

Essay

Experience of ACTIVE Training (England, Spain)

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1. Introduction

I experienced a language training during the 6 months from March 2015 to August 2015 in England and on-the-job training in Spain for 1 year in 2016. Since I joined the company, I had been interested in working overseas. I was given the opportunity in the ACTIVE (Ambitious & challenging Traineeship for International Value-added Experience, an overseas training program) and had valuable experience through this training. As this program was a language training, I will explain my experience regarding language.

2. Language School

First, I stayed in Bournemouth for 3 months to learn general English. Bournemouth is a town located on the southern coast of England.

I arrived at Heathrow Airport, was picked up by an English taxi driver, and then traveled around 2 hours to Bournemouth. Only me and the English driver were in the car, so I remember I felt anxious as I didn't know what he was saying.

I arrived at the house where I was supposed to stay and met my host family. An English couple who were kind and welcomed me (Photo 1).

Their son had already left home so they accepted me



Photo 1 Host family

and let me use his room.

They were enthusiastic rugby fans. When they watched a rugby match on TV, I heard cheering from their room, which surprised me wonder until I got used to it. A Korean student also stayed in their house.

Upon arrival, the host explained to me how to go to school, how to take a bus, meal times, etc. Although I could only understand them a little, I got away with saying "OK, OK" because of nervousness.

I started going to school from the next day. Luckily, the Korean student attended the same school and took me there, so I could keep out of trouble.

At first, the school held an orientation and we took a placement test to determine class levels. They told us to chat with students sitting next to we during break time. I turned around to find a South American student and tried to speak using a few words I knew, but it was far from a conversation.

I was the only Japanese in the school and I had to count on my poor English.

Many university and high school students attended this school with different purposes for learning English: studying English during a holiday, government-aided English learning, preparation to go to university and so on. Some were soldiers.

My classmates were from Korea, Mexico, Oman, Turkey, Kuwait, Cote d'Ivoire, Colombia, etc. (Photo 2).

As classes were determined based on the results of the placement test, I was put in a level higher than my speakry ability (judged from my written results) and felt very confused. Of course, all lessons were carried out in English and I had to ask questions in English. I was very nervous when I was told to introduce myself in front of more than 10 students.

Although I had received English education, the learning content was significantly different and focused on speaking, which surprised me. In schools in Japan, we listen to English, read and choose answers from A to D, or fill in the blanks. Here, we were expected to summarize and tell what you listened to and read, and talk to your classmates what you thought about it. We were always expected to output what we learned.

I was also simply surprised to see everyone scramble



Photo 2 Classmates

to speak by raising their hands straight away, as we generally answer to teacher's questions after being called by name in Japan. I was strongly influenced by the attitude of everyone who spoke out what she/he wanted to say using words and grammar they knew regardless of ability.

Students who speak assertively improve more quickly. In this environment, you will rarely have a chance to speak unless you speak spontaneously and your English level will be slow to improve. I tried to speak assertively, keeping in mind not to care about making mistakes in the same way as the other students.

However, I had never experienced such environment as speaking English around foreigners before I studied overseas. I was afraid of speaking at first and it took me about one and a half months before I could think like this. Since then, I found myself feeling that my conversations became longer. I gradually gained confidence and started to enjoy conversations in English.

When I think back, I think I started to have longer conversations after having learned a technique of using other expressions when I couldn't make myself understood to get through the situation.

We talked about the differences of each culture during the class. Students from the Middle East said they like Ramadan because they can understand the feelings of poor people. I felt that it is a strange custom.

Once a week, we played soccer as an after-school activity. I could make friends outside the class through soccer which was my hobby. In particular, I enjoyed playing soccer more than ever in the beginning, probably because of stress from not being able to speak English. While playing soccer, I didn't know how to ask a favor and I couldn't understand when someone asked me a favor. I now know how much effort professional sport

athletes playing overseas are making. At the same time, seeing them speak English with confidence, I gained motivation to learn (Photo 3).



Photo 3 After-school activity (soccer)

Though only gradually, I continued to use English all day and I acquired the English ability to order, shop, make reservations and travel. Just as I became used to the life in England, I moved to a different town to learn business English. The town was Cheltenham and it was in the countryside near the border with Wales.

My host family changed to a host mother from Morocco and I lived with a Saudi Arabian student.

Unlike the previous school, adult students from Europe, including France, Germany, Czech Republic, Italy, Sweden, etc. attended the new school to improve their English skills.

All of the students said they couldn't work if they didn't speak English. Some said that English is the common language in their company.

Unlike general English, we had to learn new, unfamiliar terms in Business English. The class consisted of a small group of around 5 students and the teaching speed was faster. The small confidence I acquired during the three months in the previous school immediately disappeared and I had to start from scratch. When I think back, I gained and lost confidence repeatedly.

Our class activities included practice for presentations, practice in explaining graphs and simulated meetings. I practiced explaining what KYB is using, what they are, and what they are used for.

Through learning in the language schools, I realized that we should "speak" foreign languages. Since then, I could understand how grammar and syntax are used in conversations. Honestly speaking, although it was a little hard until I began to have a certain level of conversations, this significantly changed my awareness towards foreign languages and made me think that learning them is enjoyable.

3. Language Study

I think that pronunciation is a barrier everyone faces when studying a foreign language.

There are some sounds that can be a problem for Japanese (R, TH, V, etc.). I couldn't make myself

understood with these sounds unless I pronounced them clearly with correct mouth movements. Before I went overseas, I honestly thought it wasn't a big problem, but it actually was.

I asked the host family, "can I borrow a DVD?" but they didn't understand at all even though I said it repeatedly. After that, they made me say "DVD" again and again during dinner time.

I had to move my mouth strongly when I spoke English. At first, I had muscle pain in my cheeks. We can speak Japanese without opening our mouths widely. It is important to speak out as you will not find what you are not good at until you speak, whether you are able to communicate or not.

A video site showing an approach to the barrier Japanese people may face in learning language was very helpful. For example, in order to pronounce the "R" sound, we can make a "Woo" sound in Japanese before saying "R." When I tried this, everyone was surprised and asked me "how did you improve so quickly?" Although I myself didn't notice so much difference, it seemed a big difference to native speakers. The grandson of the first host family was called Regan. When I saw him for the first time, I called him "Legan" and he corrected me "not Legan, woo-Regan." I thought it was the same, and pronouncing the "R" sound was a problem for me.

Although various ways to study English are introduced on the Internet, I think it is best to learn from your favorite things. Some recommend watching action movies and others say dramas. But if you are looking for learning materials, I think the best way to learn is to watch what you would like to watch as you are unable to continue learning unless you think it is fun. If you would like to get used to the language, you can read comics or anything. I think you should absorb the language from various things, not only from reference books. Learning a language is like muscle training. If you continue to speak, listen, read or write, you will gain these abilities.

The Korean student who stayed with me went on a trip and had his passport and wallet stolen. He couldn't return to England immediately. As he made same explanations in English at the embassy and school, he explained the situation better as he spoke.

You can never improve language skills in a short period and the only way to learn a language is to gain ability little by little.

4. KYB Steering Spain, S.A. (hereafter referred to as KSS)

After the 6-month language training in England, I started an internship training in KSS Quality Management Department in January 2016.

KSS's clients and suppliers are from the U.K., Germany, France, Spain, etc., and we communicated in each of their languages. To my biggest surprise, we used

different languages (English, Spanish and French) in a single meeting for our clients from different countries. Materials of past results were also prepared in English, German, etc. and local staff working there use two to four languages at a high level. I felt as if I was knocked over as I struggled with English alone.

You need to communicate what you think accurately in practical English. As I was not good at practical English, I couldn't get information how I imagined. I was often in a position of communicating between Japan and the local site. It was rather difficult to transmit what the Japan side intended to say to the local site and vice versa.

As not all the local employees spoke English, I sometimes had to speak in Spanish. I started from not knowing how to read letters and numbers, I learned a few words every day by communicating in Spanish, just like I learned English.

Japanese expatriates require English or local language ability, although it depends on their position and location of work. The local language is used in internal meetings and English for clients. We spoke in Japanese when we communicated with the Japanese and interpreted to Japanese as needed.

5. Camino de Santiago

During my stay in Spain, I walked the paths in Camino de Santiago (meaning "the way to Santiago") on weekends and holidays. These are like pilgrim paths in Japan and the paths are registered as a World Heritage site. They are also pilgrimage routes for Christians and they walk about 800 km to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, located between western France and western Spain. Basically, you can always follow the arrows on the routes to the destination without getting lost (Photo 4).

The reason that I challenged this walk is because KSS is in Pamplona, a town located on one of these paths, and I found out during research that I could speak with people from various countries. It is impossible to walk all the routes, I walked when time allowed and headed to the destination using trains and buses.

I started walking at around 6:30 every morning and walked 25 to 35 km a day. Loaded with around 20 kg in a backpack, I walked through fields with grazing cattle, vineyards and barley fields, and sometimes through dark forests using a head light.

As heavy luggage can be a burden when walking a long distance, people threw away unnecessary goods on the way as a common sense. Some even ripped and threw away pages of novels and guidebooks.

Pilgrims who don't usually walk so much had many blisters on their feet. Walking in sweltering midsummer heat sometimes made me wonder why I was walking there.

I arrived at an Albergue, an accommodation for pilgrims by evening. I had dinner and went to bed around

8 pm, exhausted, and continued to walk the next morning. This was my daily routine during the pilgrimage.

Albergue is run by volunteers and you can stay reasonably for less than 10 Euros. This is one of the reasons why these routes are popular among tourists. However, I needed ear plugs to block snoring as we shared a room with others. I even stayed in a room with 100 people at the most.

In the final destination of Compostela, pilgrims and tourists who completed the pilgrimage can participate in Mass every day (Photo 5). There, they held a ceremony called botafumeiro, where eight adults pull ropes and swing about a large censer (53 kg, 1.5 m long) hanging on a pulley on the ceiling at a maximum speed of 68 km per hour. This was amazing. Originally, the ceremony began for the prevention of plagues and epidemics.

As people gather on these routes from all over the world, I could meet and speak to new people every day during breakfast, walking, lunch and dinner time. I chatted with a group of Irish people and spoke Spanish with Spanish people without using a dictionary. Actually, conversations between natives were so fast that it was difficult to understand, though I improved my language abilities during the journey. I recommend visiting this place for people who would like to learn foreign languages.

6. In Closing

I greatly appreciate all the people who gave me this valuable training opportunity and the local staff and expatriates who I worked with in KSS. I would like to utilize the experience I gained during the training program in future work.



Photo 4 Camino de Santiago (arrow sign)



Photo 5 Santiago de Compostela Cathedral

Author



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Joined the company in 2008.
 Pump Engineering Dept., Automotive
 Components Operations.
 Engaged in design and development of
 vane pumps.