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Learning Languages in Multilingual Contexts: Investigating Erasmus Students' Experiences regarding Language, Social Networks, and Culture

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Abstract

This comparative case study examines the differences and similarities of distinctive study abroad experiences regarding the learning of languages, social networks, and cultural adaptation, taking as main subject of study the individual perceptions of some Erasmus students from the University of the Balearic Islands. By examining this, I point out the huge impact that those contextual elements have on their overall learning and personal experiences. I use two major research tools: (1) a quantitative questionnaire and (2) a post-programme focus group discussion. The analysis specifically focuses on six students from the UIB who participated in an Erasmus programme, and gathers qualitative data from their visions on the experience. Preliminary results suggest that the objectives, tendencies and consequences of the study abroad experience vary depending on circumstances such as the specific degree in which they are enrolled, the host country, and the individual preferences of the students. Although some research has been done on the topic, this paper aims to go further by exploring the distinctions that make this variation possible in the multilingual learning context.

Key words: Study abroad; Erasmus; Language acquisition; Social networks; Culture

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1. Introduction

“It is often suggested that the principal advantage of study abroad is that it has the power to expand the four walls of the traditional language classroom to include the local streets and people of any given culture” (Mendelson 2004, 44). The truth is that, whether for linguistic purposes or individual challenges, the popularity of study abroad (SA) has only increased since it became a common trend among students. It was in 1987 when the demand for new learning opportunities led to the establishment of the so-called Erasmus programme, a European student exchange plan. Since then, projects of this kind have been crucial to education, resulting in both an increase in the learners’ possibilities to study in alternative contexts and an emphasis in the importance of informal learning. Such is the impact that SA has had on society that recent studies concerned with the learning of languages in multilingual contexts have shown a clear tendency towards the examination of this setting in concrete. However, given the endless dimensions and nuances that SA offers, several are the areas that require further investigation.

This paper is aimed at analysing the SA context in regard to language acquisition, social networks, and cultural adaptation. By doing this, it seeks to demonstrate the impact that those elements had on the experiences of different students from the UIB. Thus, firstly, it will start by providing a literature review of research findings dealing with such context; then, it will move to introduce the main research questions and, after that, it will proceed to further explain the methodology followed; finally, results will be presented and examined in a closing discussion section which will be followed by the conclusions. With a view to collecting the information that has made this investigation possible, some students who had the opportunity to participate in an Erasmus programme were invited to engage in a focus group discussion; therefore, all the contents discussed in the last parts of the study will be based on qualitative data obtained from the students’ views on the experience.

2. Literature review

Over the last decades, “most research in applied linguistics has focused primarily on the acquisition of an L2 in naturalistic settings, followed by the formal classroom in an FL setting, and IM contexts” (Llanes 2011, 190). Thus, much importance has been attached to the context in which the learning of languages takes place. Most of the scholars who have decided to examine different settings have done so by comparing them with each other (Collentine 2009; Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey 2004). Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004), in

particular, evaluate SA in comparison to other learning settings such as regular foreign language classrooms in an at home (AH) institution, and the intensive summer immersion (IM) context. Other authors, on the other hand, have reduced this comparison to SA and AH contexts (Collentine 2004; Llanes and Muñoz 2012; Juan-Garau, Salazar-Noguera, and Prieto-Arranz 2014). However, given its extreme popularity nowadays, “much research still needs to be done in the field of SA” (Llanes 2011, 190); not only due to the lack of data, but also because, as scholars such as Allen (2010) point out, “research on its linguistic and non-linguistic benefits provides inconclusive results” (453).

Much of the recent research conducted specifically on the analysis of the SA context has mainly focused on the language learning process. Thus, several studies have centred on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge in terms of oral accuracy (Juan-Garau 2014), both oral and written abilities (Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau 2011), morphosyntactic and lexical development (Collentine 2004), acquisition of lexical meaning (Ryan and Lafford 1992), and vocabulary improvement (Ife, Vives-Boix, and Meara 2000). Others, on the other hand, have taken a different approach by analysing the whole linguistic progress in the same paper (Grey et al. 2015; Llanes 2011).

Nonetheless, there are plenty of extra linguistic factors within the SA setting that should be taken into account. As Grey et al. (2015) suggest, “SA programs can differ according to the duration of the program, students’ proficiency in the target language upon entry, the type and context of course work, the type of student housing, and the nature and extent of opportunities for guided/structured cultural interaction, reflection, and experiential learning” (138). Therefore, given the multiple academic and cultural differences that can be found in SA programmes (see Engle and Engle 2003), apart from language acquisition, attention should also be paid to the cultural and social aspects that differ from one programme to another. Thus, although some scholars have explored SA from both cultural (Williams 2005; Anderson et al. 2006; Engle and Engle 2004) and social (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013; Shiri 2015) perspectives, these areas are still in need of further research.

Furthermore, not only the settings by themselves offer multiple variations, but also the individual differences of the students who take part in the programmes. Thus, with a large part of the investigations having been based on data of a quantitative kind, the individual dissimilarities that make each Erasmus experience different between each other have gone generally unnoticed. Therefore, “it is time to draw distinctions of a qualitative sort” (Engle and Engle 2003, 2). In order to achieve that, “recent work has stressed the need to respect the voices of individual students, beyond the statistics, in order to better understand their learning

process on both an academic and personal level” (Mendelson 2004, 44). Nevertheless, it has only been in the last decade that scholars have started to address the SA context taking the experiences and perspectives of the students as the main focus (Mendelson 2004; Allen 2010; Doyle 2009; Pellegrino 1998; Kaplan 1989).

3. Objectives

To begin with, it is important to make clear that the selected students have not been evaluated through any kind of test, neither in terms of linguistic gains nor cultural adaptation. Instead, what this paper seeks to do is to collect the learners’ impressions of their experience during the Erasmus programme. Therefore, having reviewed all the previous literature regarding the SA context and its multiple variations, the main purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of six Erasmus students from the UIB, with a view to obtaining key qualitative data that may contribute to filling some of the existing knowledge gaps. These views will be analysed in terms of language acquisition, social networks, and culture, meaning that the aspects which ended up being the main object of the debate will revolve around these three different SA dimensions. Finally, results will be considered in detail in order to answer the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: Which kind of social networks do students tend to build during the Erasmus experience?
- RQ2: To what extent are social networks influential in the students’ overall progress in terms of linguistic gains?
- RQ3: With which group of speakers do students manage to practise the language the most?
- RQ4: Is the type of accommodation and the relationship students have with their roommates significant to the SA experience?
- RQ5: Which variables condition the objectives and outcomes of the students in terms of language acquisition?
- RQ6: Does technology act as an obstacle to the cultural adaptation of the students or do they get to disconnect entirely from their country daily routine?

4. Methodology

As Mendelson (2004) suggests, “only in the past decade have researchers enthusiastically turned to a more qualitative point of departure to understand the nature of the [SA] context itself” (43). Thus, since much of the previous research has been conducted using quantitative evaluation methods, this study seeks to be completely based on qualitative data. Mackey and Gass (2005) define qualitative research as one “based on descriptive data” and which “does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures” (162). This kind of methodology has been used because, in this way, “the researcher can gain more than a surface understanding of a phenomenon, delving deep into the personal experiences of individuals and painting a much more intense picture than that allowed by statistical methods” (Pellegrino 1998, 92).

With a view to obtaining such qualitative data, students taking part in the investigation were invited to participate in a post-programme focus group discussion. “Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger 1995, 299). This data collection method creates group dynamics that enable us to collect qualitative data difficult to elicit otherwise (Harding 2013). Thus, apart from refreshing each other’s memories, students were able to compare their own experiences with the others’, resulting in both commonalities and discrepancies. In order to collect and analyse the information, the debate, which took place after the Erasmus experience, was conducted in English and recorded. Excerpts of such recordings will be reproduced verbatim and included anonymously in the results section.

4.1. Participants

The only time this study made use of quantitative methods was when examining the participants’ backgrounds. Before the focus group discussion, the six students were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding personal details about themselves and their Erasmus experience. To ensure homogeneity, they were all Spanish students from the University of the Balearic Islands. Thus, their mother tongue was either Catalan or Spanish. Apart from that, they also shared other aspects such as the year of degree during the experience abroad (third year), and the length of the stay (one semester). Finally, half of the students were women and the other half men; once again, to guarantee uniformity.

However, since it is always adequate to have variety in this kind of researches, several dissimilarities between the students can also be identified. First of all, three of them were English Studies students, whereas the others belonged to other fields of study (see Table 1).

Apart from that, excepting Mar and Silvia, each of the students participated in a different Erasmus programme; thus, the destinations were disparate. As seen in Table 1, there is no much variation in terms of age, but it also exists. Furthermore, the level of English before departing, which is totally in conjunction with the field of study, is also a significant difference to which attention should be paid. Finally, it is also important to take into account that, with the exception of two students, the others had already been abroad before their Erasmus experiences (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participant profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Field of Study	Level of English before Erasmus	Host City and Country	Previously abroad
Mar	Female	23	English Studies	C1	Sheffield, UK	Yes
Mónica	Female	22	Education	B2	Örebro, Sweden	No
Silvia	Female	22	English Studies	C1	Sheffield, UK	Yes
Lluís	Male	25	Tourism	B2	Innsbruck, Austria	Yes
Miquel	Male	24	English Studies	C1	Galway, Ireland	No
Iván	Male	24	Tourism	B2	Faro, Portugal	Yes

On the other hand, diversity is also recognised in regard to the aspects of greatest interest – language, social networks, and culture –. It is worth mentioning that most of the students taking part in the investigation stayed in a students’ residence hall during the SA programme; only two of them opted for a shared apartment (see Table 2). However, there is plenty of variety in terms of social networks, since whereas some of the students reported that they had been part of multiple groups of students – English native speakers, Catalan or Spanish speakers, and international speakers – , others mostly reduced their circle of friends to people from their same country; and only Mónica joined a group exclusively of international students. As for language acquisition, there seems to be a correlation between huge linguistic improvements and pre-programme lower levels of English. Finally, with respect to cultural adaptation, students’ general perceptions appear to be mainly positive.

Table 2
Participant experiences

Name	Accommodation	Main social network	Perceived linguistic improvement	Perceived cultural adaptation
Mar	Student's residence hall	Native speakers of Spanish/Catalan	Regular	Relatively great
Mónica	Student's residence hall	International speakers of English	Relatively huge	Great
Silvia	Student's residence hall	Social networks of all kinds	Relatively huge	Great
Lluís	Student's residence hall	Social networks of all kinds	Huge	Regular
Miquel	Shared apartment	Native speakers of Spanish/Catalan	Little	Great
Iván	Shared apartment	Social networks of all kinds	Huge	Great

5. Results and discussion

In this section, I incorporate all the findings regarding the students' representations of their experiences abroad. Such representations will be analysed and discussed with a view to finding an answer to the RQs raised before:

RQ1: Which kind of social networks do students tend to build during the Erasmus experience?

The first three students coincide on the type of social network, and their comments seem to suggest that the fact of meeting new people does not have to mean building new relationships. Miquel, for example, states the following:

Miquel: I went out with Spanish people. We made a group that it was about six, seven or eight persons. [...] I also met a lot of people from Ireland, or Germany, or Austria as well [...], although most of the time I hanged out with Spanish people.

Silvia and Mar claim that they were also in a group of Spanish people. However, the two of them try to look for the reasons that led them to do so:

Silvia: In the beginning, I just wanted to hang out more with English people [...] but [...] it never turns out as you wish, so we just hanged out more with Spanish people. [...] The fact that from the beginning we were four girls [from Mallorca], from the same university and [...] class [...] made it quite difficult just to expand the group.

Mar: I spent most of my time with Spanish people. It's because it's difficult to meet native people. [...] It's definitely easier to join other international students, because [...] they were living kind of the same experience. [...] I tried to join a society [...] [of] English people [...] [but] they weren't used to having internationals. [...] I think this pushes you to go to other social circles.

Lluís and Mónica, who mainly hanged out with international people, share Mar's opinion regarding local people and give their views on that; whereas Iván's answer contrasts completely with all the other ones:

Lluís: I made a lot of friends from all over Europe and the world [...] [but] I also found it difficult to make friends from Innsbruck [...]. Local people already have their group of friends and, at least in Austria, this circle was difficult to cross. [...] Since I am back from Erasmus, I *do* try to meet foreign people, because I know how it feels.

Iván: I lived in [a] country [...] similar to Spain, [...] and to meet local people was too easy. [...] As I was on the ISN group, I met a lot of international friends.

Mónica: When I arrived to the country, they had organized the orientation programmes [...]. They put [...] students from different countries so [...] there weren't people from your country; so [...] the only people which I hanged out were from other countries. [...] I went there totally alone [...], I needed to make friends. [...] I used to live with Swedish people and they didn't really hang out with us. [...] They don't really want to make friends for just saying goodbye.

RQ1's discussion

Although scholars such as Pellegrino (1998), suggest that students abroad “are exposed to frequent and intense opportunities to interact with native speakers” (91), findings in this research show that this is not always the case. Actually, they suggest exactly the opposite. On the one hand, some of the results support recent theories claiming that “[students] often fall back on social relationships with native speakers of their own language” (Dewey, Belnap, and

Hillstrom 2013, 84). However, they do not back up the theory that students with higher levels of the language build stronger social networks (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013). In fact, looking at the previous results, the students with a higher level of English are the ones that show a higher inclination towards hanging out with speakers of their same language, whereas the students with a lower level opt for groups of international people. Nevertheless, on the whole, all the findings support the assertion that the interactions that students have with local people tend to be limited (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013), and that the development of social networks with them is hardly ever the case.

RQ2: To what extent are social networks influential in the students' overall progress in terms of linguistic gains?

Whether they were in a group of foreign students or not, all the students show their concern about the impact of people on language learning. However, English studies students refer to more advanced steps of the language process:

Miquel: [I learned] a few idioms because I spoke with native people.

Silvia: My ear got used to different types of accents in the same environment. [...] I didn't manage to learn any other language because I didn't really hang out with people from other countries.

Mar: I found interesting that most English students in Sheffield were from other parts of England, so [...] I kind of learnt how people from some areas speak or [...] the words they use; [...] it changes a lot.

The other participants, on the other hand, stress the impact of interactions with foreign students on the language process and explain how they took full advantage of the situation:

Lluís: After my Erasmus I tried to find opportunities here to keep practising, especially with native people. [...] My best friends from the Erasmus are two guys from Ireland and another guy from Scotland. [...] I always thanked [them] when they corrected me. [...] When I met local people they obviously wouldn't speak English [...], so I needed to go hard on [German].

Iván: I improved my English with a lot of Erasmus people, but especially my Portuguese. [...] The most important to learn Portuguese was to meet local people.

Mónica: I met a lot of people and I found out that, with [...] English, you can communicate with people from every corner of the world. [...] When you stay there and you see how useful it is, you know that you have to keep practising. [...] Most of my friends from the Erasmus [...] are from other countries.

RQ2's discussion

Even if it is not with native speakers, results suggest that “social interaction in the L2 plays an extremely significant role in the language learning of SA participants” (Pellegrino 1998, 105). This improvement is noticed even in the students who already had a high level of the target language before departing, which supports the assertion that “proficiency fosters, and can be fostered by, interaction and social relationships with others” (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013, 87). In the same way, it indicates that if even those who already managed the language benefit from social interactions, those who had little knowledge of it can take full advantage of the situation. Students continually refer to this progress by establishing a constant connection between people and the learning of the language, especially when it comes to close friends. Therefore, this does nothing but support the statement that “the greatest benefit linguistically comes from interacting with close friends” and that “this is supplemented by interaction with people outside of one’s normal social circle” (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013, 104).

RQ3: With which group of speakers do students manage to practise the language the most?

Despite the potential subjectivity of the answers to this question, everybody seems to agree except for Miquel, who states the following:

Miquel: [I learned more] when talking to native English speakers, because they are the ones who manage the language in a perfect way.

Apart from him, the others show their preferences towards two main groups of speakers, explaining the manners in which each of them contribute:

Silvia: For me I think it would be a combination of [native and international speakers]. Even though it’s not their first language, [international students] know things that maybe we don’t. [...] Then, with native speakers, because they are natives. [...] It gives you little words that maybe you did know but you don’t usually use.

Mar: I agree with [Silvia]. [...] From native speakers, you learn how to sound natural or learn informal words, but [...] foreign students [...] are struggling with the same things you are, so they maybe know something and teach it to you, [...] whereas a native speaker doesn't understand that thing about learning.

Lluís: With native speakers, I 'cleaned' my English; I learned the use of [it]. [...] Non-native people [...] helped me to find or realise mistakes that I also used to make. [...] I improved my German with Austrian people mainly. [...] If you are with a group of native friends either you say something in German or you just shut up”.

Iván: There was no native English speaker, but the non-native English people I learned a lot from them. [...]. [...] I learned [Portuguese] the most with Portuguese people, but my best friend from the Erasmus, [...] from Granada, [...] helped me a lot.

Mónica: I learned more from the English native speakers, but [...] I felt more comfortable speaking with the ones [...] in exchange as me, because [...] they know how you feel when you are speaking another language and [...] doing the effort [...].

RQ3's discussion

Results in this section suggest no absolute truth, but they help to get a deeper surface of the experience of the students and to better understand the situations which most facilitate their learning process within the community. Apart from Miquel, who as a proficient student shows his preference towards practising the language with native students, the others tend to agree. All the comments seem to imply the idea that learning with native students serves to perfect the language, whereas the exchange of words with international students make students feel both more understood and comfortable. Therefore, it seems to be that the best for the language learning process is to have a combination of both types of speakers at your disposal. Nevertheless, Miquel's response suggests that students with a higher level of the language may be more interested in perfecting their linguistic skills rather than in practising with international learners of the target language, even when they have the same level.

RQ4: Is the type of accommodation and the relationship students have with their roommates significant to the SA experience?

Although he had no problems with his flatmates, Miquel shows awareness of the importance of such relationships during the experience:

Miquel: We went on a shared apartment. [...] We stayed four students [...] from Mallorca. [...] I *do* think that it is really influential the relationship you share with your flatmates, cause [...] we all shared good relationship, but we also met somebody who had to share apartment with a few other native Irish people and they got such a bad relationship that he wanted to go out.

Silvia and Mar, on the other hand, point out the limited encounters that they had with their flatmates, and Silvia in particular highlights the benefits of living with a family:

Silvia: With my flatmates, it was a tricky relationship, [...] I just got to hang out with [one of them]. [...] In my experience as an au pair, [...] I had to live with a family. [...] [There] you need to get involved with the language [...]. I could not speak Spanish with them. [...] That gave me a better level of English.

Mar: I stayed with two Chinese girls and two English girls. [...] I never saw the Chinese girls, they only went out [...] at night, [...]. The English girls were lovely [...] but just the first week my room got flooded, [...] so [...] I had to stay the rest of the year on my own in an emergency flat. [...] I didn't really make friends.

Lluís and Mónica, who lived in a residence, show no regrets about their choice, and Iván contrasts his experience with the foreign family and his Erasmus experience:

Lluís: I found it easy to build social networks, because I lived in a residence. [...] It is influential? *Definitely*. [...] My flatmates from the residence were mainly Spanish and it was easier to get in touch with them, [...] but I think it is only at the beginning. [...] I got along with everybody quite quickly.

Iván: I went also as an au pair [...] and I [...] don't recommend it. [...] I got to know that sharing the apartment with [...] people from another country is difficult. [...] I realised that if I wanted to go, it would be with Spanish people or on a residence. [...] [Thus], I had a flat with some Spanish people. [...] We met people from all around the world and [...] [local] people that in another situation would be difficult to meet.

Mónica: We used to live the exchange students with the students [...] from Sweden. [...] I was living with a German girl and six guys from Sweden. At the beginning, I got along with the German girl but with the guys [I didn't]. The main point is that you get along with the exchange students. [...] It was like your family there.

RQ4's discussion

The living arrangements issue is the one that probably enables us to better understand the students' overall experiences. In fact, those findings and the ones reported before show a clear connection between the type of accommodation and the development of social networks. For instance, the majority of the participants who either lived with speakers of the same language as them or had a bad or non-existent relationship with their flatmates, without taking into account the type of accommodation, are the ones who failed the most to build social networks once there.

Furthermore, Silvia's experience in particular suggests that the homestay experience with a native family is the one that offers more possibilities for language use and communication (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom 2013), whereas Iván's backs up Pellegrino's (1998) statement that "the same potential for negative social interaction exists in the specially-prepared homestay as in other spontaneous interactions" (110). On the other hand, Mónica's comment on her experience demonstrates that "students in nonhomestay arrangements have difficulty establishing relationships with members of the local community" (Shiri 2015, 10). Therefore, this suggests that it is the quality of the experience within the specific accommodation rather than the type of accommodation in itself the one that has the greatest impact on the SA experience.

RQ5: Which variables condition the objectives and outcomes of the students in terms of language acquisition?

English Studies students coincide with each other that, due to their advanced level, it was difficult to learn something new or become more interested in the language:

Miquel: Although you may say that [hanging out with Spanish people] is not the point of [...] Erasmus, [...] I didn't care. [...] It's not all about just learning, it's doing things that you are not going to do in your own country. [...] I did not improve my English at all, other than [...] most things that you don't learn at college or in the internet itself. [...] I didn't learn any other language, and my interest did not increase.

Silvia: I do agree with [Miquel]. I think our level is more and less consolidated, so what I did learn apart from idioms was [...] some of the vocabulary I've not had the chance to learn. [...] I didn't manage to learn any other language [...]. The only thing that maybe increased was my interest in speaking with Yorkshire accent.

Mar: Just like [Miquel] and [Silvia], I don't think in terms of formal English [...] I [...] got to improve, but I did [...] learn especially [...] slang, or words young people use. [...] I think that my interest in English [...] didn't really increase, [...] it was my interest [...] in terms of accents [...]. [...] I didn't manage to learn any other language.

Just the opposite was the case for the others students, who highlight both their huge improvement and their increasing interest for the language(s):

Lluís: I became more confident and more fluent to speak. [...] As soon as I felt [that], I focused on learning German. [...] My interest in learning English during the Erasmus didn't increase, [but] it *did* increase after the Erasmus, when I found myself not able to speak any more like I used to. [...] I wanted to learn more German and [...] I *had* to [...], so [...] my interest in German increased a lot during the Erasmus.

Iván: For me the Erasmus was really important for my language. [...] I went [...] with zero Portuguese and in six months I had the B1. [...] Probably I chose Portugal [...] because of Portuguese. [...] If you can communicate it's really important in a competitive world as [...] that of tourism. [...] We go to another country to learn another language and [...] English at the same time.

Mónica: When I arrived to Sweden, [...] my speaking was awful. I was really shy, I couldn't express myself [...] [as] I would like to. [...] I keep doing mistakes [...], but at least I don't feel that uncomfortable. [...] I just had to speak in English, I didn't have any other option, so I noticed a big improvement and I realized that to learn a language you have to keep practising.

RQ5's discussion

If there was any doubt about the influence of students' field of study on their intentions and outcomes during the SA experience, these findings demonstrate that this is one of the aspects of the students' background which most triggers variety between them. It is because of that that we notice a huge difference between the English Studies students and the ones enrolled in other university degrees. Whereas the first ones do not show any intention to develop their English language nor any sign of improvement in spite of going to English-speaking countries, the others constantly highlight their need to practise the target language.

This aspect is significant not only in terms of intentions but also in terms of outcomes, since the students who departed with a lower level of English are the ones that underline their huge linguistic improvements. In the same way, English students point out that they did not notice any increase in their interest for the language, whereas the interest of the others reached its highest point either during the Erasmus experience or after it. Furthermore, two of the students show their increased concern not only about English but also about other languages. Therefore, as one of the participants himself suggests, apart from the individual aspects that characterize each student, the field of study is a really significant element when it comes to the purposes and outcomes of students taking part in such programmes.

RQ6: Does technology act as an obstacle to the cultural adaptation of the students or do they get to disconnect entirely from their country daily routine?

Although they reported having had some difficulties at the beginning, all the students mainly describe their adaptation process as positive, pointing out that technology was not an impediment to it. Miquel, for instance, states the following:

Miquel: [It was] a little bit [difficult], [...] but [...] days go by and you learn. You adapt to the culture, and it is really cool. [...] With the advent of technology, I did not feel I was living my previous life. It was so different the routine, because I was with other people. I changed the chip. [...] It was just [...] [an] opportunity I was living to the fullest.

Apart from that, Silvia highlights the benefits of her first experience abroad once again, although this time referring specifically to the cultural process:

Silvia: To adjust to timetables was quite difficult but, [...] I think I am quite similar to English people [...]. [...] I *do* think it's important [to experience the culture], but the moment I [did] [it] the most [...] was the first time I was there as an au pair, because [...] I didn't know anybody. [...] [In the Erasmus], I didn't feel [...] I was living my previous life [...]. It is totally different from when we are here with our parents or friends. There, you [...] have to adapt and meet new people [...] I *did* miss my parents but I did not want to come back. I was weeks without talking to them.

For Mar, it was not difficult to adapt to the place, and she explains that by suggesting that, before the Erasmus, she already had an English lifestyle:

Mar: I don't think it was too difficult to adapt to the culture. [...] I think it's really important to experience [it]. [...] In regard to technology, I don't think it was so different for me [...]. [...] Here in Spain I watch English TV, [...] English football, I listen to music in English... so it's like living there. [...] I don't think it really influenced the way I lived, just the people I am more closed to.

The last three speakers not only describe their cultural adaptation as positive despite the differences between cultures, but they also point out how the experience changed them as individuals:

Lluís: There is a before and after Erasmus. The life I used to have before my Erasmus completely changed the first weeks [...]. [...] When I came back I still think I haven't recovered my previous life. [...] I am a completely different person now with other habits and other interests.

Iván: For me [...] [it] was really easy; [...] they have like the same culture as us. [...] They are difficult to follow in some things [...], but it was quite interesting to adapt to that culture. [...] It's a completely different life the one in the Erasmus and the normal life. [...] What changed me the most was when I came back to live with my parents again. It was so hard.

Mónica: It wasn't difficult for me to adapt to the culture; I really felt in love with [it]. [...] It is true that it was different from Spain, [...], but at the end you adapt to that; [...] That is the main point in travelling. [...] About technology, [...] it was really useful because I could talk or have skype whenever I wanted [...], but I don't think I missed my previous life. [...] My life there was so cool, [...] it had nothing to do with my life back here. [...] It's not like the real life; you are not going to live that again.

RQ6's discussion

As previous studies (Anderson et al. 2006) have already pointed out, it *is* possible that students participating in short-term SA programmes notice a progress in their intercultural competence. Although in the majority of comments the participants insist on the difficulties they faced at the beginning of the programme, they all end up claiming that they got to overcome such challenges and that they finally adapted to the culture of the host country. This aspect is crucial since, as Anderson et al. (2006) point out, "as our workplace and society

become more diverse, and as globalization of business intensifies, an individual's sensitivity to cultural differences combined with an ability to adapt his or her behavior to those differences will become increasingly valuable" (459). Apart from that, although all the students evaluate the Erasmus experience as beneficial to the cultural process, one of them, Silvia, highlights the importance that her previous stay in the home setting had for her in that sense, challenging some previous findings which question the effectiveness of such context in terms of cultural benefits (Shiri 2015).

On the other hand, it is also important to comment on the limited impact that technology had on the students' experiences. The question was intentionally raised in view of the possible influence that technological advances may cause on people, even when they are studying in a foreign country. Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom (2013), for example, point out that "learners who [maintain] strong ties with family and friends at home while abroad through email and telephone [fail] to create strong social networks and [suffer] linguistically" (86). However, findings in this study suggest just the opposite; that technology contributed positively to students' experience and that it did not influence their adaptation process. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that most students reported having changed as individuals, either during the Erasmus programme or after it, coinciding with previous results which indicate that SA participants undergo substantial changes in their views on themselves, their principles, and both the target culture and their own (Pellegrino 1998).

6. Conclusions

This investigation was initiated with the aim of demonstrating that the SA experience is much more significant for students than it may seem at first glance. With much of the previous research having specifically covered the linguistic sphere, the need to analyse the setting from other perspectives led to the examination of both social and cultural aspects. Although the results obtained do not suggest any absolute truth regarding the conditions and factors that make one experience different from the other, they have contributed to obtaining an individualistic and unique perspective of the Erasmus experience of six different students. The findings previously reported are a clear proof that if SA programmes show variation between them it is not only due to the characteristics of the host countries, but they also depend on the particular conditions of the place and the inclinations and aims of the students.

This investigation raises awareness of the influence of some aspects in particular. On the one hand, as results indicate, social networks tend to be reduced to fellow students from the same country, international students, or a combination of both. However, whether

composed by speakers of the same language or not, social groups and their nature have proved to be influential in the learners' inclinations and attitudes during the Erasmus programme and after it, as well as in their linguistic progress. On the other hand, although the place of accommodation is significant to the experience, it is the quality of the experience within it the one that has its greatest impact.

In terms of linguistic gains, the research has also come to the conclusion that linguistic purposes change depending on the field of study and the level of language of each student. However, in spite of this variation, they tend to agree that the best for their linguistic progress is to practice with both native and international speakers of the language. Finally, results regarding the culture experience imply that cultural adaptation in short-term Erasmus programmes is as feasible as it is recommendable, and that, on the whole, it also has its influence on the students' experience.

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