful year. On return, after a couple of short-term postings, I landed a job teaching French in Morley, near Leeds, but had to resign when I became engaged: married women were not allowed to teach.

Eileen Coleman, née Wills
ELA in Besançon, 1934-35



1931
Actor James Dean born

1932
Amelia Earhart flies the
Atlantic in record time

1933
Hitler becomes Chancellor
of German Reich

Friends and family

Playing Cupid

Health warning: the Central (Marriage) Bureau can seriously affect your life!

Austrian FLA in south London, 1979-81

The Language Assistants programme often seems to have had more long-term influence on people's lives than its instigators could ever have predicted. Six per cent of the questionnaire respondents had actually married someone they met during their year abroad, and this is to say nothing of the love affairs and broken hearts that have invested many a returning Language Assistant with a twinkle or tear in their eye.

[Did the year change your life?]

Not only was it the most exciting and educational year of my life, like many FLAs since then I met my future wife there, so I have what you might call 'vested interests' in the scheme!

ELA in Austria, 1958-59

Meeting my future husband there. I got married in 1973 and have lived in England ever since.

FLA in England, 1972-73

Yes: by confirming my internationalist outlook; by introducing me to teaching (my route into the British Council); by introducing me to my first wife!

ELA in France, 1973-74

After briefly returning to Austria to finish my degree I returned to England, married my former colleague, had a lovely daughter (now 18), did a PGCE, and am now settled in Sheffield with a wonderful family and a satisfying career – none of which would have happened without my time as an FLA!

Austrian FLA in south London, 1979-81

1934

Bonnie and Clyde's bank-robbing days end

A family affair

The mother

I was an ELA in Rochefort from '68 to '69 which was a good time to observe the intense political debate and forming of distinct political camps following the events of May '68. As for school, teachers merely turned up for lessons – there was no sense of pastoral commitment or involvement in a school community. I was in a girls' lycée, where pupils were interested and I had no discipline or motivation problems.

During the year I corresponded with [a fellow student] Joe who was spending his year as an ELA in the Puy-de-Dôme and we subsequently married. We had both developed a lifelong love of France and went to live in Paris for four years where our daughter was born.

Joe and I share broadly similar views about our ELA experience and Maude has grown up in an ambience where discussions about France were the norm. The Assistants programme has a hidden continuity – the life skills it spawns and the innate goodwill of the programme cannot be quantified. And now my daughter has gone to live in south-west France indefinitely, so the impact on all our lives has been enormous!

Anne Liddane

The daughter

My parents always talked fondly of their time as Assistants in France, and I know as I was deciding what to do for my year abroad, I was made very much aware of what a unique, enriching experience the Assistantship is. I knew that whatever I did and wherever I went it would be an opportunity of a lifetime, but I suppose the ultimate decision to follow the Assistantship programme in 2001-02 was a combination of a desire for a real challenge, backed

1935

Wallace Carothers produces first nylon



Anne and Maude Liddane with friends from Anne's time as an Assistant in 1968-69

up by the fact that I had two parents who had taken the plunge and at the end of the year had found themselves much better off for having done it.

I think much has changed since my parents' time in France – their stories differ greatly from mine, obviously our schools differed a lot, and they spoke more French – we were seven or eight English Assistants in my town, and saw each other regularly. My mum and dad, however, were pretty much alone as English (Assistants or otherwise) in their towns, and therefore spoke French all the time. Despite all this though, I feel that much still remains the same – leaving home to spend a year abroad teaching English in a strange place is still, I'm sure, the challenge that it always was, which provides the unique, enriching experience that my parents always talked about. I for one am not the same person for having been an Assistant – I came back to England more confident and self-assured, wiser and an all-round better person for having faced the challenges the year threw at me. I am now going back out to France to live with my French boyfriend.

Maude Liddane

1936

Spanish Civil War begins
Jesse Owens takes four golds at Berlin Olympics

Professor Jim Coleman was an ELA at the Lycée de Garçons in Besançon in 1968-69, following in the footsteps of his mother who had been an ELA in the same town in 1934-35 at the Lycée de Filles. He fits very neatly into the idea of the Assistants programme being a family trademark. In addition to him and his mother, his sister Jill was an ELA in Germany and his wife was an ELA in Nantes. His daughter took her French A level in 2005 and naturally hopes to follow in the family footsteps.

Ongoing entente cordiale

Many lifelong friendships were made which have been sustained in spite of distance and time.

Lifelong and deep friendships including a former boyfriend and his wife who generously asked me to be godfather to their daughter (now 25).

ELA in France, 1968-69

Getting to know one of the teachers and his family on a personal level and we have been in touch ever since: now more than 30 years. We lived through our respective children being born and growing up and I am going to his 60th birthday party in a few weeks' time.

ELA in Germany, 1972-73

The son of the family that befriended me in 1963, then a schoolboy, is after 40+ years my closest friend. This year we published together a book on three brothers from the area who were all killed in World War II.

ELA in Germany, 1961-62

The colleague who was delegated to meet me at the station by the head teacher of the school to which I had been appointed became a close friend and

1937

Pablo Picasso paints 'Guernica'

remains so to this day. In early October 1999, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of my arrival in La Rochelle, we arranged to meet on the platform at La Rochelle Ville station in order to re-enact our first encounter. I managed to find the Glasgow University blazer which I had worn on that day in 1959, and which, to my surprise and delight, still fitted me. I hid on the platform until a train arrived, then I mingled with the passengers as they made their way to the exit, where I was confronted by the surveillant who is now my friend with the deathless words: 'Monsieur Campbell, je pense!' The scene caused great hilarity for our wives.

Ian Campbell, ELA in France, 1959-60



Ian Campbell reunited with his French colleague at La Rochelle railway station

1938

Biro pen first patented

The intrusion of world events

Over the last 100 years one can be only too well aware of the many global incidents, disasters both natural and man-made, as well as happy moments, which must have affected Language Assistants abroad in most continents on the planet.

I was appointed as a Spanish Language Assistant from Argentina in Surrey for the year 1981-82. (YES, exactly, I know what you are thinking!) As you know, after that year, our diplomatic relations were hurt, and this wonderful programme was cancelled in my country, so I could not promote the idea of becoming a Spanish Assistant the way I would have loved to for years. Yet, I did so in many other ways. My students of English heard about my experience thousands of times. And then, my own sons developed a love for England even though they've never been there.

I remember that year in Surrey vividly! It was JUST WONDERFUL! This kind of experience, I believe, makes one grow; it opens our minds, makes us feel a better person. We learn about tolerance and acceptance. Personally, from that moment, I believe I became a global citizen. And I became more knowledgeable even of my own country.

I will never ever forget that year in England. I loved your country, and its people, and I enjoyed every single minute of the experience. Of course, it was a highlight in my life. I still regret the War. I wish it never happened.
Argentinian FLA, 1981-82

The kindness of the school staff and other people confirmed my view that Germans were just people, not 'the enemy' as I had considered them while a child during the war.
ELA in Germany, 1955-56

[Best moment] The warm-hearted friendly welcome I got as a German from my host family only 25 years after the war.
German FLA in Scotland, 1969-70

1939

Great Britain and France declare war on Germany

Snapshot from Senegal

Over the week I walked a lot, and another phenomenon I should report involves being 'greeted' by shouts of 'toubab!', mostly from children but some adults too, whenever passing someone's compound or village. 'Toubab' seems to be a pan-Senegambian word for 'white person', but occasionally I couldn't help thinking that it translated more as 'whitey' or 'honky'. It is quite disconcerting to be summed up in this same way wherever you go. A lot of the children shouting this at you will run up to you and ask for money, sweets, or – significantly – pens and pencils. Others will just want to touch you, or hold your hand and walk a few steps with you. I really didn't expect any of this, and I still haven't worked out how I feel about it, or even how – other than 'naturally', and with confused yet humble bonhomie – to react to it.

Attitudes to time and distance – less controversially – are also surprisingly different. For example, I have been told, a number of times, that where I want to go is so far away that I should take a taxi. Subsequently, I have discovered that the far-flung destination I was seeking was less than 1km away! I am now of the belief that this is attributable to what I think is the received idea here regarding toubabs, walking, and money ... The idea, as I understand it, goes like this: toubabs can afford taxis; if you can afford a taxi, you take a taxi, no matter how short the distance ... especially if you're a toubab. Thus it is that I find myself fielding more

preconceptions about myself (and toubabs generally) than I should have expected; more than this, it means I often find myself at the receiving end – for a change – of cultural relativism and having to second-guess or interpret what might ordinarily be presumed to be factual answers to simple questions. How far, indeed, is far?

The first day of February was 'Tabaski', aka 'Sheep Festival'. The entire ovine population of Senegal descended on Dakar, it seemed, for a rave, only to find their own grave. Casually sporting my new 'boubou' (voluminous Muslim robe), 'babouches' (slippers! Me in slippers!), and 'hat' (a piece of styled cloth worn on the head), I went to the house of the father of a friend. The father has three wives and ... well, a lot of children. The family slaughtered four sheep which they butchered and prepared themselves. I observed as much of this process as I possibly could, but being a Western wimp meant that I felt a little queasy and had to sit down, away from the massacre, and wait until my cold sweat had dried. One thing I learnt that day: it is a fool that stands in front of the man with a machete hacking a dead sheep to bits, for surely he will be splattered by sheep shrapnel, and might feel a bit ill too. We ate a lovely meal, in the afternoon, in order to commemorate – it appears – the day when God asked Abraham to kill his own son.

Terry Bradford, ELA in Dakar, 2003-04



It shouldn't happen to a Language Assistant ...

Some of our former Assistants are still chuckling, albeit nervously, at the comic moments that befell them all those years ago.

[Funniest] Seeing the reaction on other teachers' faces when I put the apple sauce on the plate with my roast pork. It was in fact meant to be the dessert!
ELA in France, 1985-86

Spent a night in jail (which was good, bad, funny and surprising all at once). Was told on arrival that I was to design the English curriculum at the university where I was posted. This was a surprise.
ELA in Ecuador, 1997-98

Laughing at my own mistakes. I once asked for 'pilules' for a transistor radio (remember those?), and referred to a couple of twin girls in one class as 'des juments'!
ELA in France, 1967-68

I had to join a club to meet as many French people as possible, and didn't realise it was for OAPs, so I went on day trips with them!
ELA in France, 1999-2000

1940
Battle of Britain

1941
Enigma code broken

1942
OXFAM founded

Je me souviens des années soixante

Je me souviens du train de nuit entre Londres et le Yorkshire, aussi exotique pour moi que l'Orient Express en partance pour Istamboul.

Je me souviens d'une leçon de phonétique dans un taxi londonien. D'abord incapable de comprendre ma destination le chauffeur me reprit : « You mean Saint PANcras », mettant l'accent tonique à sa place, sur la première syllabe.

Je me souviens de Mike et de Bert, professeurs d'humour, corrigeant mes fautes de grammaire et m'apprenant l'art difficile et nécessaire de rire de soi.

Je me souviens des enseignants devant la cheminée de la salle des profs, pendant la récréation du matin, et qui faisaient ensemble les mots croisés du Times avec une facilité déconcertante.

Je me souviens des repas scolaires, de la gelée (gello) tremblotante, d'un vert ou d'un rouge surnaturel, servie au dessert, accompagnée de



« sponge cake », cet étouffe-chrétien que pourtant les élèves dévoraient avec l'appétit de la jeunesse.

Je me souviens des « steak and kidney pies » de ma logeuse Mrs Lord, de son « Yorkshire pudding », de ses côtes d'agneau et de son « apple pie », mets savoureux qui prouvaient aux incroyants l'existence de la cuisine anglaise.

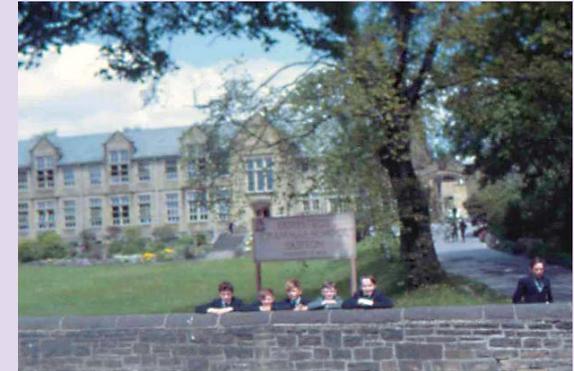
Je me souviens des soirées étudiantes à Leeds ou à Liverpool, des baisers des jeunes filles, jolie leçon d'anglais, au son de la musique pop d'avant les Beatles.

Je me souviens des matches de football à Burnley (alors champions d'Angleterre), dans la joyeuse ambiance des tribunes populaires, de la rencontre entre l'équipe locale et les Spurs, avec leurs stars, Ray Pointer et Danny Blanchflower.

Je me souviens de ce match international (et interminable) de cricket à Leeds, où j'ai compris pourquoi les Anglais avaient gagné la bataille de Waterloo : grâce à leur patience.

Je me souviens de ce meeting où j'étais le seul Français dans une assemblée de fermiers du Yorkshire, hostiles à la fois à De Gaulle et à l'entrée de la Grande-Bretagne dans le Marché commun.

Je me souviens que l'hiver, la nuit commençait à tomber vers trois heures et demie/quatre heures, ouvrant la perspective d'une longue soirée au coin du feu et devant la télévision, en compagnie de la famille de ma logeuse, à regarder avec un alibi culturel le hit parade (une nouveauté pour moi),



Ermysted's Grammar School, Skipton, 1962

à découvrir la télé commerciale (inconnue en France), et à regarder les séries historiques de la BBC.

Je me souviens des séances de cinéma, de l'avis de la censure précédant le film, du gong d'Arthur Rank, de la fumée de cigarette qui s'élevait en volutes devant l'écran, et du « God save the Queen » à la fin.

J'ai oublié les milliers d'autres impressions, sensations et émotions, éprouvées pendant cette année-la, et qui ont fait de moi un anglophile et un angliciste, un universitaire qui, plus tard, enverra des centaines d'assistants français outre Manche, pour qu'ils puissent dire à leur tour : « Je me souviens ».

Maurice Chrétien
Assistant français dans les Yorkshire Dales, 1961-62

1943

'Casablanca' on general release

1944

Allied troops land on Normandy beaches on D-Day

1945

End of World War II

Class of 2005

The Language Assistants of 2004-05, whether they knew it or not, were part of a year group that was making history. The 4,700 men and women who crossed continents this year were treading in the footsteps of the pioneers of the Language Assistants programme back in 1905. For such a special group it seems appropriate to devote a section of this celebratory booklet to their thoughts, feelings, comments and anecdotes, 100 years on from their pioneer predecessors.

From student to teacher

For many of the 2004-05 Language Assistants, going abroad to teach, usually for the first time, was a challenging prospect, but one that provided surprising and gratifying rewards.

The first lesson was definitely the scariest, but the best thing is now when I look back and realise that I've taught them 99% of the English they now know and that they enjoy learning English! It's also lovely when the children run up to you in the supermarket and say 'hello' to you, to show off their English to their friends or their parents!

ELA in France

Language Assistants of 2004-05 have found many new and different ways of complementing the existing curriculum. Their enthusiasm for their mother tongue and their home country, coupled with vivid imagination and cheerful persistence, has helped to motivate and delight many thousands of pupils across the world.

The most surprising moment was when some Year 10s started once to ask me fairly personal questions in English. I said to them: 'All right, if you want me to answer, ask in French.' That's what they immediately

did, and it allowed the most reluctant to speak to express themselves.

French FLA in Dorset

My best moment was when I had a group of 28 12-year-old students singing 'What can I do ...?' by the Corrs (their Spanish accents were so cute!).

ELA in Spain

Both ELAs and FLAs seem to have been struck by the language and general ability of the pupils with whom they worked. Many had to adjust their high expectations of language skills and general knowledge.

A lot of students don't know the European geography, e.g. Pakistan is not in Europe!

French FLA in Scotland

I assumed most people within the EU would know which countries were members and where they could be found on a map, but I had to explain that there were no kangaroos in Austria too often. On the other hand some people just wouldn't accept that Austria was not part of Germany.

Austrian FLA in Berkshire

Others found true delight in the foreign language successes of their pupils.

As regards the pupils, they are not as bad and 'allergic to languages' as much as I had been told before.

French FLA in Dorset

Best moment was when a girl smiled and obviously enjoyed herself speaking German although she is very shy and normally never speaks at all.

German FLA in Leeds

The Language Assistants often had comments to make on their relationship with teaching staff in the

school. Usually the initial point of contact and often a role model to inexperienced Assistants, modern foreign language teachers and heads of department can have a major impact on the first few weeks of the experience. Some have proved to be inspirational.

My funniest moments came when I was in charge of a class with a brilliant teacher and we played English games with the pupils, they had so much fun and learnt so much too.

ELA in France

Others meanwhile seem to have been too stretched with other duties to provide enough support to uninitiated new Assistants, or were simply unsure how to use them.

The topic that galvanised many of the 2004-05 Language Assistants, wherever they were based, was discipline in schools. They usually felt that what they perceived as being the low level of discipline in their host institution would never have been tolerated in



Nick Clayton, ELA in Italy, 2004-05, on class trip to Sicily

1946

First meeting of UN General Assembly

1947

Dior's 'New Look' launched

1948

National Health Service established

1949

NATO founded

their home country. This view was held by ELAs and FLAs alike suggesting that, as a novice, one will meet some level of difficult behaviour in the classroom wherever one goes.

The stereotype that was confirmed is that pupils in high schools generally study very little and occasionally are very disrespectful and undisciplined, at least compared to students of the same age in Italy.
Italian FLA in England

Some Assistants were pleasantly surprised by the behaviour they encountered.

Probably the most surprising moment has been to find out the English pupils in general have slightly better manners than German pupils have. They're mostly very friendly.
German FLA in Lancashire

Others have had the honesty to reflect on their own recent past in the classroom.

It makes me realise how stupid and disrespectful [sic] I was with some teachers when I was younger.
French FLA in Doncaster

One Assistant could recognise that young people are not so different wherever you go.

About schools, I thought that students will sit quietly in classrooms, studying hard and doing everything what the teacher says, but why on earth should English students be any different from German students?
German FLA in Hertfordshire

My worst moment has been trying to discipline students who have no discipline in the home.
ELA in Spain

The lows ...

View it as a challenge, a make-or-break situation, and you'll surprise yourself in many ways.
ELA in France

The Assistant's year is by no means an easy option and, to some extent, the people putting themselves forward for the experience will have to prove themselves personally and professionally, often in new and difficult circumstances. Adjusting to a new country, to its social mores, national attitudes, idiosyncratic bureaucracies and language complexities, requires determination and grit. Assistants are briefed on anticipated problems and obstacles, but some of the 2004-05 cohort still got more than they bargained for.

Most participants find they have to dig deep for extra-high levels of resilience, patience, self-reliance and confidence. For most 2004-05 Language Assistants it was a wholly positive experience. Any obstacles faced and overcome were felt to have built character and strength and provided an excellent preparation for future life. For many, a year without some level of challenge would have been less of a year.

... and the highs

To reiterate the overall positivity exuding from the Assistants it's worth looking at what made them laugh. Our respondents kindly shared some of their best comic moments with us.

I received a present at the beginning of the year, which appeared to be a little frog.
French FLA in Cheshire

My funniest moment was when one of my classes tried to learn to say "t i'nt in t' tin", a typical Yorkshire phrase.
ELA in Spain

A lot of very funny/interesting moments. The range of interesting English names chosen by the students is always very funny. In my classes I have Banana, Hill, Table, Wind, a lot of Apples and many others. One of my friends has a student called 'St Paul Genius III'. That same friend, while standing in a lift, got told by a teacher from his school that he had 'a nice big head'.
ELA in China

Funniest moment was when I tried to hail a police car because I had confused it with a taxi.
German FLA in Leeds

The funniest moment was when I wanted to show the pupils some of our traditional incense we burn for Christmas. So I lit these tiny cones which we put in little wooden 'smoking men'. Suddenly the caretaker burst into the room just as I struck another match. It was kind of a joke that I was the one lighting bonfires in school.
German FLA in Leicestershire

It changes your life without your really realizing it.
ELA in France

Summing up the 100th year

This very special year group has provided an exemplary insight into the Language Assistants programme as it is today. The following comment sums up the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response of the many 2004-05 Assistants for whose reflections we do not have space this time.

I think that it was a brilliant year, full of emotions, challenges and fun, and to be honest, I'm sad it is nearly the end because I feel like everything in school and outside school is getting better and better ... I wish I could do it again!
French FLA in Wiltshire

1950
BBC transmits first live broadcast across the Channel

1951
Festival of Britain held in London

1952
Tea rationing ends in Britain after 12 years

1953
Coronation of Elizabeth II

Bowler hats and baguettes

Received wisdom states that ill-informed preconceptions about a country and its inhabitants, benign, comic or otherwise, will be cast aside through international cultural exchange. Is this view borne out by the Language Assistants programme? Current and former Assistants were all asked to comment on their experience of national stereotyping and even to own up to their own initial prejudices.

First up are the 2004-05 Assistants. Unlike their earliest predecessors, today's Assistants live in a world where international travel is commonplace. That said, it is clear that preconceptions about different nations and their peoples still abound. Some Assistants were surprised by what they encountered.

Before coming here, I thought that English people were really unsociable people but they are not at all.
French FLA in Widnes

I just got aware of cultural differences and met English people who love 'lapin à la moutarde' and who hate pubs!
French FLA in Bedfordshire

I was surprised to see people wearing kilts in the streets. That was quite exotic for me! Apart from that, the reputation of greediness attached to Scottish people is entirely false! They are the most gentle and kind and generous people I know.
French FLA in Glasgow

Whatever I thought of French people before has completely altered and now, when ignorant people say that the French are arrogant, cheese-loving, impatient fools, I really enjoy telling them differently!
ELA in France

Well, when I first received the e-mail that told me that I was coming to Northern Ireland, I knew about the religious troubles and I thought that the people were not as the Latin American people. My beliefs have changed during these months. I really like Irish people. They are so kind, friendly, helpful, warm, and welcoming.
Mexican FLA in Northern Ireland

When I arrived, I was really surprised to be called 'love', 'sweetheart' or 'darling' by people I didn't know (old ladies, bus drivers, shop owners, waiters).
French FLA in Oldham

Others found that their previously held views of the host country held firm after a few months of living and working there.

Skirts: yes, they are very short here.
German FLA in Leeds

French people are always eating cheese and they all buy big baguettes every day and they drink a lot of little black coffees and they drink wine at lunchtime even when they have to work in the afternoon; they are ALWAYS on strike and they like their holidays and long lunch breaks and eating is very important and you have to say 'bon appetit' before you eat anything. But they are very friendly and welcoming and are more laid back than people give them credit for.
ELA in France

They do all ride bicycles and bustle around everywhere making lots of noise. They're very friendly and hospitable. I can't really think of many preconceptions which I had which I've found out aren't true. Some people say Chinese people all look the same, but that definitely isn't true – in fact they say Western people all

look the same and I have to put in a lot of effort to convince them it's not true!

ELA in China

The stereotype of Latin men was confirmed, but mainly by the older population. Drug barons, guerrillas and kidnapping: not confirmed as it hasn't happened to me. A few dangers confirmed, but no more dangerous for me than some parts of the UK.

ELA in Colombia

Before I came to England the picture of a typical Englishman was somewhere in between Prince Charles and Mr Bean. When I moved into my shared house the first person I met was a guy who funnily enough fitted perfectly into my picture ...

German FLA in Hertfordshire

Language Assistants of 2004-05 had ample time during their residency to reflect on the stereotypes, and sometimes accompanying prejudices, held by



1954
Roger Bannister runs
four-minute mile

1955
Albert Einstein dies

1956
Elvis Presley releases
'Heartbreak Hotel'

pupils and the general population of the host country. FLAs from Germany and Austria reported facing a particular challenge working in UK schools.

British people definitely think they are the heroes of the Second World War and the Germans are evil people.
German FLA in Manchester

Comments from former German FLAs demonstrate that this is not a new phenomenon.

I didn't have any [preconceptions]. But when I was in England in 1975 the comedy show 'Fawlty Towers' was a big hit on TV and it was great to see how they presented the English and other cultures. I love the English humour but I never understood why Germany is very often connected with war and Hitler. I was born after the war and identified with a different Germany.
German FLA in Kent, 1975-76

Some of the respondents to the questionnaire who experienced this kind of stereotypical view saw it as a personal goal and part of the point of the programme to turn around the ill-informed perspectives that were presented to them.

The first thing that came to my first-year pupils' minds when I asked them what they knew about Germany was usually Hitler or something in connection with the Second World War. I hope now it is German cars, inventors, scientists, Black Forest Gateau – and me!
German FLA in Northern Ireland

Of course, there was the odd allusion here or there to Germans as Nazis or Hitler, but my pupils were really interested in learning about German history.
German FLA in Leeds

1957
Treaty of Rome establishes
European Economic Community



Wang Shuyan, Chinese FLA in Scunthorpe, 2005

Cultural, economic and societal differences were commented on by many of the 2004-05 Language Assistants. In some cases genuine culture shock was experienced, particularly by those who had travelled across continents for their year abroad.

People in Britain have more freedom to express their own opinions in public; students here have more options to choose what they want to learn but they are not as intelligent as Chinese students.
Chinese FLA in Northamptonshire

[Worst moment] Arriving at my grim accommodation in Siberia, realising that I did not have a kitchen sink and would be washing up in the bath for a year.
ELA in Russia

[Most surprising] Finding out that the average salary for lecturers in Russian institutes of higher education is

1958
Boris Pasternak wins
Nobel Prize in Literature

about £50 a month ... and that many products in shops in Siberia are only slightly cheaper than in the UK.
ELA in Russia

'The United Kingdom', that is just a name, because they always make it clear that they are either English, Welsh or Scottish, they don't like to be confused, they are very nationalist. The English breakfast only exists in the B&Bs or hotels; they hardly ever have it at home. They love tea, and have it more than twice a day, sometimes. They say 'sorry' for everything, and people of all ages use 'cheers' instead of 'thank you'. They love talking about the weather, and if it's a rainy day, they say it's miserable. They eat only sandwiches for lunch. There are signs everywhere, so you can easily find the place you are looking for. They use maps a lot and their maps are just perfect! There are notices/signs reminding you to mind the gap/the step/your head; when crossing, to look right or left, and even where to walk: keep right/left.
Peruvian FLA in Wiltshire



1959
The Mini goes on sale

Kitchen nightmare?

English food is strange (awful combinations like: lasagne, chips, beans).

German FLA in Wolverhampton

English people eat junk food: true. But at the same time I became quite fond of fish and chips, and salt and vinegar crisps, my favourite. But there's nothing I can do with jelly, corned beef or Yorkshire pudding.

Well, no offence, I had already this cliché of British people eating badly! Unluckily, this was confirmed! I had to teach several times to teachers and pupils that there is in fact an art of cooking and eating, and that it requires patience and love! Eventually, after tasting some recipes, some of them did agree to change their bad habits (for example, nice fruit salad instead of Walkers crisps at breaktime).

Inevitably the host country's national cuisine, drinking habits and climate have a major impact on the experience of the visiting Language Assistant. Everyone has to eat, and the 2004-05 Assistants had strong opinions on what they were offered in the schools and the regions where they were based. It is fair to say that the vast majority of Foreign Language Assistants stationed in the UK were less than enamoured of the culinary output they encountered. Many were simply baffled at the food combinations served up on a plate. But other FLAs experiencing life on the sceptred isle had their preconceptions about British 'nosh' well and truly quashed.

The vagaries of British sustenance were not the only culinary matter under the spotlight in 2005. Language



Richard Starr, ELA in Peru, 2003-04

Assistants travelling all over the world had some novel mealtime experiences to report.

I think it was confirmed that the Chinese will eat anything. Monkey brains, dogs, hedgehogs, anything!

Lots of funny culinary moments – hedgehogs for sale as food, ducks' tongues being served up at dinner parties, being given a boiled egg by someone at a dinner party and finding out it had a chicken foetus in it, but not to worry – that's what makes it a delicacy! All very 'Indiana Jones'.

[Funniest moment] Trying to explain that for me eating a guinea pig (after very politely eating one!) was like them eating their dog.

1960
'Lady Chatterley's Lover' trial

1961
Construction of Berlin Wall

Master chef?

Food: the English food is definitely better than its reputation; I really enjoyed scones and all sorts of pies as well as the big variety in supermarkets.

I have been extremely surprised about the food, which is really good (I would kill for a cheesecake!).

The food is not so bad as I used to think, especially since the Jamie Oliver recipes became popular! In my opinion, the 'pub culture' is a real phenomenon which is very particular of the United Kingdom.

Tea: it is absolutely as delicious as I had imagined it! Even better!

And other European countries did not escape culinary stereotyping altogether.

Well, the French do carry baguettes around and eat them anywhere, including on the metro. Some of their cuisine has made me think about going vegetarian – seeing whole rabbits, pigs' heads and feathered chickens in the supermarket got a bit much!

Confirmed: Italians are obsessed with food. If they're not actually eating, the chances are they'll be thinking about their next meal.

Stereotypical thing confirmed: mealtimes. How late can they actually get?!

1962
The Beatles' first single, 'Love Me Do', released in the UK



Peruvian family mealtime

Most, particularly those in the UK, had a number of comments to make about the weather.

The weather is and was how I was imagining before coming here, cold, windy, freezy [sic].
Mexican FLA in Northern Ireland

One stereotype that was not [confirmed] though, is the weather. It isn't actually raining all the time; no, instead the weather changes very quickly, from rain to snow to warmth, then cold again. You never know what to expect in fact!
French FLA in Manchester

English weather isn't as bad as I had expected it to be but nevertheless English people always talk about the weather.
German FLA in Kent

1963
JFK assassinated
Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

The former Language Assistants were asked the same question about national stereotypes as the class of 2004-05. Some of their observations suggest that preconceptions and generalisations have not changed that much, but note some of the subtle generational differences.

My ELA year gave me privileged access to a side of Africa beyond the usual African images of famine, ethnic conflict, game safaris or traditionally built private detectives. In reality Senegal is largely a country of people trying to make their lives better; really not so different from people in the UK.
ELA in Senegal, 1997-98

There was a lot of spitting, squatting and staring; the language was really difficult; pensioners really did practise t'ai chi in public, and the food was fantastic. Despite the obvious hardships most Chinese face in their daily lives, I encountered some of the happiest, most contented people I've ever met.
ELA in China, 2002-03

Living in Germany was the best way to find out that 'the Germans' as such do not exist; northerners are very different from people in the Rhineland. School life did not fit into the cliché of stiff Germans with no sense of humour.
ELA in Germany, 1978-79

For most Assistants, the year abroad is enormously enriching. Part of that enrichment comes from the opportunity to sit down with intelligent adults and engage in political and intellectual discussions. This experience helps them to realise that their own country is not the centre of the universe. Exchanges

1964
Radio Caroline, first pirate radio station

with foreign nationals, be they teachers or pupils, enable both sides to understand their own culture with their respective limitations, as well as that of the other country, and our respondents provided ample evidence of much breaking down of barriers through undermining unhelpful stereotyping.

The funniest moment was when a student asked me if I drank tea at 5 p.m. I had never heard of this stereotype before and it seemed such a bizarre thing to say!
ELA in France, 2004-05

Confirmed: the sanctity/absurdity of the British obsession with afternoon tea. This was confirmed one afternoon in 1960, when I witnessed a well-to-do English couple bringing all the accoutrements of afternoon tea from their caravan onto the beach in fierce heat and pouring themselves a cup of tea. The French people on the beach were incredulous.
ELA in France, 1959-60



1965
US troops sent into battle in Vietnam

A tale of Toulouse – two English Language Assistants in discussion about their year abroad

Alison Edwards and Debbie Palmer were both ELAs at the Lycée St Sernin in the city of Toulouse, but 27 years separate their respective arrivals in 'la ville rose' to undertake their Assistantship. Alison was an ELA in 1976-77 while Debbie completed her year in 2003-04. In June 2005 they met to talk about whether the teachers, pupils and red wine had changed much in a quarter of a century.

First impressions

A: I can remember my departure very clearly because my birthday is on 1st October, so I was 21 on the day I arrived in Toulouse. I spent that evening completely on my own, crying in my room! But that was the only evening of the entire year that I spent slumming in my room. I keep wondering how they managed in 1905 because in 1976 communication was non-existent. I knew I might get the odd phone call or letter but there was no other means of keeping in touch with people and I knew I was leaving all my friends.

D: I arrived on the 'navette' from the airport and met my friend who is French and who was at university in Toulouse. Having her was great – she took me around the city, she took me to buy my mobile phone chip, she took me to the school and introduced me to people, even though she did not know the school!

A: I knew where I was going to stay – Rue du Périgord, which was just around the corner from the school. There were three 'boulangeries' between the Rue du Périgord and the school, and that caused a bit of a problem. On the way to school I would resist the first one and the second one, and my custom would go to the third. On the way home I would again resist the first and the second one, and then give in to the third. So the one in the middle never got my custom! [laughs]

D: For my accommodation I paid about 460 euros per month, and I got half of that back as housing benefit from the Caisse d'Allocations Familiales.

A: I know it was a long time ago but I paid only eight francs a week. They paid me virtually everything back, because they thought I was destitute with no bed!

D: When I did get a place on my own it was the first time I had lived on my own and it was strange doing things for the first time in France which I had not done in England.

A: You develop a whole new vocabulary – and an area of independence. I had been away from home before – in a hall of residence – but not entirely on my own.

First contact with French teachers

A: I was lucky – there were a couple of teachers who both taught English, and they were like my parents when I arrived. I am still in touch with Mme Barbière. The other mother figure was an English lady who had married a Frenchman – she was my inspiration; she was 29 and already 'agrégée' and teaching to a superb level. There was one lady who had her 12 hours more or less on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday apart from an odd hour which stuck out on a Monday, and I distinctly remember her saying to me: 'c'est bon – tu es très forte – je te laisse faire le cours lundi – je ne reviens que mardi.' And that was it. She went off every weekend and left me with her entire class on the Monday, and never did those hours.

D: I did not see anyone teach – I wish I had. I would like to know how they work, how they manage to keep control because at the beginning I would have liked to see how it was done. I expected more discipline –

I had heard that the French system was more disciplined than the English system.

Gastronomy

A: My worst moments weren't linked to the school – they were linked to my digs, and getting so grossly overweight. At the end of the year my dad didn't recognise me – he came out to Blagnac to accompany me back and he just didn't recognise me at the airport!

D: I actually lost weight – I ate nothing but 'chocolatines' and drank nothing but red wine.

Improvement in language skills

A: 100% improvement for me. Everybody in my year group had been abroad, so we all came back with a high level of spoken French and it meant that discussions in that fourth year were pretty in-depth.



1966
Bobby Moore's England
team wins World Cup

1967
First human heart
transplant carried out

1968
'Les événements de mai 68'
in France



Hôtel d'Assézat, Toulouse

D: I developed a much better understanding, much quicker. I've always been a bit timid about speaking the language – it definitely improved my speaking but not as much as I would have hoped, had I not been quite so timid.

1969
Man lands on moon

Life outside school

D: Lots of coffee, lots of red wine. My flat was right above the supermarket and the security guard in Casino laughed at me a lot: 'Ah, that girl is back again, buying more red wine.'

A: In plastic containers!

Changed as a person?

D: I am probably more confident about talking to people I don't know and definitely more willing to ask about things I need to know about. When it comes to looking for an apartment I know what to look for and I'm also possibly more responsible with money.

A: Same things for me. I gained maturity, confidence, independence, self-reliance, and learned to get on and do things. This was probably even more apparent in my time because we didn't have any contact with home – no e-mails, no phone calls, no mobiles.

But it was a bit of a shock to come back to university for a year because you had to kind of revert, and people had different expectations again. People had treated me as an adult for a year and had expected me to be responsible and good with money and to know a little bit about the world, and then all of a sudden I was back in a hall of residence and we were mollycoddled again.

D: I went back into a house with a friend but what I found difficult was having my parents having to pay for it after having done it all myself – going back to being dependent again.

1970
Concorde achieves Mach 2



Toulouse

A: I desperately want to go back there. I only went back once – fairly soon afterwards – but for family reasons I haven't been back since. I'd like to see how Toulouse has changed.

D: It is a lovely city. I think of it as a kind of Paris of the south, there's so much going on, there is a lot of culture, it's almost as expensive – but it's smaller and friendlier. People walk around with smiles on their faces, and then there's the weather!

A: It's quite frightening really. 29 years ago and I still remember Toulouse as if it were yesterday. It really was the best year of my life.

D: It was for me too.

1971
UK currency goes decimal

A transforming experience

Many Language Assistants reflecting on their time abroad describe all kinds of personal transformations that took place and possibly changed the direction of their lives forever.

It profoundly affected my life. It was the first time I had ever been out of Scotland! It instilled a love of all things French which eventually led to my retiring to France in 1991.

ELA in France, 1956-57

Going to Senegal was the most incredible experience of my life and I hit highs and lows. I have a much healthier attitude towards my family and money. I'm more tolerant and patient as a result of being there.

ELA in Senegal, 2003-04

While in the UK I met people from Eritrea, Vietnam, Kurdistan, mostly refugees since I volunteered in a Literacy Project in a Tertiary College. I could see that the way we prepare our food is very similar to those from Vietnam or Eritrea, with the latter we shared the same way of making clothes and crafts. And we also celebrated our differences: language (but all of us learning English to communicate), religion ... However, we all realised that feelings are experienced in the same way, we all loved, we all laughed, cried at listening to terrible real-life stories about suffering and struggle, we all felt that each of us could make a change in the life of others. I would like to think we all did.

Peruvian FLA in England, 1989-90

A number of Language Assistants wrote in their responses about the way in which the programme had influenced their career choice and the development of their career skills.

Sent me on my merry way to be the leader of a band (the Rocking Diplomats) and the top-scoring captain of the French Embassy cricket team in Canberra.

French FLA in England, 1972-73

Yes – it made an immeasurable difference to my life. It confirmed my career as a language teacher; it gave me real self-confidence; it made me feel at home abroad in France, and desperate to see more of the world and travel widely, which I have done.

ELA in France, 1970s

It really helped me to see how Scottish primary schools dealt with multicultural classes. The way parents were invited to participate (there were flyers in many languages), how kids interacted with one another naturally. It was a lovely experience and now I am working here in Argentina to promote intercultural communication in our schools.

Argentinian FLA in Scotland, 2003-04

Yes. It opened up a whole new world of people, books, imagination and opportunities. It made me more conscious of both my personal and national identities by making me explain myself to others. It led me to work in diplomacy, which I had never thought of before.

French Canadian in Wales, 1996-97

A turning point in many ways. An opportunity to explore different facets of your own personality and interests without the constraints of the past.

ELA in France, 1968-69

From Language Assistant to entrepreneur



Sam Jennings and Dan Smith today, ELAs in France, 2002-03

Sam and Dan met while they were Assistants in the Bordeaux area. Dan was from Loughborough University, studying French and Politics; Sam from Leeds, studying French and English. For them the year abroad fostered more than academic learning. The interests they had in common, and their location in a region of France famous for its rugby, gave them something of a launch pad. In Dan's own words:

During the year Sam and I organised a few sports tours to Bordeaux for rugby teams from the UK and thoroughly enjoyed the work it involved. We share a passion for sport and travel, so we started to look into organising sports tours as a potential business idea. Two years on, we have just launched Tours4, a sports tours and student group travel operator. Tours4 may not be a multi-million pound company yet, but we are good at what we do and, most importantly, we enjoy it. We both have a year in Bordeaux to thank for that!

1972

The UK, Denmark and Ireland sign Treaties of Accession and enter EEC in following year

1973

First call made with portable cellphone

1974

Watergate scandal

1975

Monarchy re-established in Spain

From Language Assistant to teacher

Like their predecessors, many of the 2004-05 Assistants intend to become teachers. 68% said that they were planning to become a languages teacher. (The proportion of FLAs was far higher at 77%, with only 48% of ELAs saying that they are considering a career in teaching.) In many cases, Language Assistants came to their placement with a definite plan to teach long-term, and their experience on the programme simply confirmed their initial decision. Others discovered that the reality did not match their expectation and were pleased to have had the chance to test their career idea before committing themselves to the wrong path.

In some cases, however, it came as a complete shock to the Assistant in question that they enjoyed teaching, having vowed never to seek a career in the classroom.

It has confirmed my plans to be a teacher because I now know that I can do it. I had some difficulties here but I believe that they made me stronger.
German FLA in Leeds

Being an ELA has indeed influenced what I will do next. My experiences in Germany have made me decide for definite that I want to be a languages teacher after completing my degree.
ELA in Germany

Before going there, I just wanted to stay one year. Now I am actually applying to train with the GTP or PGCE programme from September 2005!
French FLA in Doncaster, 2004-05

Yes. Back in Germany I study to become a teacher. Here I learned some new ways of teaching and

1976
Death of Mao Zedong

The year overall was enormously enriching. I swiftly realised that England was not the centre of the world and that many English customs were limited in comparison to the French habit of combining the ingredients of a table: food, wine and conversation. These discussions also served as a means for me to understand much more clearly my own culture and background.

The impact on my subsequent life has been immense since it has revolved around a love of France and a career teaching French in universities. I have spent a considerable amount of time in France and I feel – as do others – that my personality changes as soon as I set foot on French soil. My year abroad was responsible not only for my personal, social and cultural development, however: a fellow student from Hull was an ELA at the Lycée de Filles in Bourg-en-Bresse and we cemented our relationship in the course of the year, and later married.
Geoff Hare, ELA in Bourg-en-Bresse, 1966-67

motivating, which I will definitely use in my lessons back in Germany.
German FLA in Hertfordshire

I vowed I would never become a teacher: what did I end up doing?!
ELA in Germany, 1982-83

Yes – it made me much more confident, a Francophile with a lifelong love of food, and helped me decide that I would like to be a teacher. I am now a head teacher!
ELA in France, 1976-77

1977
Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee



Lamine Tangara, French FLA in London, 2004-05

From Language Assistant to opera singer

My year in Voiron certainly changed my life. Apart from being the only Brit for miles around and therefore being obliged to speak French the whole time, I enrolled at the Conservatoire in Grenoble and met the teacher who was to push me in the direction of a singing career. I had a superb time and still keep in touch with some of the friends I made during the year. Thank you!
Felicity Lott, ELA in Grenoble, 1967-68

1978
World's first test-tube baby born

As others see them ...

'They walk taller' – observations from Higher Education Institutions about their students becoming Language Assistants

One of the first things that struck me was that returning students occupied more space. They had gained in confidence and self-esteem and they walked taller and carried themselves more assertively.

A golden opportunity to be grasped with both hands: a chance to learn a language and live another culture.

English Language Assistants joining the Language Assistants programme do so, usually, for the third year of their modern foreign language degree at a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). Their tutors, professors and Year Abroad co-ordinators play a crucial role in marketing the programme, administering the application process and preparing their students for the experience. They also have a bird's-eye view of the influence of the experience on their students' learning. Staff from over a dozen HEIs involved in the programme responded to a questionnaire which asked them to comment on students' performance improvement and their subsequent employability, competition from other programmes, and this programme's overall impact.

Improving performance

All the respondents could see a range of improvements in the performance of returning students. Inevitably, mastery of the language of the host country (increased vocabulary, a higher standard

of pronunciation, better sociolinguistic competence), is the most visible outcome.

It is, without a doubt, the most satisfactory and enriching of all the different ways of fulfilling the Year Abroad requirement but, above all, it does wonders for the student's performance in the foreign language.

Students spending their Year Abroad as Assistants tend to have greatly improved oral and aural skills on their return to the UK.

In addition, HEI staff talk of increased self-confidence and greater independence as well as self-awareness, self-reliance and maturity. Students have a better attitude to study (e.g. handing in work punctually) and are more focused on their academic work and their career. Their knowledge of the target language culture is dramatically improved, as is their understanding and acceptance of cultural differences.

It is the best way for a student of a foreign language not only to improve vastly his/her mastery of it, but also to become really acquainted with the social realities behind it – and first and foremost, with the people who speak it.

ELAs enter a genuine and valid foreign language speech community and, to be accepted and therefore succeed, have to adjust, adapt and assimilate – the sooner the better! They gain the greatest and most telling insights into many aspects of the foreign language culture and regularly return more linguistically proficient and certainly more mature – mainly as a result of the confidence that they have gained from standing up in front of a class and discovering the buzz of teaching for themselves.



Richard Allen, ELA in Paris, 2004-05, with his students

They show a great improvement in their skills of teamwork, listening, communication, managing groups, responding to problems, working with deadlines, and they show a much greater awareness of the problems and needs of language learners.

When the Language Assistants programme was initiated in 1904-05 there was little alternative for language students and tutors who wished to spend structured time in a country where the target language was spoken. In recent decades, with the advent of various cross-cultural exchange programmes such as Socrates-Erasmus and Leonardo, students have had a range of options to choose from when considering how to spend time abroad. Most tutors see many advantages for the student in taking the Assistantship option.

All other things being equal, the chance of a paid job requiring skills that they possess, working in a team, taking direction, motivating and directing those under

1979

Margaret Thatcher becomes UK's first female Prime Minister

1980

John Lennon shot dead

1981

Marriage of Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer

them, in an organisation whose purpose they clearly understand, with ample opportunity to study and develop their own interests wins hands down.

Each [type of Year Abroad opportunity] has its merits, and each appeals to a different kind of student. Assistants have more opportunity to get to see into the lives of the host community. On return, those doing Assistantships and work placements have enhanced knowledge in different areas from those studying at university. They may have lost out on formal learning, but may have gained in intercultural insights.

For my money there's nothing to compare with the Assistantship experience. Assistants in most cases integrate better and have better relationships with people in the host country.

The vast majority of ELAs thought their experience had been extraordinarily worthwhile, often life-changing, and some deemed it more important than the degree itself.

The British Council Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) now gives UK students the opportunity to reflect on and recognise the skills they have gained during their Year Abroad in the context of wider academic, career and personal development aims.

The PDP enabled students to focus specifically on the personal aspects of their development which are often neglected in the largely academic procedures. Most students stress their increased confidence, self-reliance and self-knowledge ... and identify transferable skills such as organisation and time-management, communication and presentation skills, which are likely to enhance their employability ... the PDP can become an essential tool in the preparation for job interviews.

1982
UK-Argentine war in Falkland Islands

Career preparation

Clearly, if their intended career is teaching, then the benefits of having successfully completed a year of teaching practice are very helpful. Even if they do not enter teaching, the transferable skills they will have learned will stand them in good stead, whatever their chosen career.

Students can point to an extended period of employment in a foreign institution in which a range of skills, personal and professional, were required.

To quote one of our former students, 'if you can take a class of hormonal adolescents who don't want to know about English and get them to pay attention and learn something, you can do anything.' It involves presentation skills, leadership skills, organisational skills; it requires



Kate Joyce, ELA in Mexico, 2002-03

1983
Neil Kinnock elected leader of UK Labour Party

interacting and negotiating with bureaucrats, colleagues, team leaders. To be an Assistant you have to push your product, a useful business skill – 'il faut vendre sa salade'.

It provides students with an excellent opportunity not only to improve their German but to acquire important skills in the areas of communication, people-, time- and crisis-management, which makes them highly desirable for any future employer, and it is also an amazing personal experience that changes how students view themselves and their future.

With thanks to colleagues from the universities of Central Lancashire, East Anglia, Hull, Kent, Leeds (York St John College), Liverpool, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Swansea, and the Open University, among others.



Chris Barton, ELA in China, 2003-04

1984
Assassination of Indira Gandhi

The view from the staffroom – teachers’ perceptions of FLAs

FLAs – why do we need them?

Everyone benefits – it can be a life-changing experience for FLAs, and pupils gain real insight into another language and culture.

Adapting to an education system so different from their own is a formidable challenge for most FLAs. They have to come to terms with a school atmosphere and ethos which probably has very little in common with their own experience, and they need to become accustomed to language teaching methods which may be very different from the way in which they were taught English.

They do come with a number of inbuilt advantages: they are young, usually energetic, keen to learn, wanting to find out about different and new approaches and – above all, perhaps – they are invariably young enough to be able to relate easily to their pupils, especially those in the sixth form, and to share their social and cultural interests.

What were the qualities and strengths of your best Assistants?

Enthusiasm, adaptability, flexibility, reliability and resourcefulness figured very highly on the teachers’ list, as well as a sense of humour, a happy disposition, a readiness to work hard and a willingness to contribute and to become involved. Above all, however, the degree of success every year depends upon the FLA’s readiness and ability to develop good relationships with both staff and pupils.

She had an excellent rapport with staff and students.

He related so well to pupils and teachers.

A willingness and ability to share their culture is another important dimension:
she wanted to show the good side of her country;
and independence and creativity were highly prized:
she was always full of exciting ideas;
he had the time and energy to develop resources which teachers would not have been able to do.

Some of these resources are the authentic materials which Assistants bring with them but many also make tape or video recordings or produce language games during their time at the school.

The benefits for schools are an added allure for the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) department, continuing opportunities for teachers to sustain their foreign language fluency and gain an updating of their vocabulary and cultural and social knowledge. In one school the FLA worked with teachers from other departments to help prepare them for INSET they were going to undertake abroad as part of the International Professional Development programme organised by the British Council.

Pupils have invaluable access to native speakers and benefit by having their stereotypes challenged.

Schoolchildren are hungry to learn about other cultures and traditions as soon as they find out there is an interesting and interested personality involved.

It provides for many learners their first experience of meeting and communicating/working with a native speaker and hearing about their lives, home and

interests. This relationship can make MFL study relevant and come to life.

FLAs can also be an excellent role model.

Having a young native speaker to offer not just a model for the language but a model for ‘adventure’ as well.

Gains for local authorities and specialist language colleges include raising the profile of MFL within the authority and the possibility of spreading FLAs’ talents to other schools, especially in the primary sector, and helping them to work together in sharing FLAs to build stronger links.

Although most Assistants spend the majority of their time with groups or individuals preparing for examinations, some FLAs are especially effective in team teaching alongside the teacher, provided that the session is well planned and the respective roles



Emmanuelle Bataillon, French FLA in Suffolk, 2004-05

1985
Live Aid concert

1986
Portugal and Spain join EEC

1987
Channel Tunnel digging commences



Daniel Setzer, German FLA in London, 2004-05

of teacher and FLA are fully clarified. In some schools FLAs are considered to be an especially valuable resource to support teachers who are teaching their second or third foreign language.

Other schools use the Assistant in Key Stage 3 to maximise motivational impact and encourage pupils to continue with MFL in Key Stage 4.

Some Assistants become more fully involved in general school life. Many organise language clubs at lunchtime or after school. They attend daily briefings, participate in assemblies, write articles for school magazines and newsletters, take part in the Christmas concert and school production – ‘Oliver’ seems to be a particular favourite – and get involved in sporting activities, such as football, basketball, volleyball and the supervision of a fencing club. Others promote their own culture to all areas of the school – giving

1988
Stephen Hawking publishes
‘A Brief History of Time’

demonstrations of flamenco dancing or preparing their national cuisine for the Food Technology department.

My abiding memory is of a German FLA leading school assemblies during the November Remembrance period.

Overall, however, the main impact of the FLA on the whole school is seen as being the way they can promote languages as a living subject and open up staff minds to other countries and cultures.

Some Assistants have been able to engineer vital links with schools abroad, and Assistants can be very helpful in setting up and supporting e-mail and penfriend links. Others are often involved in accompanying school visits and exchanges abroad. Day trips to Boulogne and Paris, study visits to France, Spain and Berlin, accompanying pupils on a visit to a Christmas market abroad, helping with the annual German exchange and even participating in a visit to Poland as part of a Comenius project.

The most important aspect is to bring young people from different countries together and make them experience what it means to live and work in a different culture.

Quite simply because, having experienced the benefits oneself in terms of language gains, you know it is an essential requirement for young people wishing to become effective teachers of MFL.

One teacher summarised his view of a successful FLA:

It's work that involves personal human contact; being open to being directed by the teacher and then bringing their own ideas too – that is the ideal.

1989
Fall of Berlin Wall

It is very good value for money.

It has certainly helped us to improve examination grades.

FLAs are a vital component of the languages department.

We would be lost without it [the FLA programme].

It makes students realise that there are ‘real foreigners’ to whom they can relate.

[It is] one of the most positive and effective ways of raising the profile of MFL in our schools.

A good FLA is an essential aid to motivation and to supporting high quality teaching and learning in MFL.

It is an amazing addition to the language experience of the students.

A fantastic programme which allows an exchange and interaction of various cultures to come together.

It keeps languages alive in schools.

FLAs are excellent role models and embody the spirit of language learning.

It [the impact made by FLAs] is always good and with a great Assistant can be absolutely fantastic.

An excellent programme to bring authenticity and enthusiasm into the classroom.

It makes languages come alive for pupils.

It helps in raising the standard of spoken language and opening pupils’ eyes to another country and culture.

1990
Nelson Mandela released

The pupils' viewpoint

The FLAs' perceived impact on pupils is seen to be almost entirely positive. The word 'enjoyment' cropped up time and again and pupils see FLAs in a different but complementary role to that of their teachers. They generally love them, and are very enthusiastic about them.

The ambience of the FLA sessions is usually quite different: it gives pupils an opportunity to speak in a non-threatening atmosphere.

As well as helping them to develop language skills, FLAs provide for students an insight into a different culture and can also provide more motivation for language learning as such. Pupils love to hear about differences and similarities between the two countries; some pupils genuinely do not understand the concept of speaking other languages until they meet them.

In the centenary year competitions were held throughout the UK to highlight the contribution which FLAs make to language learning in their schools.

A selection of competition entries is featured on the right.

Assistants are obviously quite close in age and interests to their students who like the different relationship they have with them and are very curious about them.

The more academic students enjoy the opportunity to converse with a young native speaker who is au fait with the latest youth trends in their country.

There is a more relaxed environment – we are more comfortable to say what we can when we feel like it.

It is very enjoyable – it makes a change from normal lessons.

It's great working with a real person (sic) because you learn how to say things well and they really make you talk – you can't get away with just sitting there!

With native speakers the authenticity feels better.

The FLA has much more time for you and you work at your own pace.

It's cool to have support and a more informal feeling than lessons – it's easier to speak as it's a small group.

They give you inside information from someone who has experienced living in Spain and what they think England is like.

It's independent, fun and really improves your vocabulary.

You can discuss problems 1-1; as long as you try things out during the session and are not too reserved, it will help your confidence.

They are French and have a lot of French experiences.



1991
World Wide Web's first site online

1992
Maastricht Treaty signed

1993
Audrey Hepburn dies

Leading the way

The people who make it all work

The commitment of Central Bureau and, latterly, British Council organisers of the Assistants programme has been widely recognised and acclaimed over many years and that is partly illustrated by the vision for the programme that is shared and passed on.

The programme is simply the most effective way I know of changing lives and broadening horizons through a close and hands-on association with another country. Language improvement may be the prime motivating factor but the benefits go far deeper.

Even though there may be different emphases, partner countries share a similar understanding of the programme and that is one of its great strengths.

It is remarkable, given the wide variety of cultures and administrative practices represented among participating countries, how closely values and objectives are aligned.

Most rewarding is the heart-warming feedback from schools and returnees and the satisfaction of moulding such a venerable and successful programme to changing circumstances. Least rewarding, perhaps, is the recognition that increasing pressures on schools and teachers can leave Assistants vulnerable and unsupported.

The programme has thrived for 100 years because it enables participants to come face to face with a real foreign community; they have a meaningful mission in a structured environment. The formula is simple and cost-effective: receiving schools pay for what they need and, in the process, enable the Assistants to acquire the skills they desire. Administrative arrangements work because they are tried and tested,

1994

World Trade Organization created

have been adapted over the years and are the responsibility of dedicated professional staff in each of the participating countries.

Widening the net

Tony Male was director of the Central Bureau from 1986 until 1999. Paddy Carpenter was assistant director and subsequently deputy director of the Central Bureau for many years, and during the whole of that period he had overall responsibility for the Assistants programme. Both have clear and gratifying memories of the scheme and of their involvement in it but also see its development in a broader context.

In June 1974 I joined the Central Bureau as head of Teacher and School Exchange. During a secondment to the Quebec Ministry of Education in 1980 we were able to set up a reciprocal Language Assistants programme. The circumstances illustrate another facet of the scheme: at the crucial point where I was presented to Roger Haeblerlé, the senior official in the Ministry who needed convincing, he graciously allowed me to speak my piece without interruption and then agreed to the proposals. Things do not normally happen that fast. It turned out that he was originally from Alsace and had been an Assistant himself. The principle held good in many cases: wheels turned smoothly where senior colleagues at home and abroad had shared the experience. And there were many. Yves Martin, former Doyen de l'Inspection Générale in France and Karl-Heinz Rinke, former Director of the Pädagogischer Austauschdienst are names that spring to mind immediately in this context.

When I became director of the Bureau in 1986 my responsibility was clearly for all our programmes. The officers running the Assistants programme were

1995

Bosnia peace accord ends three-year war



British Council programme officer, Julian Mayhew, with school pupils in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2005

fantastic. Resourceful, efficient and doggedly unshakeable. They needed to be. The sheer numbers, multiplicity of foreign partners and relentless annual timetable all add up to a huge perennial challenge. Our shared commitment was to creating an environment for participants which fostered speedy integration into schools while allowing the chemistry of immersion to work. Our greatest allies in this were the Language Advisers and their LEA networks.

I first went to Buenos Aires in 1994 to negotiate the reinstatement of the Assistants programme with Argentina. In the period 1969-82 the Central Bureau had placed a total of 132 Spanish-speaking Language Assistants from Argentina in schools and colleges throughout the UK. When I returned with Lord Henley in October 1995 the new agreement was signed and I

1996

Dolly, the cloned sheep, born in Scotland

heard Minister Jorge Rodriguez decree the programme to be in the national interest of Argentina.

As for cost-effectiveness, from 1965 until the point of my retirement in 1999 the Central Bureau/British Council had placed in excess of 155,000 Assistants. At that point – given its gloriously reciprocal nature – the administration of the programme took up about 9% of our resources. Unbeatable value from all angles!

Tony Male

In 1876 Vincent Van Gogh saw advertisements in newspapers in Paris for Assistants to teach in England. His first application, to a school in Scarborough, was rejected but on 31 March he received an offer of a post in Ramsgate. He arrived on Easter Sunday but within two months the school moved to Isleworth, west London. There he changed schools, and gave German lessons at the day school run by the local Congregationalist minister.



Looking back ... and looking forward

I was responsible for managing the Assistants programme at the Central Bureau in the 1970s and we used to say, back in those pre-Erasmus days, that it was clearly the world's biggest exchange programme, as well as the longest-running. In typical seventies' hyperbole I wrote in an article: 'they arrive with small change in their pockets from most of the world's currencies, weak and strong; their forefathers have known slavery and colonisation, migration, revolution,

empire and El Dorado; their cars, if they had one, would display most of the letters of the alphabet plus no doubt a sticker or two announcing the sympathies of protest and separatism.' And the point I was trying to make was that they came from cultural backgrounds immensely more varied than the four or five languages they represented.

As cultural carrier pigeons they bring into our schools their youthful curiosity and their tales from home. I say youthful because most of them are just that, not forgetting the lovely old gentleman, an exile from Franco's Spain, who was the Spanish Assistant in the school where I worked in France. Assistants are told in the official documentation that they are ambassadors for their country (my elderly Spanish colleague clearly was not) but what is more sure is that they nearly always return home, at the end of their year, as committed ambassadors of the country where they have worked as an Assistant.

They belong to that exciting and vulnerable age group to which everything seems to happen in a kind of 'cradle to grave' experience. Fortunately most of my memories of them are happy ones, sometimes the source of lots of laughs such as when I received a note from a school (before spellchecks were invented) wanting to 'make an appliance for a French Assistant'; and the time when a local authority adviser on the north-east coast of England wanted to know why the Bureau's allocation of 25 French Assistants that year included 23 Tunisians, only to learn that they had all requested to be there – and when you ask for Hull, you get it! No offence to Hull. On the contrary, they had simply followed the recommendations of their predecessors who spoke warmly of the hospitality they had received on Humberside.

Alongside the merriment there were also more sober moments related to Assistants. As an administrator I also had to live through some of their tragedies and the Latin American Studies Scholarship Trust, now administered by the British Council, commemorates the three young women who died at the beginning of their year in the earthquake that struck Mexico City in 1985.

But let me return to that article I wrote 30 years ago. Underlying much of what I wrote then was a growing belief that it was time to take another look at the Assistants programme. Should we still be talking about them simply as Language Assistants, using them almost exclusively in the languages classroom? Is there not some way of making them more available as Cultural Assistants to the whole school community, giving support and a sense of reality to other school activities, depending on who they are and where they come from? In fact, should we not extend the programme to include future teachers from countries whose languages we do not teach in schools, and to send our own 'non-language' students in return? This would provide for all potential teachers the same opportunity that is currently provided by the Language Assistants programme for future language teachers.

Paddy Carpenter

And it came to pass ...

The Comenius Assistants programme was created in 1995 under the EU Socrates programme. It sends intending teachers to schools throughout Europe to support the development of cultural awareness and language teaching. The UK sends and receives around 125 Comenius Assistants from the 30 EU member and accession countries each year.

1997
Death of Diana, Princess of Wales

1998
Good Friday Agreement
in Northern Ireland

1999
First elections for Scottish Parliament
and National Assembly for Wales

The future of the Assistants programme – the next 100 years?

The programme has survived two world wars, various periods when it has come under threat because of funding restrictions, additions and reductions in the number of partner countries involved and unceasing changes over the last century in the way that languages are taught. All of the evidence of this booklet points to the fact that the programme remains in excellent health and should continue to flourish and to bring benefits both to the Assistants themselves and to the schools where they operate for many years to come.

Throughout its evolution the programme has always been susceptible to certain changes – questions of eligibility, the duration of the period of appointment, mechanisms for preparation and support – and there have been some subtle developments in the role of the Assistant in schools as teaching styles and curricula have evolved. One of the most significant developments in this latter area in recent years has been the development of modern foreign language learning in primary schools.

The National Languages Strategy sets out the aim of giving every pupil in England the entitlement to learn a foreign language in Key Stage 2. The presence of a native speaker to support the MFL teaching in primary schools for at least part of the time is increasingly seen as a vital element and each year more and more Assistants are being allocated to primary schools, usually on a shared basis, to bring their unique presence to a wide-eyed and hugely enthusiastic audience. As one head teacher comments: 'it will be a clear illustration of the principle of Excellence and Enjoyment in action.' The British Council has produced a Starter Pack to support primary FLAs and

encourage a cross-curricular approach, emphasising the contribution which Assistants can make to cultural understanding.

The London Borough of Richmond has been employing FLAs in primary schools since 1992 to support its well-established project on the Early Teaching of Modern Languages. The lessons are based on a clearly designed syllabus and involve a great deal of puppet work and the playing of games. The FLAs are given a very comprehensive induction course and usually work alongside the teacher in the classroom, though some also take small groups to the library for short periods of time. They have also

participated in Family Language Learning sessions for parents and children to learn together in sessions after school.

The schools involved have been extremely positive about the venture. Their confidence in offering a language as a curriculum subject has been boosted by the presence of a native speaker, especially one who is young and usually able to relate easily to the children and to offer them cultural insights at an appropriate level. A recent development has been the involvement of a number of FLAs from Quebec who have introduced hitherto unknown vocabulary such as 'un muffin' and 'un bleuët' (blueberry tart)!



Frank Noon

Daniela Zeinsteger, Argentinian FLA in London, 2004-05

2000
Millennium celebrations

2001
Total solar eclipse

2002
The euro becomes currency
in 12 EU countries

The last word – What is so good about the Language Assistants programme?

A true celebration of the programme's centenary would not be complete without some final words from the people in the best position to comment on its success. Here are some views from the 2004-05 Assistants and their predecessors on how the programme impacted on them, and why, in their opinion, it should continue for another 100 years.

The FLA programme helps people here to understand Chinese culture and the Chinese language better and I, as an FLA, have become more self-dependent and more sensitive to the English language and culture.
Chinese FLA in Northamptonshire, 2004-05

The year as an FLA has allowed me to immerse myself into the culture and peculiarities of a foreign country, to gain insight into a different school and educational system and to get an overview of politics and social issues in the UK.
German FLA in Tyne and Wear, 2004-05

Being an ELA has meant I'm a lot more confident than I was. I now don't think anything of standing in front of 20 very noisy pupils and telling them all to be quiet, whereas at the beginning of the year I was much less sure of myself in that respect. This increased confidence will be very valuable later on in life.
ELA in Germany, 2004-05

The programme has given me a great insight into the culture and everyday life in Germany; 12 hours of teaching per week was very good experience, but also left plenty of time for me to join in with community activities, courses at the university in Münster, and to do some travelling at weekends and during the holidays.
ELA in Germany, 2004-05

The FLA programme: a wonderful human experience, a gateway to teaching opportunities and eventually the means to live a language to its full – a lifetime experience for each of us, isn't it?
French FLA in Scotland, 2004-05

It provided the impetus for me to change from home-loving country boy to open-minded global citizen.
ELA in France, 1985-86

Suffice it to say that the Assistantship is an absolutely excellent scheme which offers fabulous opportunity to those who believe that the study of languages should, in fact, be as much about achieving a high quality of verbal communication and dexterity as about isolating oneself in often fusty libraries over learned tomes.
ELA in Germany, 1977-78

This is an extraordinary programme that does miracles for European integration!
French FLA in England, 1972-73

I felt like a language-teaching Cinderella, brought all the way from home to be treated like a princess, respected, well looked after. It was fantastic!
Argentinian FLA in Scotland, 2003-04

I think the ELA scheme is an inspired scheme which contributes powerfully to international understanding and building a stable world. It would be marvellous if it could be larger and give more people the chance to have a positive international engagement in the way I did.
ELA in Germany, 1972-73

It unlocked a world unbeknownst to me. It showed me the value, worth and privilege of exploring a new land, culture and history. It allowed me to learn, observe and

participate in a way of life different from my own. I feel truly honoured.
ELA in China, 2002-04

It may have been only nine months in a life of 30 years but in many ways it has really made me the person I am.
ELA in Senegal, 1997-98

Initially I would say the main thing I learned from the Assistantship was to speak German, to be independent and resilient in life, but after 25 years, I realise the impact of the ELA programme in my life has been surprisingly far-reaching.
ELA in Germany, 1980-81

It was a muckle brow year I willnae forget.
French FLA in Scotland, 1976-77



Frank Noon

Yang Yanxian, Chinese FLA in London, 2004-05

2003
England wins Rugby World Cup in Australia

2004
Entente Cordiale celebrations

2005
London wins in bid to host
2012 Olympic Games

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About the editors

David Rowles was an English Language Assistant at the Lycée Louis Barthou in Pau in 1959-60. His abiding memories are of becoming acquainted with the wine of Jurançon, learning to speak 'real French', playing a season's football for a local league club, learning how to play *belote* during the *cours d'anglais* with the students in *Première* and trying – without success – to teach the *Sixièmes* to play cricket. In his role as a languages teacher and a schools' inspector he has continued to retain close contact with the Assistants programme throughout his career.

It was during David's year in the Pyrenees that he got to know Valerie's mother, and they subsequently married – after, of course, she had spent a year as an FLA in Hertfordshire in 1963-64!

Valerie Rowles, his daughter, was an ELA at the same school 26 years later. She recalls the sublime beauty of the *chaîne des Pyrénées* as seen from her apartment bedroom window, her first-hand experience of the apparent predilection of French doctors and pharmacists to prescribe several kilos of medication, whatever the ailment, the way in which she was able to meet so many new and interesting people from other countries as well as France, and how her horizons were genuinely enlarged.

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December 2005



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