INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: A CASE STUDY ON ACADEMIC EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT. *Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Case Study on Academic Exchange Programmes.* The paper intends to identify the challenges experienced by students during their study abroad in a post-pandemic context. In addition, emphasis is placed on respondents' self-perceived level of intercultural communicative competence. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought considerable changes in the educational field and many academic exchange programmes have been ceased. While numerous studies have identified linguistic competence and cultural awareness as outcomes of academic exchange programmes before the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a gap in research in this area in a post-pandemic context when people were reluctant to engage with each other. Students exposed to potentially stressful situations in their academic lives might experience negative outcomes in their achievement. Thus, respondents' coping mechanisms when faced with culture shock abroad are also referred to. The study included 15 participants. A survey was used as a research method. The data obtained were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively through descriptive statistics using Google Forms' built-in tools or Voyant Tools for content analysis. Findings indicate that 93.3% of the participants self-evaluate themselves as having developed intercultural communicative competence and that 40% have experienced culture shock. Nevertheless, respondents perceived the academic exchange programme as a valuable experience for engaging in reflective practice even if they faced various challenges related to weather, the school system and contact with a new society.

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REZUMAT. ***Competența comunicativă interculturală: Studiu de caz pentru programele de mobilitate academică.*** Studiul de față își propune să identifice provocările cu care s-au confruntat studenții în timpul programelor de mobilitate academică în străinătate în context post-pandemic. Este adusă de asemenea în prim plan evaluarea respondenților cu privire la nivelul propriu de dezvoltare a competenței comunicative interculturale. Pandemia COVID-19 a adus schimbări considerabile în domeniul educațional și multe programe de schimb academic au fost sistate. Numeroase studii au identificat competența lingvistică și conștientizarea culturală ca rezultate ale programelor de schimb academic înainte de pandemia COVID-19. Totuși, există un vid de cercetare în acest domeniu într-un context post-pandemic, când persoanele au fost mai reticente în a socializa. Studenții expuși la situații potențial stresante în viața lor academică ar putea avea rezultate negative în performanța lor. De aceea menționăm în studiul de față și mecanismele de adaptare ale respondenților atunci când se confruntă cu șoc cultural în străinătate. Studiul a inclus 15 participanți. Metoda de cercetare folosită a fost ancheta pe bază de chestionar. Datele obținute au fost analizate calitativ și cantitativ prin statistici descriptive folosind instrumentele Google Forms sau Voyant Tools pentru analiza conținutului. Rezultatele indică faptul că 93,3% dintre participanți se autoevaluează ca având competență de comunicare interculturală și că 40% au experimentat șocul cultural. Cu toate acestea, respondenții au perceput programul de schimb academic ca o experiență valoroasă pentru angajarea în practică reflexivă, chiar dacă s-au confruntat cu diverse provocări legate de vreme, sistemul școlar și contactul cu o nouă societate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *context post-pandemic, programul de mobilitate academică, competență comunicativă interculturală, șoc cultural, cultură, limbă*

1. Introduction

The internalisation of education and the increased global mobility are factors that encourage tertiary-level students to spend a period studying abroad and improve their academic performance, language learning in an immersive native-speaking environment, intercultural competence, personal growth (i.e. independence, adaptability, networking and social skills), and career prospects. Academic exchange programmes can be interchangeably named student exchange, student travel exchange or international student exchange (Mathiesen and Lager 2007). For reasons of consistency, this paper uses the term academic exchange programmes. The time spent abroad enables students to become more capable of living in a globalised world and developing their cross-cultural learning and

global awareness (DeLong et al. 2011). These constitute prerequisites for the professional requirements of the 21st century.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought considerable changes in the educational field and teaching had to be adapted to online platforms. Communication practices in many universities worldwide have become entirely digital. For safety measures linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, academic exchange programmes have been reduced or completely ceased. Erasmus students who engaged in virtual exchange programmes reported "deficient intercultural socialisation as a result of missed experiences" (Schueller and Şahin 2022, 96) indicating that face-to-face interaction is paramount for such type of study abroad. In the spring of 2021, many universities returned to in-person instruction and virtual exchange programmes were replaced with on-site ones (Levine-West et al. 2023).

The educational value of academic exchange programmes has been widely dealt with in the literature and numerous studies have explored the development of language knowledge and intercultural communicative competence as outcomes of participating in academic exchange programmes (Behrnd and Porzelt 2012; Bohman and Borglin 2014; Cleak, Anand, and Das 2016; Crossman and Clarke 2010). Living abroad can negatively impact students' lives as they face challenges of adapting to a new culture, overcoming language barriers, understanding socio-cultural differences or engaging in intercultural adaptation (Andrade 2006; Meier and Daniels 2011, Levine-West et al. 2023). Even if before COVID-19, these challenges were regarded as a common part of the study-abroad experience, students' anxieties worsened during the pandemic (Levine-West et al. 2023, 47) as they were faced with much more pressure linked to various safety measures. Nevertheless, the students who enrolled in on-site academic exchange programmes in the spring of 2020 have indicated positive experiences related to "increased mindfulness, self-reflection, and personal growth […] learning to be flexible, resourceful, and adaptable in new situations" (Pedersen 2021, 81).

This paper widens the discussion on the educational value of academic exchange programmes beyond the development of language knowledge and intercultural communicative competence because it reflects on a post-pandemic context which has challenged people's ways of engaging with each other. This discussion represents an opportunity to reflect on the challenges experienced by students in an academic exchange programme and the coping mechanisms they have employed to overcome culture shock. These two paths for inquiry pave the way for the research questions addressed in the study: the types of challenges and coping mechanisms employed by students in their study abroad and their self-perceived level of ICC. The paper explores educational implications and directions for further research. The concepts of intercultural communicative

competence (ICC), culture shock and coping mechanisms are central to the discussions in the paper.

The following section consists of a brief review of theoretical aspects of intercultural communicative competence and the coping mechanisms undertaken when faced with culture shock abroad.

2. Theoretical framework

Acknowledging that all learning is social and that all learning environments are culturally embedded has favoured an integrated manner of teaching a foreign language. This perspective that favours a mix of language and culture learning has been covered in the literature by many language educators (Byram 1997; Risager 2007; Kramsch 1993). In the field of foreign language learning it is salient to address the fact that "students have both a linguistic and a cultural gap to bridge" (Collie and Slater 1997, 6). Considering that language is "part of and bears our identity"' (Skjekkeland 2012, 69) communication in a foreign language should imply an effective communication across cultures and languages. In today's multicultural educational and professional contexts, in addition to acquiring linguistic proficiency in a foreign language, students should be encouraged to develop their ICC.

The theoretical underpinnings of this present research are linked to the development of ICC understood as a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes developed in intercultural situations which enable the use of language in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Deardorff 2009). In the past thirty years, the development of ICC has been a topic of interest in many fields ranging from politics to education, linguistics and economy. In the literature, various concepts are connected to ICC and, to some extent, terms overlap: cross-cultural competence; global competence; intercultural sensitivity; intercultural intelligence; multicultural competence or intercultural awareness. For reasons of consistency and because the paper focuses equally on intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes as in the intercultural competence models proposed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2009), this paper uses the term intercultural communicative competence. According to Deardorff (2009), ICC comprises three components:

- Intercultural attitudes: respect, openness, curiosity, interest, willingness to discover a new culture;
- Intercultural skills: observation, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting, relating;
- Intercultural knowledge: cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness.

It is relevant to acknowledge that the development of ICC is underpinned by various variables: the individuals' opinions about culture, their age, cultural

background, socio-cultural and socio-economic context, and level of motivation just to name a few.

ICC develops gradually in formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts. A study abroad academic experience provides various formal, informal and non-formal learning opportunities that support the development of ICC. In the same line of thought, students who study abroad become aware that "communication in a foreign language is inevitably cross-cultural" (Pop 2019, 17) and are likely to reflect more on their own identity, on the encounter of new cultural representations and on the changes that are brought by this encounter because such experiences engage the "individual to interpret *self* (intra-culturality) and *other* (inter-culturality) in diverse contexts of social and cultural exchange" (Pop and Răduț 2019, 36).

Another central topic in the present research targets the challenges that students experience in the host country. Even if empirical research concluded that academic exchange mobilities enable students to acquire a more refined understanding of cultural differences (Coleman 2013; Kinginger 2009), language barriers and a lack of experience in multicultural groups can negatively impact students' learning experiences and social contact (Schartner and Cho 2017). This paper has addressed the issue of social contact in the host country as it is "a contributing factor to international students' cross-cultural adaptation" (Szabo, Papp, and Luu 2020, 82). Starting from the premise that individuals who live in unfamiliar environments tend to be more susceptible and sensitive to social comparison (Lockwood et al. 2012), the paper aimed to identify the challenges experienced by students during their stay abroad.

A different social and cultural environment, food, weather and living habits can trigger students' culture shock understood as "the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment" (Pedersen 1995, 1). According to Oberg (1960) there are four stages of culture shock: *the honeymoon stage* when individuals are very excited about their stay abroad; *the crisis stage* during which individuals experience loneliness, confusion and a sense of failure; *the adaptation stage* during which individuals have found a kind of survival mode and they embrace cultural differences; *the adjustment stage* when individuals accept the host culture. The participants in this research were required to evaluate their level of culture shock.

University students face various academic and non-academic demands during their studies. Erschens et al. (2018) and Webber et al. (2019) indicate such examples of academic demands: adaptation to a new learning context, overwork, preparation for exams, and the pressure to perform. Non-academic demands refer to conflicts with family and friends, financial distress, concerns related to moving to new places and bonding with new acquaintances (Beiter et al., 2015). It should not be overlooked that students' academic performance can be diminished due to stress and demands that cannot be met (Turner et al.,

2015). In this respect, the present paper intends to point out participants' stress factors in an academic exchange programme.

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose of the study

The current study intends to identify the challenges and stress factors experienced by students during their study abroad. In addition, the paper aims to shed light on the students' level of intercultural communicative competence as an outcome of their academic exchange programme.

3.2. Participants and Procedure

A total of 15 respondents provided answers to the survey based on convenience sampling. Responses were anonymous. Table 1 indicates participants' profile:

Table 1. Participant's profile

Participants	N	%
Age		
20	5	33.3
21	1	6.7
22	3	20
23	3	20
24	1	6.7
25-30	2	13.3
Total	15	100
Gender		
Female	12	80
Male	3	20
Total	15	100
Type of academic exchange mobility		
Incoming student	7	46.7
Outgoing student	8	53.3
Total	15	100
Mother tongue		
Romanian	9	60
Bengali	3	20
French	2	13.3
Hungarian	1	6.7
Total	15	100

All respondents are multilingual and can speak various languages such as English, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Italian, Spanish, French, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali.

The Google Forms questionnaire was sent via email or MS Teams to students who have participated in an academic exchange programme after the COVID-19 pandemic. The targeted time frame was January 2024. Given the low number of respondents, the findings cannot be generalised. However, in qualitative studies, the sample size is not that relevant (Cohen et al. 2011) and we consider that our research is valuable in respect to the qualitative analysis of the respondents' views about their stay abroad. In terms of representativity, the respondents have travelled to different countries allowing for a broader perspective for discussing intercultural encounters.

3.3. Research instruments

The questionnaire comprised 22 items with a mix of close-ended (multiple choice, checkboxes or Likert scale) and open-ended questions organized into five main sections: Section 1 - Demographic information (age, gender, mother tongue, linguistic competence in other languages); Section 2 - Location and duration of the study abroad (host country, duration of studies); Section 3 - Challenges related to living abroad (aspects difficult to handle, making new friends, cultural aspects, language difficulties, learning outcomes) Section 4 - Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ability to identify tangible and intangible elements of culture, development of ICC); Section 5 - Culture shock (experiencing culture shock, stages of culture shock, coping mechanisms).

The quantitative data obtained were analysed through descriptive statistics using Google Forms' built-in tools, while the qualitative data were processed using content analysis provided by Voyant Tools (www.voyant.org). The questionnaire was formulated in English.

3.4 Research questions

The research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of challenges were faced by respondents, in a post-pandemic context, during their academic exchange programme?

2. Did they experience culture shock and what were the coping mechanisms they employed?

3. Did respondents develop their intercultural communicative competence as a result of participating in an academic exchange programme?

4. Results and Discussion of Results

To provide a perspective regarding the respondents' cultural encounters abroad, it is relevant to mention that 26.7% have travelled to Norway, 20% to Germany, 19.1% to Romania, 13.4% to Italy, 6.7% to Ireland, 6.7% to Sweden and 6.7% to Turkey. The students spent an entire semester abroad (80%) or a whole academic year (20%).

The investigation of the challenges experienced by respondents was performed through a close-ended item (with checkboxes) and various open-ended questions. Data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Figure 1 indicates that weather (40%), the encounter with a new society (33.3%) and the school system (33.3%) were leading factors that they perceived as most difficult to handle. The location (26.7%), language (26%) and culture (20%) have also posed difficulties to them. One respondent did not experience any challenges while being abroad.
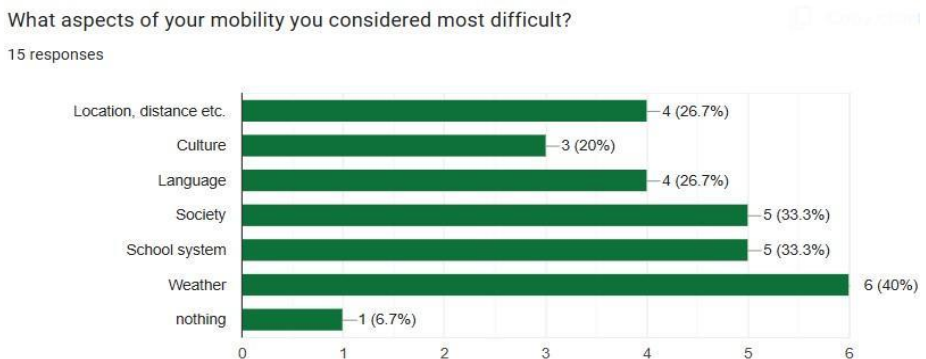
What aspects of your mobility you considered most difficult?

15 responses

Location, distance etc.	4 (26.7%)
Culture	3 (20%)
Language	4 (26.7%)
Society	5 (33.3%)
School system	5 (33.3%)
Weather	6 (40%)
nothing	1 (6.7%)

Figure 1. Aspects considered difficult during the exchange programme

The open-ended questions underwent content analysis via Voyant Tools. The corpus created contained 279 total words. The most relevant frequent words in the corpus were: weather (4 instances); language (4 instances); friends (4 instances). The data collected indicate results similar to the findings in the close-ended item above, i.e. the weather has played a considerable role during their mobility abroad. It is common knowledge that some people can suffer from weather sensitivity which impacts their physical or mental health.

The use of the target language is also perceived by respondents as challenging. There is general agreement in contemporary literature that international language students enhance their language skills and intercultural competence in contact with native speakers in the host country (Wang, Crawford, and Liu 2019). However, many international students found it difficult "to engage in meaningful contact with locals and some consider the lack of it as a personal

failure" (Maier and Daniels 2011, 212). One's development of language competence abroad can be underpinned by various individual variables (motivation, language ability, age, time spent abroad, etc.) as well as by definite cultural differences as indicated in Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede 1984) which can act as barriers to communication. In addition, the fact that the host country has various dialects or official languages (as is the case of Norway or Spain) makes the practice of language and communication even more challenging. Therefore, either in the context of academic language use or in the sphere of language used for socialisation, respondents in this study had first-hand experience with the complex endeavour of communicating effectively in a foreign language.

According to the data gathered, it is difficult to socialize and make new friends abroad. This might be subject to various individual variables and unrealistic expectations of how natives establish relations with international students. Norwegians for example "are generally distant and reserved in interpersonal relationships" (Sener 2024, 1) and value privacy. Students should have handled interactions with Norwegians with this knowledge in mind.

To showcase the challenges faced by respondents during their exchange programme, we include below five answers taken from the open-ended questions:

> [Leaving home/living by myself for the first time was challenging and also trying to make Norwegian friends.]
>
> [The most difficult part for me was to not to feel constantly that I am a foreigner and to distance myself from people based on this fact]
>
> [The school system, the language of teaching and the exam session]
>
> [The most challenging was to adapt to the way of life of the country]
>
> [Parking regulations]

Coping with various adaptation demands connected to socio-personal issues or academic constraints is not easy to accomplish for an international student. The answers indicate that it was challenging for respondents to make new friends, to get accustomed to new educational requirements and to effectively use the target language in diverse socio-cultural contexts. In addition, they found it difficult to handle elements connected to the new society (e.g. parking rules, and adapting to a new way of life).

Most respondents (93.3%) answered that by the end of their exchange programme, they had new friends and only one respondent (6.7%) stated that he/she made no new friends. Still, the answers to the open-ended questions indicate that making friends was a difficult endeavour. The health regulations in the post-pandemic context might have also played a considerable role. Meier

and Daniels (2011, 212) address the issue of social interaction during exchange programmes abroad and indicate that many of the students are not able to make new friends. Possible solutions refer to the need to reconceptualise their identity as foreign language learners (Meier and Daniels 2011, 212). One important aspect to consider in this context is that social comparison with native speakers can threaten one's self-confidence (Lou and Noels 2024, 1) and one respondent mentions this aspect: I *[feel constantly that I am a foreigner]*.

In line with previous empirical research showcasing the beneficial outcomes of exchange programmes (Coleman 2013; Kinginger 2009; Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004), we focused our attention on the respondents' positive experience abroad. The answers were analysed with Voyant Tools. The corpus that was created contained 225 total words. The most relevant frequent words in the corpus were: new (9 instances); experience (5 instances); people (3 instances); language (3 instances); and friends (3 instances). More than half of the respondents acknowledged the positive aspects of the academic exchange programme. They had to handle different situations, meet people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, speak the language of the host country, and make new friends. To showcase the positive outcomes, we include below four examples of answers taken from the open-ended questions*:*

> [The experience as a whole, but especially meeting new people and practising the language]
>
> [Every experience where you have to fight with your struggles is positive as it offers the possibility to get to know yourself better. Erasmus offers plenty of space for reflection as it places you in a completely new environment and makes you face some challenges]
>
> [Making friends, learning about a new culture and language]
>
> [For a foreign student, one of the most positive aspects of this experience language barriers, understanding cultural nuances, and navigating academic challenges]

The answers emphasise that exchange programmes are a positive, worthwhile experience that allows students to be acquainted with new people, improve their language competence, value the encounter of a new culture and navigate academic challenges that arise from being faced with different educational systems. The findings are similar to research conducted by Coleman (2013), Kinginger (2009), Phipps and Gonzalez (2004), Szabo, Papp, and Luu (2020), and Holmes and O'Neill (2010).

In light of the selected questionnaire responses, we focus on two salient directions that emerge from undertaking an exchange programme. On the one hand, it is the reflection process that occurs when students are out of their

comfort zone and experience novel situations that make them attain self-knowledge and develop their problem-solving skills to handle various challenging contexts. As one responder exemplified, the exchange programme [*offers the possibility to get to know yourself better] and [offers plenty of space for reflection].* Reflection on one's experiences, reactions and emotions can be investigated through an ethnographic approach (interviews, diaries, discussions etc.) which targets the development of cognitive and affective dimensions (Roberts et al. 2001, 239). According to the Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 1983), a person who demonstrates intrapersonal intelligence can reflect and question oneself, understand his/her strengths and limitations, plan and set personal goals or think of ways to improve one's life. Having in mind the fact that "knowing the self is an awareness that comes about through knowing others" (Holmes and O'Neill 2010, 169) an exchange programme offers this window of opportunity towards engaging in personal reflection.

The genuine exposure students get by being immersed in an authentic socio-cultural environment is valuable for the development of their intercultural communicative competence. If a foreign language is best acquired in a setting that fosters naturalistic language acquisition with plenty of meaningful exposure similar to how one learns one's mother tongue (Krashen and Terell 1998), culture also has to be an experience gained first-hand. By travelling abroad students can broaden their cultural knowledge (cultural artefacts, architecture, gastronomy, values, norms etc.), their cultural skills (awareness of communicating effectively in diverse cultural situations) and their attitudes towards culture (being open and respectful towards other people belonging to different cultures, be curious to find out a new culture etc.). In addition, "interaction with people of another language and society makes them conscious of and reflexive about cross-cultural relationships" (Roberts et al. 2001, 242) in diverse intercultural encounters.

Respondents were asked if they would be interested in repeating this experience. The majority (73.3%) responded affirmatively, 20% would probably do so and 6.7% responded negatively. The findings confirm that respondents have identified, on a personal level, more benefits than drawbacks in connection to the exchange programme.

Respondents were engaged in another reflection process when asked about the outcomes of their study abroad (*What did you learn due to this mobility*?). Answers were analysed using Voyant Tools. The corpus contained 211 total words. The most frequent words in the corpus were: language (4); culture (4); people (2); open (2); and adaptation (2). Thus, the development of linguistic competence and cultural awareness were the most frequent outcomes of the exchange programme. To showcase the learning outcomes of the academic exchange programme, we include below four examples of answers taken from the open-ended questions:

[Be more open to people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds]
[I have strengthened in my identity (national, religious)]
[I learned a lot about me and my capacity of adaptation]
[How to survive without family and friends]

The answers confirm that when travelling across borders new encounters enhance the "experiential learning about self and other" (Jordan 2002, 96). One respondent is confident that he/she has learned a lot about himself/herself and his/her capacity for adaptation. Another respondent has strengthened his/her identity by participating in intercultural dialogue which puts new knowledge about the *other* in relation "to one's own self-knowledge and values" (Byram et al. 2009, 23). For another respondent, the exchange programme has been an eye-opening experience to survive in a new context without family or friends.

The development of ICC is a personal and life-long learning process. The awareness of the *other* builds on the willingness to engage in this process of discovery. We intended to find out what were the first steps undertaken by students towards engaging in intercultural dialogue. We selected several answers:

[Discussions about the different ways universities are functioning in our countries, the differences in teaching]
[I told them about my language and how it's formed from a semantic perspective]
[I tried explaining some cultural references, such as different Romanian dishes or Romanian slang].
[history (how multiculturally rich our country is), Hungarian folksongs, Romanian and Hungarian language basics]

The answers indicate that respondents communicated about their language, educational system, gastronomy, multiculturality in their country, history, and music. Thus, they mainly tackled the tangible parts of culture.

Asked to indicate if the host country has risen to their expectations, respondents provided several perspectives which indicate their openness towards engaging with *the other*:

[Yes, it is not a destination that people think at first thought, so I think it opened my view of old communist countries. I also learned a new language]
[Yes, it offered the perfect place to practise the language that I'm learning]
[Yes, especially due to my personal interests in Nordic languages and culture. The country helped me have the authentic traditional and cultural experiences]
[Yes, Sweden is a beautiful country, people are very polite and I have understood that they value their private life. I went with some views on life and relationships between people and after the mobility I returned with a different view]

Individuals who exhibit intercultural attitudes such as openness and respect for the *other* have according to Byram (2008, 69) the "willingness to suspend those deeper values, at least temporarily, to be able to understand and empathise with the values of others that are incompatible with one's own". Immersion in a different culture is a transformative experience as it allows one to see the world from an alternative perspective. As indicated in the selected answers, respondents reflected on their intercultural experience and stated that the exchange programme had helped them to master the foreign language better, engage in authentic cultural situations and get to know the country's history and the society's norms and values.

The tangible and intangible elements of culture can be explained through the iceberg model of culture proposed by the American anthropologist Edward Hall (1959). The metaphor of the iceberg makes a distinction between the 'visible' and 'invisible' elements of a culture. Thus, elements of culture that can be easily seen when meeting a new culture refer to art, food, traditions, language or clothing and are complementary to elements that are not so obvious and easy to understand or accept: beliefs, values, behaviour, cultural expectations etc. Respondents were required to state if the tangible and intangible cultural elements facilitated or hindered their experience abroad. Answers were analysed using Voyant Tools. The corpus for the tangible elements of culture contained 244 total words. The most frequent words in the corpus were: *traditions/traditional (8 instances); food/spices (4 instances), cultural events (2 instances); humour (1 instance); and public transport (1 instance).* Findings suggest that respondents can indicate several tangible elements of culture that they have observed in the host country.

Asked to consider if invisible cultural aspects have facilitated their experience abroad, respondents concluded that given the short time frame, they did not have many opportunities to fully experience these. The corpus for the intangible elements of culture contained 298 total words and the most frequent words in the corpus were: experience (6 *instances*); difficult (5 *instances*); values (3 *instances*); help (3 *instances*); and culture (3 *instances*). We selected several answers:

> [Such cultural aspects were most certainly difficult to comprehend at times, but I believe that they helped me take note of other perspectives as well, and adjust to a more carefree way of living]
> [I don't think our experience allowed us (or at least me) to really interact with a country's beliefs about life or values. It's a pretty short period after all, and doesn't imply such a wide field of experiences after all].
> [German personality: fellow students were kind and open to help, but it was culture shock that they were in general more rigorous with themselves]

The answers indicate that respondents had difficulties comprehending some invisible aspects of culture (beliefs, mentality etc.). The short period spent abroad did not provide such a diverse array of experiences. Still, their answers suggest that they can reflect on their cultural experiences and engage in critical thinking in connection to the two directions proposed by the iceberg model of culture.

Respondents were required to self-evaluate their level of ICC as an outcome of the academic exchange programme. The quantitative analysis concluded that 58.3% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 33.3% agreed and 8.3% responded neutrally. The findings are also rendered in Figure 2:
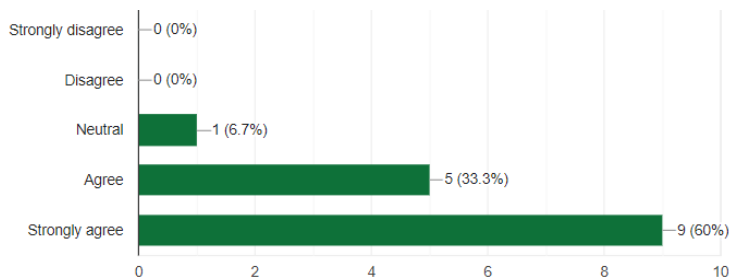

Figure 2. Self-evaluation of respondents' intercultural communicative competence

Respondents have travelled to various European countries and encountered unique tangible and intangible cultural representations. Unquestionably, the time spent abroad and the direct contact with the host culture are definitive for enriching one's ICC. Findings indicate that 93.3% of the respondents agree and strongly agree that they have developed their level of ICC.

The responder who indicated a neutral answer has not provided conclusive answers to most of the questions addressed in the survey indicating for the majority of the open-questions 'no comment', 'none', 'I never noticed'. Readiness to be open to the *other* and preparedness to change are achievable if the person is willing to do so and if the context is appropriate. In the same line of thought, Meier and Daniels (2011) argue that spending a period abroad does not necessarily result in intercultural learning and that without some pedagogical interventions meant to develop students' cognitive, affective and behavioural intercultural dimensions, students might even return home with a slightly negative attitude towards the host culture.

Contrasting cultural aspects might also be conducive to culture shock. In this respect, we asked students if they had experienced culture shock during their academic exchange programme. Figure 3 provides visual support:

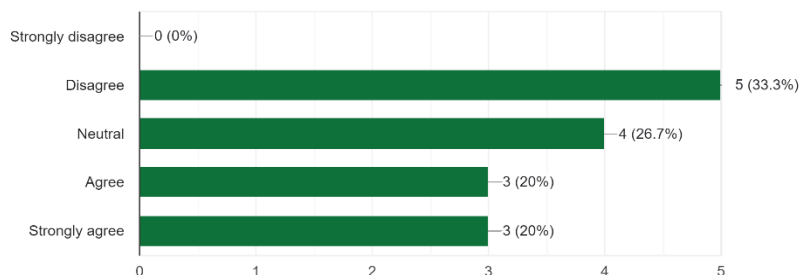The academic exchange mobility made me experience cultural shock.
15 responses

Figure 3. Self-evaluation of respondents' level of culture shock

The findings indicate that 33.3% of the respondents consider that they did not experience culture shock, 26.7% are uncertain, 20% agree and 20% strongly agree with the statement. Consequently, 40% of the respondents have experienced culture shock when getting acquainted with new people and learning the ways of a new country. The shock of accommodating to a new environment, managing language difficulties or getting accustomed to different academic requirements has caused respondents to feel uneasiness and stress. Respondents reported the following coping mechanisms: making new friends (6 instances), finding a common ground to balance differences (2 instances), adapting one's behaviour (1 instance) or keeping calm (1 instance). Because it was not compulsory to answer this item, not all respondents indicated examples of coping mechanisms. As the four stages of culture shock are concerned, 80 % of the respondents indicated they have experienced all the stages, 10 % have experienced the adjustment stage and 10% the crisis stage.

The first research question intended to investigate the types of challenges that were encountered by respondents during their incoming or outgoing exchange programme. Several items in the questionnaire (open-ended and closed items) addressed this issue. The findings indicate that 26.7% of the respondents have experienced difficulties in communicating in the language of the host country. This can be connected to students' language competence or their ability to interact and make themselves understood either in academic environments or in socialising contexts. The fact that some students have travelled to countries where there are many spoken dialects and language is not so homogenous and easy to comprehend compared to the standard language encountered in the foreign language classroom, adds to the communication problems experienced by respondents. Additionally, respondents considered that it was difficult to make new friends during the exchange programme. This can be related to a great extent to personal variables (social skills, age, personal expectations, level of confidence, etc.), but can also be explained according to

Hofstede (1984) by the norms of behaviour and the cultural expectations of a certain culture. Still, 93.3% of the respondents managed to make new friends.

Other challenges refer to living abroad, managing daily tasks and assuming new responsibilities. For many of the respondents (66.7%), this was their first academic exchange programme. Therefore, they had difficulties in accommodating to a new context where they had to rely much on themselves. We consider that this is the reason why 26.7% of the respondents mentioned that 'location' was challenging to handle.

Respondents provided three main reasons why their exchange programme was difficult to handle. These three factors gained the highest percentages. The first one referred to weather and 40% of the respondents agreed that it had a decisive role in their life spent abroad. Because some respondents have travelled to Ireland and Scandinavia, rainy days and northern winters with few hours of natural light have influenced their stay abroad especially if they were weather-sensitive people. The other two factors regarded the encounter of a new society (33.3%) and a school system (33.3%). Respondents indicated as challenging the contact with a new society characterised by new social norms, laws, hierarchies, institutions or patterns of social behaviour. Likewise, adapting to a new way of life in the host country or even to parking regulations as one respondent indicated, put students out of their comfort zone. Respondents confirmed they found the exam session difficult due to the new educational environment.

The second research question addressed respondents' culture shock and the diversity of coping mechanisms employed. Findings indicate that 40% of the respondents have experienced culture shock and that 80% have experienced all four stages indicated by Oberg (1960). The coping mechanisms they have employed refer to socialization techniques, accepting and understanding differences and keeping a calm approach to the stress generated by having to get accustomed to different academic and non-academic requirements.

The third research question aimed to engage respondents in self-reflection and investigate their level of ICC. Several items in the questionnaire (open-ended and a closed item with a 5-point Likert scale item) addressed this issue. Findings indicate that 60% of the respondents *strongly agree* and *agree* (33.3%) that the academic exchange programme has helped them to develop their ICC level. Only one respondent (8.3%) positioned himself/herself in a neutral zone. An academic exchange programme for one or two semesters is a transformative experience as it allows one to see the world from an alternative perspective, and to become a mediator across languages and cultures. Findings suggest that respondents were able to reflect on their intercultural experience and stated that it has helped them to master the foreign language better, engage in authentic cultural situations, and get to know the country's history and the society's norms and values.

ICC has a behavioural, cognitive and attitudinal dimension linked to it. Respondents developed intercultural knowledge and indicated several tangible and intangible parts of the host culture. The intangible parts were more difficult to grasp as they did not have many opportunities to fully experience these. Still, to further enhance their level of ICC they need to continue their culture-specific and culture-general learning. Asked what they have learnt from the experience of living abroad, respondents provided answers that can be linked to their attitudinal dimension: open (2 instances); and adaptation (2 instances). These examples reflect respondents' intercultural attitudes: openness towards other cultures and willingness to suspend disbelief to adapt and accept the *other*. Respondents have had many opportunities to develop their intercultural behaviour. The answers collected from the open-ended items indicate that respondents understood cultural nuances, interacted with new people and spoke the target language in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

5. Limitations and further considerations

Even if 93.3% of the respondents agree and strongly agree that they have developed their level of ICC, the answers to the open-ended items reveal that their self-reflections regard only some of the cognitive, affective and behavioural intercultural dimensions and not all of them are present, at once, for each participant. Moreover, their self-reflections indicate that the development of ICC is an ongoing, lifelong learning process and that practice is the key to improving ICC over time. Consequently, literature in the field of foreign language learning indicates that there is no one-size-fits-all development of ICC as much is underpinned by individual variation. The small targeted population in this research makes findings unsuitable for generalisation.

This research could gain more depth if ethnographic research was undertaken in addition to the survey. Ethnographic investigations which involve a variety of data collection techniques such as self-reporting, diaries, interviews or participant observation can develop students' intercultural communicative competence (Jordan 2002; Roberts et al. 2001; Luken 2012).

6. Conclusions

Our research adds to similar studies investigating how academic exchange programmes considerably contribute to students' development of intercultural communicative competence. Findings indicate that respondents have faced various challenges during their exchange programme and that weather, the school system and the contact with a new society were leading factors. Still, students have found various positive aspects linked to exchange programmes and they managed to socialize and make new friends. Respondents experienced

culture shock but were confident in developing their intercultural communicative competence. They engaged in reflective practice and became empowered by the experience of living abroad alone and navigating diverse difficulties.

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