

## Chapter 7

# LANGUAGE ASSISTANTS

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## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE INSTRUMENTS AND THE RATIONALE**

In this chapter we will discuss the data concerning language assistants obtained from the post-lesson interview with the language assistant and the language assistant questionnaire. Firstly, we will explain the structure of the instruments and the rationale for using them. Then we will present the nature of the sample. This will be followed by a detailed description of our findings and the implications. Finally, we will draw conclusions and make recommendations.

### **The Language Assistant Questionnaire<sup>1</sup>**

The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions. There were Yes – No questions, Likert-style questions and open questions. The assistants were asked for information about their backgrounds, the induction course and the observation period, their inside and outside school experiences, their impressions of life in Slovenia and their knowledge of Slovenian.

Our rationale for using a questionnaire was that we<sup>2</sup> believed the assistants would be more likely to answer truthfully, if they did not have to worry about an interviewer writing down their answers and they would also have more time to formulate their answers (see *Appendix 8*).

### **The Post-Lesson Interview with the Language Assistant<sup>3</sup>**

The interview was conducted immediately after the lesson by the observer in the native language of the assistant. It was a structured interview consisting of 22 questions. The assistants were asked about the observed class, their planning of the lesson, their usual work in the classroom, their co-operation with language teachers, their participation in extra-curricular activities and their training needs.

The reason we used an interview was to allow the assistants to give insights into the observed lesson immediately after it had taken place. In this way the observer would be able to determine whether this was an example of a typical lesson with the assistant, as not only the language assistant was interviewed, but also the teacher and the students. It was hoped that this would contribute to a clearer picture of how lessons with the assistant were perceived (see *Appendix 5*).

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<sup>1</sup> From now on in this chapter 'Language Assistant Questionnaire' will be referred to as 'questionnaire'.

<sup>2</sup> From now on in this chapter 'we' refers to the Baseline Study Team.

<sup>3</sup> From now on in this chapter 'Post-Lesson Interview with the Language Assistant' will be referred to as 'interview'

## **THE NATURE OF THE SAMPLE**

We observed 34 lessons by 33 assistants, two of these were performed by the same assistant. As he was observed twice (at two different schools), he was also interviewed twice. However, he only completed one questionnaire. Although 29 assistants received questionnaires only 26 responded. Unfortunately, the four French assistants did not receive questionnaires, which meant that no questionnaires were completed by French language assistants. Of those who filled in the questionnaires four were German, two Italian and 20 were English speakers.

We observed lessons in 31 schools. At two grammar schools two observations took place, one in German and one in English, and in one grammar school observations of the French and English assistants took place. Of the schools observed five were primary, eight were vocational, 17 were grammar and four were mixed (vocational and grammar).

Among the assistants there were 23 English speakers, four German, four French and two Italian.

## **EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS**

### **Background Information about Language Assistants**

We expected that language assistants were likely to have a degree in their own language, a foreign language or in education. The results surprised us as this was only the case for 50 per cent of those asked. The other 50 per cent had a degree in an unrelated subject. Of the 14 assistants who were in Slovenia for a second year or more eight had a degree in their own language or a foreign language, whereas the remaining six had a degree in other subjects. It was thought that those who had a degree in subjects other than languages were not likely to stay another year, as they were likely to move on to other professions. However, the results do not support this.

Of those responding to the questionnaire 11 were in Slovenia for the first year as opposed to 15 who had been here for more than a year. This shows that the majority of the assistants are here for their second year or more. When questioned as to whether they had worked as a language assistant elsewhere, seven responded positively and 18 negatively. This shows that only a minority (7 of 26) had had experience as a language assistant in other countries.

We expected that although some assistants had not been assistants before, they may have had some previous teaching experience. We were interested in whether having previous teaching experience would affect the way they answered questions 6a, 7, 8, 9 and 23 in the questionnaire (see *Appendix 8*). We found that 19 of the 26 replied that they had had previous teaching experience. We then went on to ask those who had responded positively to give examples of previous teaching experience. We assumed that assistants would have had different kinds of previous teaching experience and as we can see from *Table 7.1* this was in fact so. They had experienced teaching different subjects, not only languages, to different age groups and in different environments. It should be noted that from the data we cannot see how many people had actually taught their native language as a foreign language.

*Table 7.1 Examples of assistants' previous teaching experience*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Teaching abroad</i>	7
<i>Private tutoring</i>	6
<i>Teaching adults</i>	5
<i>Summer schools</i>	2
<i>Nursery schools</i>	1
<i>Volunteer work</i>	1
<i>Teacher training</i>	1
<i>Teaching ESL</i>	1
<i>Teaching Music</i>	1
<i>Teaching Maths</i>	1

We expected that those with previous teaching experience of any kind would have more enjoyable experiences in teaching and living in Slovenia. Therefore we cross-tabbed the answers to question 4 *'Do you have previous teaching experience?'* with question 6a *'Have your expectations about Slovenia been met professionally?'*, question 7 *'Was the induction course informative enough?'*, question 8 *'Would you have appreciated some advice on classroom management (at the induction)?'*, question 9 *'Could you in any way contribute to future induction courses?'* and question 23 *'How would you rate your time as a language assistant?'*. The results were as follows:

When comparing question 4 with 6a, we found that only two assistants with previous teaching experience had not had their professional expectations met, whereas 17 had. With those who had no teaching experience, only one of the seven had not had their professional expectations met.

When comparing question 4 with question 7, we found that seven people with previous experience found the induction course informative, whereas four did not, and eight did not attend. This result may show that those with previous experience do not think that it would be useful to attend a course, but as is shown by those who did attend the course it can also be useful for those with prior experience. Of the seven with no previous experience, three found the induction course informative, two did not and two did not attend.

When comparing question 4 with question 8, we found that 12 of those with experience would appreciate some advice on classroom management, six would not, and one failed to answer. Not surprisingly, all seven without experience would appreciate some advice on this matter. Thus the majority of assistants, whether with or without experience, would

appreciate some advice on classroom management.

When comparing question 4 with question 9, we found that of those with experience, 17 (out of 19) would be prepared to contribute to future induction courses, and four out of seven without experience would also be. In general people are willing to collaborate on future induction courses.

When comparing question 4 with question 23, 13 of those with experience said that their time in Slovenia was '*excellent*', whereas only one of those without experience gave the same answer, and the remaining six answered '*good*'. This shows that, whether they are experienced in teaching or not, the majority of assistants enjoy their time in Slovenia.

We can conclude from this data that there is no evidence that previous teaching experience would make a difference to the professional life of an assistant in Slovenia.

Another point to consider is that assistants could have worked previously with groups of children and adults and not considered it as teaching experience. In addition, they may have been used to working with people and groups. As we expected, the assistants had different kinds of relevant experience dealing with people as seen in *Table 7.2*.

*Table 7.2 Types of other relevant experience the assistant may have*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Work with adults</i>	5
<i>Work with children</i>	4
<i>Experience living abroad</i>	4
<i>Life experience</i>	4
<i>Theatre experience &amp; radio/TV work</i>	3
<i>Classroom management training programme</i>	2
<i>Team work</i>	1
<i>Methodology courses</i>	1

It is difficult to comment on this data as relevant experience is not defined and is therefore subjective. The activities mentioned above are varied in content as well as in social aspects, which means that language assistants had very varied experience.

### **Training**

Firstly, we wanted to know the assistants' opinions on the induction course, which is arranged when they first arrive in Slovenia and prior to them teaching at school. Secondly, we were interested in how they felt about the observation period, which also occurs before they start teaching and involves observing various classes, which they will eventually teach. They were also questioned about their training needs and interest in the organisation of official meetings. The findings are presented below.

### **The induction course**

Out of the 26 assistants who answered the questionnaire only 16 had attended the induction course. It should be mentioned that the majority who did not attend had previous teaching experience. Six assistants said that they did not find the course informative and they gave varying reasons. However, two of them mentioned that there was no advice on classroom management. Of those who found the course informative six said the most useful aspect was obtaining information directly from experienced assistants. They also appreciated the information about Slovenia and the Slovenian education system. Another useful aspect was meeting the mentor. We expected that the assistants would claim that learning some basic Slovenian was one of the most useful aspects of the induction course, but the findings show this was not the case.

The expectations that assistants would be willing and interested to be involved in future induction courses proved to be correct. 21 of the assistants said they would be willing to contribute. Not surprisingly, the two who said 'no' had never attended an induction course. The most popular suggestion was that the assistants could help by sharing experiences. In addition, it was felt that they could give information on classes and the teacher-assistant relationship.

### **Training needs**

The assistants mentioned some of their training needs in the interview as seen in *Table 7.3*.

*Table 7.3 Assistants' training needs*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Classroom management</i>	11
<i>Foreign language teaching methodology</i>	6
<i>Induction course on Slovenian school system</i>	4
<i>None</i>	4
<i>Slovenian language course</i>	3
<i>Foreign language teachers' seminars</i>	1
<i>Language assistant seminars</i>	1
<i>Drawing (painting) classes</i>	1
<i>IATEFL conference participation</i>	1
<i>Getting familiar with Slovenian culture</i>	1
<i>Debate club seminar</i>	1
<i>Class technology</i>	1
<i>Don't know</i>	1

We expected that everyone would appreciate some advice on classroom management; the fact that 19 people answering the questionnaire and 11 when interviewed said 'yes' to classroom management advice, shows that this is important. It is surprising that four assistants who were in their first year within the Scheme said that they would not

appreciate advice on the matter. However, all four of them had previous teaching experience. Six assistants would appreciate foreign language teaching methodology. Four assistants would like more information on the Slovenian school system. No further training was required by four assistants.

### **Observation period**

The expectation was that all assistants would observe classes before starting to teach. The results show that six people did not. Four of these were assistants in Slovenia for the first time and even more worryingly, two of them also had no previous teaching experience.

As seen in *Table 7.4*, if we disregard the types of schools, then the average length of observation was 1 week. There is no straightforward explanation why in grammar schools this period lasts only a few days, but this is worryingly short.

*Table 7.4 Length of observation period*

<i>Type of school</i>	<i>Average length of observation period</i>
Primary	1 week
Vocational	2 weeks
Grammar	a few days
Mixed (Vocational and Grammar)	1.5 weeks

As regards the usefulness of the observation period 16 assistants (out of 20) answered positively and four negatively. All of those answering positively said the reason was that they received important information about classes and teaching styles. The ones who said it was not useful were mostly those returning for the second year or more.

### **Official meetings**

Official meetings are intended to be both of an informative and social nature. One is organised for assistants during the year. The expectation was that assistants would be willing to share experiences with one another, and this was a correct assumption. However, it is worrying that three of the five who did not attend any meetings were in their first year in Slovenia. The majority of those who attended enjoyed the meetings and the reasons stated were social and the sharing of ideas and experiences.

### **The assistants' perception of classroom activity**

All the information concerning the assistants' perception of classroom activity was obtained from the interview, which occurred immediately after the observed lesson. We were hoping to discover how the assistants felt about both the performed lesson and their lessons in general.

### **The observed lesson**

As it would be expected the majority of language assistants had a positive attitude to the lesson we observed. When asked whether it went as planned only three assistants answered negatively and, in fact, two even stated that it went better than expected. The only real reason for the lesson not going as planned was that students were slower than usual. However, on the whole the assistants thought that the students' response was typical. We

were also interested to know whether the assistants were satisfied with their own performance and as expected all except one, who did not know, were satisfied with their performance. When answering the question on the teacher's performance half of the assistants said that they were satisfied with the teacher's input. However, this does not mean that the other half were dissatisfied with the teacher's input. On the contrary, the assistants were satisfied with the fact that there was no teacher's input. We can assume that this was part of the plan, as already mentioned, the majority of the lessons did go as planned.

Another important point to mention is to do with the planning of the observed lesson. As seen in *Table 7.5*, there were some discrepancies here in teachers' and assistants' answers to the same question. 23 assistants said that they had done the planning alone as opposed to eight who had planned together with the teacher. Only 12 teachers answered that the planning had been done by the assistants themselves. We could speculate from these answers that the teachers and assistants do not always agree on whose work is put into the planning.

*Table 7.5 Who did the planning of the observed lesson?*

	<i>Teachers' view</i>		<i>Language assistants' view</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	1	3.3	3	8.8
<i>Language assistant</i>	12	40.0	23	67.7
<i>Both</i>	17	56.7	8	23.5
<i>Total</i>	30	100	34	100

The expected time for planning the lesson was approximately two to three hours. However, the amount of time taken was varied. Two assistants took no time at all whereas 13 took at least two hours, 19 assistants took up to one hour to plan a lesson (see Chapter 5, *Table 5.2*).

### **Skills**

During the interview we also asked questions relating to classroom practice in general. We thought that language assistants would mostly deal with the skills of speaking and listening. As is shown in *Table 7.6* this is in fact the case. However, they also practised the other two skills, namely reading and writing. It is clear that assistants practise more than one skill.

*Table 7.6 Skills practised by the assistant*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Speaking</i>	27
<i>Listening</i>	17
<i>Reading</i>	9
<i>Writing</i>	8

However, the occurrence of skills was slightly different in the observed lessons. See Chapter 4, *Table 4.6* for comparison.

### Materials

As far as the use of the textbook is concerned, nine assistants use it, eight never use it, 11 use it rarely and the remainder use it for supplementary material. Of those using the textbook, the majority use it for topics and only a few for pictures or because they have to. Besides the textbook other materials and equipment are used during the classes with the assistant. These are varied, and are included in *Table 7.7*.

*Table 7.7 Materials and equipment used, excluding textbooks*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Newspapers/magazines/books/brochures</i>	39
<i>Computer/Internet</i>	18
<i>Cassettes/CDs</i>	14
<i>Video</i>	7
<i>Postcards/pictures/photos</i>	6
<i>Teacher prepared material</i>	4
<i>Realia</i>	3
<i>Overhead projector, overhead transparencies</i>	3
<i>Worksheets</i>	2
<i>TV</i>	1
<i>Photocopies</i>	1
<i>Blackboard</i>	1

As expected assistants mostly use original printed material (39 cases) and the computer/Internet (18 cases). And in 14 cases music (cassettes, CDs) was used which came as a surprise.

### Topics

We expected the assistant would be quite free in choosing the topics, and in fact, 25 thought they did have freedom in choosing them, as opposed to only two who considered that they did not have any freedom. For more detailed information see *Table 7.8*.

Table 7.8 Freedom in choosing the topics

	No.	%
<i>Entire</i>	7	20.6
<i>Quite a lot</i>	18	52.9
<i>Some</i>	5	14.7
<i>Not much</i>	2	5.9
<i>None</i>	2	5.9
<i>Total</i>	34	100

### The way the lessons are organised

We expected that the favourite organisation of the lesson would be team teaching while the results on the usual organisation of lessons show that 29 assistants solo teach, 14 team teach, five teach in split classes and six combine all three options. This can be seen from Table 7.9.

Table 7.9 Usual organisation of lessons

	No.
<i>Solo teaching</i>	29
<i>Team teaching</i>	14
<i>Split classes</i>	5
<i>A combination of all</i>	6

One of the assistants commented: *'I like solo teaching because it gives me total control over exactly how much material to teach and what kind of practice exercises to design. However, team teaching would allow teachers to learn from each other and help overcome problems as a team. The teaching profession desperately needs this.'*

When asked which they preferred the assistants answered solo teaching followed by team teaching and finally split classes. The reasons why they preferred a certain type of teaching were as follows:

Respondents that answered *'team teaching'* gave the following reasons:

- *good for discipline*
- *shared responsibility*
- *two heads are better than one, students get more attention.*

Respondents that answered *'solo teaching'* gave the following reasons:

- *simpler class management, more interesting*
- *other teachers are not interested in team teaching*
- *language assistant is used to it.*

Respondents that answered *'split classes'* gave the following reasons:

- *basic level holds back the higher level students*
- *more independent*
- *more opportunities for speaking.*

The fact that solo teaching was preferred and most usually practised on the part of language assistants, which is in opposition to the general idea of the Scheme, namely that team teaching should be the most common option, could be explained by the possibility that language assistants thought they were team teaching only when both the teacher and themselves were actively involved in the lesson. They might not have considered mutual planning or the teacher just helping the students as team teaching.

We expected the assistants would need some guidance from the teacher, especially in organising the class and dealing with discipline. Our expectations were met as only seven assistants said that they definitely did not need any guidance from the teacher and, as the results show, when asked what the language assistants would like to do at the induction course, 11 answered they needed classroom management skills training. More information is given in *Table 7.10*.

*Table 7.10 Need for guidance from the teacher*

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	9	27.3
<i>No</i>	7	21.2
<i>Partly</i>	13	39.4
<i>At the beginning</i>	2	6.1
<i>Depends on the teacher</i>	1	3.0
<i>Rarely</i>	1	3.0
<i>Total</i>	33	100

Two of the assistants commented:

*'One can always learn from a teacher, especially someone like your mentor who has been teaching for a long long time. I like listening to the teacher's advice and learning from her.'*

*'A close relationship with the teachers would help. Some kind of guidance would be a very good thing in the first three months. For good guidance a very good relationship between the assistant and the teacher is needed'.*

### **Timetabling**

As anticipated there was a difference in whether the assistants saw all classes in the school and also in the frequency of their visits to the classroom. As seen from *Table 7.11*, 18 assistants taught all classes whereas 16 assistants did not see them all. Nearly all French, German and Italian assistants teach all classes which could be explained by the fact that there were fewer classes and students studying these languages, especially in the case of French and Italian, and therefore these assistants had more opportunity than those teaching English to visit all classes.

Table 7.11 'Does the assistant teach all classes?'

Language Assistant	<i>Teaches all classes</i>		<i>Does not teach all classes</i>	
<i>French</i>	4	100%	0	0%
<i>German</i>	3	75%	1	25%
<i>Italian</i>	2	100%	0	0%
<i>English</i>	9	60%	15	40%
<i>Total</i>	18	-	16	-

We thought that the frequency of assistants' visits to the classroom would be once a week with the same class. In fact, this was partly true: 28 language assistants saw the same class once a week, while six of them saw the classes less often. Quite a few assistants would like to see their classes more often than they actually do.

### **The Assistants' Perception of School Life**

Aspects of school life, which included teaching and good relationships with students and teachers, were cited as the most enjoyable experiences of teaching and living in Slovenia. However, problems in school life, such as disorganisation and non-integration, appeared first on the list of the least enjoyable experiences of teaching and living in Slovenia.

#### **Assistant's relationship to students**

Generally speaking half of the assistants answering the questionnaire had an excellent relationship with the students, and the other half had a good relationship with them. Their suggestions for improving the already good relationship were smaller groups, better understanding of school rules on the part of the assistants, better understanding of the role of the assistant on the part of the students and the ability of the assistant to discipline. It should be noted that lack of discipline and uncooperative classes were two of the most often mentioned factors when listing least enjoyable experiences teaching and living in Slovenia.

#### **Assistant's relationship to the mentor**

The relationship with the mentor was seen as either excellent (more than 70%) or good and only three assistants said there should be better understanding of one another.

#### **Assistant's relationship to other language teachers**

All assistants reported that they had an excellent or good relationship with other language teachers. Suggestions for improvement included six assistants saying that there should be more advice on team teaching, lesson plans and strategies and three assistants suggesting that teachers should be more productive and flexible.

#### **Assistant's relationship to the headteacher**

Both the assistants and the headteachers were asked whether the latter were aware of the assistant's work in the classroom. There is a discrepancy between the results from the assistants and headteachers in this respect: 90% of headteachers said they were aware of classroom activity whereas only 70% of the assistants said the headteachers were aware. The majority of assistants said that the headteacher had never observed their classes and only half said that they conversed with the headteacher either sometimes or often.

### Assistant's involvement in extra-curricular activities

We expected that the language assistant would be involved in extra-curricular activities such as school magazines, debate club and some extra classes for good and weak students. The answers in *Table 7.12* show that the highest number of assistants, i.e. ten of them, were involved in excursions, trips, and sports days, nine were involved in magazines, six in language competitions, five in debate clubs, four in cultural days and conversations and four were not involved in any activities. When interviewed most of them failed to answer whether they enjoyed these activities.

*Table 7.12 Assistants' involvement in extra-curricular activities*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Excursions/sports days/trips</i>	10
<i>Magazines/school newspapers</i>	9
<i>Language competitions</i>	6
<i>Debate club</i>	5
<i>Drama/school performances</i>	5
<i>Conversation</i>	4
<i>Cultural days</i>	4
<i>None</i>	4
<i>Projects</i>	2
<i>Sketch competition</i>	2
<i>Proof-reading</i>	2
<i>Summer camps/research camps</i>	2
<i>Topic workshops</i>	2
<i>Going to theatre</i>	1
<i>Youth conference preparation</i>	1
<i>Matura dance</i>	1
<i>Various events</i>	1
<i>Conversation for teachers</i>	1
<i>Poetry club</i>	1
<i>English club</i>	1
<i>Partner school abroad</i>	1
<i>Reading badge/reading club</i>	1

To the hypothetical question of which extra-curricular activities the assistants would like to be involved in 15 said they would not like to be involved in any more (the data shows these

15 were already involved in extra-curricular activities), eight would like to participate in drama and five in the school magazine. The rest of their answers can be seen in *Table 7.13*.

*Table 7.13 Extra-curricular activities assistants would like to be involved in*

	<i>No.</i>
<i>None</i>	15
<i>Drama</i>	8
<i>School magazine/newspaper</i>	5
<i>Choir</i>	3
<i>Sports</i>	2
<i>School trips</i>	2
<i>Music</i>	2
<i>School radio</i>	2
<i>Debate club</i>	2
<i>International school project</i>	1
<i>Photography</i>	1
<i>Extra English/German</i>	1
<i>Conversation</i>	1
<i>Literature</i>	1
<i>Writing club</i>	1
<i>Reading club</i>	1
<i>Drama for teachers</i>	1
<i>Conversation for teachers</i>	1
<i>English club</i>	1
<i>'It depends'</i>	1

### **Assistants' professional expectations**

We were interested to see whether the assistants' expectations about Slovenia had been met professionally. All 26 assistants answered this question and 23 of them said that their professional expectations about Slovenia had been met. Those three whose expectations had not been met were all in Slovenia for their first year: one did not know what to expect, although he/she had previous teaching experience, one expected to be teaching smaller groups but the comment itself was not negative, and the third, who had teaching experience, said he/she had expected more independence.

## **The Assistants' Perception of Life Outside School**

For the majority of the assistants their expectations about Slovenia had been met. Their most enjoyable experiences concerning life outside school included culture, sport, travel and socialising. On the other hand, six assistants mentioned social isolation as one of their least enjoyable experiences. We assumed this to be connected to the language barrier, however after further investigation, it was discovered that this could not be proven by the data (three assistants had survival level Slovenian and three beyond survival level). Other least enjoyable experiences were bureaucracy, illness and accident.

## **Learning Slovenian**

It was expected that the assistants would say it was necessary to learn Slovenian beyond survival level. The results show that only 60% thought so. The expectation was that only a few assistants would speak Slovenian above survival level. However, the results show that this is not so. Almost half of them claimed that they were beyond survival level.

We were curious to see whether a better knowledge of Slovenian would affect relationships with students, mentors, other language teachers and headteachers, and the results show that there is no obvious difference between those with survival level Slovenian and those with beyond survival level. When asked to rate their time as a language assistant, 13 (of the 26 respondents) who had a survival level of Slovenian, rated their time as '*excellent*' or '*good*' (only one answered '*satisfactory*'), and all those with beyond survival level of Slovenian (12 assistants) answered '*excellent*' or '*good*'.

The Slovenian language was, however, a factor contributing to the enjoyment of teaching and living in Slovenia. For two assistants improving their Slovenian was a pleasant experience; however, four said that the difficulty of the language was an unpleasant experience.

## **Assistants' Overall Impressions**

Finally, we wanted to know how the assistants rated their time teaching and living in Slovenia, how they saw their role contributing to language teaching and purely as a matter of interest, the most noticeable differences between Slovenian school culture and the assistant's own. All assistants questioned except one rated their time as a language assistant as '*excellent*' or '*good*', only one said it was '*satisfactory*'.

Giving students more confidence, especially in speaking, giving first-hand information about the life and culture of the native country of the assistant, providing new resources, and introducing different ways of teaching to Slovenian schools were perceived to be the most important ways of contributing to the improvement of language teaching in Slovenia in the opinion of the assistants. It is interesting to note that when the headteachers were asked why they had applied to have an assistant, their answers corresponded to the first three ideas listed by the assistants in *Table 7.14* explaining their perception of their role in the improvement of the language teaching in Slovenia.

Table 7.14 How the assistants see their role contributing to the improvement of language teaching in Slovenia

	No.
<i>Giving students more confidence, especially in speaking</i>	15
<i>Giving first hand information about life and culture of the native country of the assistant</i>	14
<i>Providing new resources, different ways of teaching to Slovenian schools (flexibility in grammar teaching, "little is more", testing, formal writing)</i>	12
<i>Being in the role of "walking dictionary" for teachers and students</i>	5
<i>Inspire the students for English</i>	1
<i>Have demonstrated that the relationship with students matters</i>	1
<i>Offering extra-curricular activities</i>	1

Just as a matter of interest we decided to ask the assistants about the difference in school culture in Slovenian schools and the assistants' own. The expectation was that there would be some differences. Table 7.15 shows that this is so but it is difficult to comment on the data as the assistants come from varied cultures. The biggest difference seems to be discipline not being as strict in Slovenia as in the assistant's own school culture. There also seems to be some difference in the level of responsibility that the Slovenian students have for their education (mentioned by seven assistants) and in the way that they are taught and tested, as students are said to be expected to learn facts at the expense of creativity, (mentioned by seven assistants plus three who talk about Slovenian students having to regurgitate information rather than use it). Slovenian students have more chances to retake exams (mentioned by six assistants), but the school atmosphere was more tense (mentioned by four assistants).

Table 7.15 The most noticeable differences between Slovenian school culture and assistant's own

	No.
<i>Discipline – less strict than in Britain and the USA (more punishments especially for truancy)</i>	10
<i>Students in Slovenia do not like school - learn just to get marks or get to university and do not take responsibility for their education although they are supposed to be mature after 16 (parents in Slovenia are more often at school and rarely back the teacher against the student)</i>	7
<i>Too much emphasis on testing and evaluation and little creativity</i>	7
<i>Better chance for students of getting a good grade in Slovenia (retakes and oral correction)</i>	6
<i>More pressure and more tense atmosphere in Slovenian schools</i>	4
<i>In Slovenia students are expected mostly to regurgitate information rather than use it</i>	3
<i>No difference - youth is the same everywhere</i>	3

Table continued overleaf.

<i>Student-teacher relationship in Slovenia - not as much respect as in Britain</i>	3
<i>More emphasis and knowledge of foreign languages in Slovenia</i>	3
<i>Lack of help for fellow students except during tests (in Britain vice versa)</i>	1
<i>Teacher-teacher relationship in Slovenia is less co-operative (especially with tests)</i>	1
<i>Homework in Slovenia just glanced at (in Britain corrected)</i>	1
<i>Children are more competitive in Slovenia</i>	1
<i>Mixed classes, no uniforms required in Slovenia</i>	1
<i>Better organisation and teaching methods than in the USA</i>	1
<i>No split classes in Slovenia according to children's abilities</i>	1
<i>Bigger classes in Slovenia</i>	1
<i>Extra-curricular activities – fewer in Slovenia and during school hours (classes often empty or cancelled because of activities)</i>	1
<i>Students are less aggressive in Slovenia</i>	1
<i>Too much emphasis on Matura</i>	1

## CONCLUSIONS

- The Scheme is successful, assistants return for another year of teaching and rate their time in Slovenia as 'good' or 'excellent'.
- The type of degree and the teaching experience of the assistant are not key factors in their performance. Other kinds of experience are useful.
- On the whole the induction course was found to be useful and informative, by those who attended. Although not all attended.
- The need for classroom management, teaching methodology and other training was universal.
- Information on the Slovenian school system is appreciated by assistants.
- Assistants who take part in the observation period find it useful.
- Official meetings are a welcome way of sharing ideas and experiences.
- Students practise all four skills with the assistant, not just speaking and listening.
- Assistants mostly use original printed material and material from the Internet.
- Assistants have quite a lot of freedom in choosing the topics.
- There is much more solo teaching than team teaching or split classes. This could be due to misunderstanding of the term team teaching.
- Almost all assistants would appreciate some guidance from teachers.
- English assistants have less opportunity to teach all classes than assistants of other languages. This is because there are more learners of English.
- The majority of the assistants see classes once a week.
- On the whole, assistants have a good relationship with students, mentors, other language teachers and headteachers.

- Most assistants are involved in extra-curricular activities, although some would like more involvement.
- Assistants' personal and professional expectations have been met in most cases.
- A good knowledge of Slovenian (i.e. beyond survival level) is not necessarily a contributory factor to a more positive experience of teaching and living in Slovenia.
- Assistants aim to give students more confidence in speaking and information about life and culture of the target country.
- Discipline, learner responsibility and testing are treated differently in Slovenia to the assistants' own cultures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Existing assistants and mentors should be actively involved in induction courses.
- ❖ A few students should be invited to induction courses to provide information to the assistants on their experiences with an assistant and what they found useful.
- ❖ Induction courses should continue and the attendance of the assistants should be monitored.
- ❖ The period of observation should be monitored so that there is uniformity.
- ❖ Official meetings should be continued and assistants should be encouraged to attend.
- ❖ Assistants should be given advice on classroom management, teaching methodology and additional training.
- ❖ If possible, the assistants should see their classes once a week.
- ❖ Assistants should be encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities.
- ❖ Basic level Slovenian is advisable but after that the assistant should be allowed to choose whether or not he/she attends a language course.
- ❖ The varied background of the assistants should be exploited in the interest of the students and the school.
- ❖ There is still quite a high percentage of the language assistants using the textbook. Therefore there is a need for special materials to be designed for the language assistants in Slovenian schools.