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“I know how to improve. You know what I mean?”. Neoliberalism and the development of multilingual identities through study abroad

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Abstract: The present article examines the relationship between study abroad and the construction of multilingual identities regarded as more marketable in the neoliberal economy. The main objective is to provide an insight on student mobility and dominant visions of the future in line with which languages are chosen to be taught/learned at tertiary level and how this offer mirrors the economized perspective adopted in the higher education system. It focuses on European higher-education students participating in study abroad through the Erasmus program in three contexts across Europe (Finland, Romania, and Catalonia). In the first place, the article delves into the ways neoliberal discourses on the value of study abroad and the skills that are expected to be acquired through the experience – this is, the type of individuals that the participants might become – shape their decision to enroll in a sojourn abroad in a particular context. Secondly, this article analyzes to what extent European youth participating in study abroad eventually perceive they added to their identities the desirable marketable skills they expected and how they consider this is going to materialize in the future. By looking at how multilingual identities are constructed through the Erasmus program, this study hypothesizes that study abroad is another mechanism embedded in educational practices that respond to economic demands in which the marketization of language skills plays a prominent role.

Keywords: commodification; identity; multilingualism; neoliberalism; study abroad

1 Introduction

Every year hundreds of thousands of European youth participate in a period of studying abroad (henceforth SA). According to the European Commission (2020), in

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the academic year 2019–2020, despite the mobility restrictions triggered by the COVID 19 pandemic, 312,800 student mobilities were achieved, “a sharp drop from the previous year attributable to the pandemic.”

This mobility is made possible by the Erasmus+ Program, which has at its core fostering sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion. Furthermore, it aims to strengthen European identity and active citizenship. In particular, according to the European Commission (2023), the specific objectives of the program are the following:

- promote learning mobility of individuals and groups, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organizations and policies in the field of education and training;
- promote non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organizations and policies in the field of youth;
- promote learning mobility of sport staff, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of sport organizations and sport policies.

The Erasmus+ Program includes 4 different actions: Key Action 1: Learning mobility for individuals, Key Action 2: Cooperation among organizations and institutions, Key Action 3: Support and policy development and cooperation, and Jean Monnet Actions: Support for teaching, learning, researching, and debating about several aspects related to the European Union. In particular, the present study is concerned with the first: Key Action 1 (Learning mobility for individuals) which is expected to “bring positive and long-lasting effects on the participants and participating organizations involved, as well as on the policy systems in which such activities are framed” (European Commission 2023). One or more of the following outcomes are expected to be achieved by pupils, students, trainees, apprentices, adult learners, and young people that participate in the mobility activities supported under this Key Action:

- improved learning performance;
- enhanced employability and improved career prospects;
- increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- increased self-empowerment and self-esteem;
- improved foreign language and digital competences;
- enhanced intercultural awareness;
- more active participation in society;
- enhanced positive interactions with people from different backgrounds;
- better awareness of the European project and the EU values;

- increased motivation for taking part in future (formal/non-formal) education or training after the mobility period abroad. (European Commission 2023)

Judging from the above, the aims of the program seem to tackle, in a holistic way, personal and professional-related skills that structure the participants' identity, defined by Norton (2013: 45) as: "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future".

The objectives of the Erasmus+ program Key Action 1 mentioned above also appear to be connected with the idea of global citizenship, "understood as a concern for others, society, and the environment; global awareness; and civic engagement" (Chakravarty et al. 2020: 124), a concept that "emerges within the neoliberal political economic model that emphasizes [...] one's life as the enterprise of oneself" (Chapman et al. 2018: 148).

Furthermore, if we specifically focus on the fifth aim, which concerns bettering foreign language skills, and we take into account the pro-multilingualism political agenda of the European Union (cf. Mocanu 2022), it might be rather hard to argue how a neoliberal, utilitarian rationale is reflected in this objective. This is because the European Union appears to advocate for an inclusive multilingualism where all the languages of the supranational entity are allegedly given equal importance, regardless of their speakers. However, in reality, not all languages enjoy the same status: English is the *de facto* language of the EU and some languages (Catalan, for instance) are not even recognized. In this line, Duchêne (2020) points to the fact that "multilingualism is also an ideological regime that produces difference and potential inequality" (p. 95), since neither the value of multilingual speakers, nor that of multilingual repertoires is the same in all places and at all times. The author further argues that "multilingualism is simultaneously valued in terms of "market expansion," "productivity," or "creativity", and it is framed as a potential resource that can be transformed into various forms of capital" (Duchêne 2020: 93).

This article focuses, first, on the research background in which the study is grounded: study abroad and language learning. It connects both to the more critical literature that takes onboard the effects of the neoliberal ideology that affects individuals and institutions alike in order to draw parallelisms between the phenomenon of SA, multilingualism, and the demands of the market. This initial section is followed by the methodology of the study. The results section focuses on the outcomes of the interviews conducted with SA students at the beginning and at the end of their stay abroad which were thematically analyzed. Finally, the paper is concluded by a section where the results are discussed.

2 Background

A few decades of research on identity-construction processes show that mobility and language learning are determinant factors. Most of these studies, of a qualitative nature, have focused on migrants (e.g. Cervatiuc 2009; Cummins 2019; Norton 2013). In relation to SA, identity has been explored by a few studies (e.g. Barkhuizen 2017; Jackson 2008; Quan and Menard-Warwick 2021), many of them of a qualitative type, whose results indicate a certain destabilization and hybridization of the self, due to sojourns abroad (e.g. Pellegrino Aveni 2005; Mocanu 2019).

In a review of the literature on identity in academic SA, Kinginger (2015) classifies studies into five identity categories: nationality, foreigner identities, gender, age, and sexuality, showing how, so far, identity construction processes in SA have been understood mostly within a non-utilitarian framework. This article aims at going beyond this schema by examining how SA mobility responds to utilitarian, neoliberal processes (Courtois 2020; Dvir and Yemini 2017; Sabaté-Dalmau 2019) in which the acquisition of foreign language skills plays a pivotal role.

2.1 Study abroad, neoliberalism, and language learning

The relationship between education, language, and the political economy of neoliberalism has called the attention of many researchers in the last years (Block 2017; Duchêne 2011; Heller 2010; Martín-Rojo and Del Percio 2019). On this note, Duchêne (2011) argues that there is a need, “on the one hand, to understand the materialization of multilingual practices within the labor logics that give these practices meaning and, on the other, to consider language as an instrument of inclusion (or exclusion) linked to institutional systems, and to social and economic transformations” (p. 3–4).

This article attempts to understand how SA contributes to the formation of neoliberal identities (Block 2017) by offering the participants the possibility to show their potential as neoliberal subjects through: a) their decision to participate in a mobility program, and b) enabling them to gain a type of symbolic capital with bettering foreign language skills at the forefront that is considered desirable by the neoliberal economy. This is: “a person with better language skills comes to be seen as evidence of the person’s moral alignment with the neoliberal ideals of endless self-development” (Gao and Park 2015: 81).

For the purpose of this paper, neoliberalism is understood as “an ideology within language education that views language as a commodity and promotes the idea that FL (foreign language) learning is connected to the acquisition of wealth, social status,

and professionalism” (Ennser-Kananen et al. 2017: 16) that “pertains to the way that practices of economics and discursive patternings of knowledge and learning interact” (Olssen 2006: 217).

In this context, geographical mobility through SA becomes a means for language learners to cultivate their human capital (Foucault 1997) “considering their movement from one locale to another as an investment in their potential as a neoliberal subject” (Gao and Park 2015: 81).

In this perspective, our conceptualization of SA goes beyond the traditionally confronted understandings of SA as motivated by the endeavor to achieve better employment prospects (Robertson et al. 2011) versus study abroad as a means to accumulate social and cultural capital (Waters and Brooks 2011), showing how SA – as one of the main assets of the internationalization of higher education, is guided by both pragmatic and ideological policy rationales (Dvir and Yemini 2017) that ultimately converge within individual identities. These subjectivities respond to the need of the neoliberal market in search of multilingual individuals that show both capability and willingness to transcend social, cultural, and economic borders with ease.

Subjected to the currents of neoliberal ideology, SA, a “self-governing practice that aligns with dominant discourses promoting voluntarist attitudes to labour mobility” (Courtois 2020: 237), traditionally associated with the elites, is discursively normalized as a desirable asset for all. This is due to the fact that temporary mobility related to SA might be understood as a way to forge identities that integrate and display both the participants’ capacity and eagerness to be mobile subjects in the future (Murphy-Lejeune 2004). The mere fact that “one has made the deliberate, planned effort to move to the place associated with valued forms of linguistic capital” (Gao and Park 2015: 81) could be an indicator of the individual’s alignment with the tenets of the neoliberal economy. Hence, language competences become human capital *per se*, that is, “individual knowledge components or skills” (Flubacher et al. 2018: 4) that are ultimately exchangeable for money, in a process called by Heller (2010) language commodification.

2.2 Neoliberal rationale for multilingual identities through SA

In spite of the scarcity of available research on the relationship between neoliberalism and multilingualism in SA (cf. Sabaté-Dalmau 2019), many studies with a critical view to SA have indirectly looked at the role of language-related skills as a contributor (cf. Zemach-Bersin 2009). Furthermore, research on the relationship between multilingualism and the political economy in higher education provides highly-informative insights for the present study. In this line, Zimmermann (2020),

and Zimmermann and Muth (2020) showed how prospective higher education students in Switzerland invest in language learning according to their aspirations for an imagined future, demonstrating how neoliberal discourses permeate language learning. This ideology, rooted in the fluctuations of the market, affects individuals and institutions alike: the former align with entrepreneurial visions of the continuously improving self, while the latter adopt an economized perspective of multilingualism based on a “chronotope of potentiality and proleptic perspectives on time” (p. 303).

In another study, Zemach-Bersin (2009) shows how American students articulate SA “as having a social currency or commercial value that students can both literally and metaphorically profit from” (p. 305), which predisposes learners to a certain way of thinking (Darvin and Norton 2015) and which structures learners’ decisions to invest in or divest from a particular language with the ultimate aim to access “a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future” (Norton 2013: 3). Similarly, Bae and Park (2020) shed light on how English language learning of young children in Korea is influenced by their parents’ entrepreneurial visions of the future in which English language skills are foreseen as a must.

In a similar vein, Chakravarty et al. (2020: 23) claim that “(t)here is indication that, in addition to learning specifically about a particular topic (e.g. safety net programs or business practices of a country), education abroad programs enhance students’ marketability by increasing students’ language proficiency and understanding of socioeconomic and political conditions in other societies”.

However, in spite of the fact that study abroad has been demonstrated to be a good environment for language learning, it is not directly and automatically related to language gains *per se* (cf. Kinginger 2009) due to determining factors such as the context of the sojourn, and program and individual difference variables. In a study that examined the access to and use of Arabic and English in SA in an Arabic speaking context, Trentman (2013) revealed a much more complex phenomenon in which linguistic gains in SA are influenced by access to native speakers, language choices (both of the students and their interlocutors), as well as by the individual agency of the participants. However, Llanes (2019) demonstrated that a sojourn abroad in a context in which English is not the official language positively impacts the participants’ oral fluency and lexical complexity, as well as their general English level, pointing to the fact that access to native speakers is not a must for language learning in study abroad. Llanes et al. (2016) showed that English as a lingua franca contexts are beneficial for general L2 proficiency and lexical complexity, coinciding with the results of a study conducted by Köylü (2021), which indicate that “regardless of the context (traditional SA in an official Anglophone environment vs. ELFSA [English as a Lingua Franca Study Abroad]: contexts where English is not an official language but

it is used as a lingua franca), time spent abroad has a positive impact on proficiency” (p. 10). More recently, Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022) confirmed that English as a lingua franca contexts for SA are equally favorable to traditional Anglophone contexts for L2 oral performance. In spite of these results, a recent study (Fiedler 2022) shows how SA European students not only choose English as the main foreign language to invest in during their sojourn abroad, but they also adhere to standard varieties of English and take the native-speaker as a model for assessing their linguistic competence.

Drawing on the above, the following paper attempts to “challenge celebratory discourses of multilingualism” in SA and delve into how “language learning is intertwined with economic opportunity and larger structures of social inequality” (Zimmermann 2020).

In particular, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do higher education European students involved in a period of SA articulate their present and future identities in terms of cultural and linguistic knowledge when they are at the onset and at the end of their sojourn?
- 2) In what ways do the neoliberal discourses on the importance of study abroad contribute to shaping the identities of the participants? How do they trigger decision-making processes that actively respond to the requirements of the neoliberal market?

3 Methods

The present study is based on data stemming from semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1) conducted with students who were enrolled in an Erasmus sojourn abroad in one of the following European locations: Oulu (Finland), Lleida (Catalonia), and Bucharest (Romania). The same interview guide was used when the participants were at the beginning (PRE) and at the end (POST) of their sojourn abroad.

3.1 Participants

The qualitative data for the present study comes from a bigger research project that involved a quantitative and a qualitative data collection. A total of 155 higher education students participated in the quantitative data collection and 120 students participated in the qualitative data collection at the beginning of their sojourn: 64 in Lleida, 17 in Oulu, and 39 in Bucharest. The disparity between the numbers of students for each context is due to the fact that the participants volunteered to be interviewed. Oulu was the first context where data was collected and the interviews

were conducted after the welcome day at the university. In Lleida and Bucharest, some participants were already contacted before the welcome day through the social media groups created by and for international students. All the interviews were conducted with the same researcher. In spite of the fact the students were offered either English or all the local languages (Spanish, Catalan, and Romanian), with the only exception of Finnish as possibilities to conduct the interviews, most of them chose to be interviewed in English. Only a few Spanish participants preferred Spanish.

The vast majority of the interviews were conducted individually with each participant. However, a few students were interviewed in pairs or as a group at the beginning of their stay abroad. At the end of the stay, a total of 58 participants were interviewed through Skype: 29 of those who had done their stay in Lleida, 12 in Oulu, and 17 in Bucharest. These constitute almost half of the participants who were interviewed at the beginning. The drop-off in number is due to the fact that at the onset of their stay abroad, the students were interviewed personally while at the end of the stay, Skype was used, and therefore, the process required more preparation and better scheduling. Furthermore, some of the participants who volunteered at the beginning were more difficult to contact once they returned to their home countries and a few did not volunteer to participate in the post-interview. Finally, ten participants were chosen for the present study. The selection was made according to the following criteria: (1) balanced gender; (2) balanced geographical distribution; and (3) balanced field of studies. Important to mention is the fact that some of the participants were interviewed in pairs at the beginning of their sojourn: Jennifer and Claudia, and Sami and Jussi; and two of them (Jennifer and Claudia) were also interviewed together at the end of the experience.

The names of the participants were changed to preserve their anonymity: Claudia (22, Spain, Nursing Degree), Jennifer (22, Spain, Nursing Degree), Jussi (24, Finland, Construction Engineering), Sami (24, Finland, Construction Engineering), Mila (22, Bulgaria, English Studies), Stefaan (22, The Netherlands, Computer Science), Diego (23, Spain, Civil Engineering), Meyer (21, Germany, Business Administration), Jesús (22, Spain, Physics), Mildri (25, Norway, Medicine), Petronela (21, Agricultural Engineering, Poland).

3.2 Location

The three settings (Finland, Romania, and Catalonia) were chosen in order to examine three contexts in Europe believed to be different at the cultural, social, economic, and linguistic level. Despite differences between the contexts not being

empirically founded, they are rather well established in the collective imagination and we contend that they exist and operate at many levels.

For instance, at a mere geographical level, the United Nations Statistics Division¹ separates the European continent into Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern Europe. Each of the three chosen contexts belongs to a different area: Romania is situated in Eastern Europe, Finland in Northern Europe, and finally, Catalonia belongs to Southern Europe.

Furthermore, while Finland's first official language is Finnish (a language totally unrelated to the Latin family of languages), Romanian, Catalan, and Spanish belong to the Latin family of languages. However, despite the fact that the three are Roman languages, important differences exist. Spanish is one with a very high international profile, spoken by hundreds of millions of speakers and taught as a foreign language in the five continents. The international projection and prestige of Romanian, instead, is much lower. Finally, while Spanish and Catalan are similar, the colossal dimension of the former, both at the national and international level, significantly overcomes the dimension of the latter, which is a minority language within Spain.

Finally, from an economic and political point of view, the three countries belong to the European Union. However, while Spain accessed the EU in 1986, Finland was admitted in 1995, and Romania did not enter the EU until 2007. Furthermore, while the currency in Finland and Spain is the Euro and both belong to the Schengen area, Romania is not yet in the Eurozone, nor does it belong to the Schengen zone.

3.3 Instrumentation and analysis

The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to deal with narratives voiced at the beginning and at the end of the sojourn. Thus, the research instrument was designed with the purpose to provide guiding questions that could elicit information related to different aspects of how the students perceived their sojourn when they were at its onset and after it finished. Since the main aim was to interpret meaning from text data, all the selected interviews were transcribed adopting basic transcription conventions (Appendix 2). Thematic analysis was employed for the examination of the data. The method has been identified by Block (2014) as one of three distinct ways to deal with narratives, together with structural analysis, and dialogic/performative analysis.

For the analysis, a combined technique of deductive and inductive approaches was implemented in order to capture the intricacies of the phenomenon. The first was due to the fact that the questions of the interviews were designed after an

1 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/> (Access 7th April 2022).

examination of previous research on the topic of SA which led to the identification of a few research gaps that the study aimed to explore. On the other hand, an inductive approach allowed us to integrate data-driven themes that were not initially considered among the theory-driven ones.

4 Results: multilingualism, employability, and futures on the move

The answers of the students to the question “How do you think this mobility program will influence your life” show how personal, professional, linguistic, and cultural assets converge in a single desirable identity which is expected to be more sellable on the neoliberal market. Becoming “more employable” is structured as one of the highest assets of the sojourn abroad, on a continuum ranging from expectations for which students find it hard to provide arguments to more structured future plans to work and live abroad in which the impact of SA appears more clearly.

Straight from the beginning, the participants seem to align with and reproduce the neoliberal discourse of SA as an asset in one’s CV. What is striking though is that in spite of the fact the students align with this discourse and adopt it as part of their life-narrative, they struggle to identify by which means this benefit is going to come into being.

For instance, Claudia and Jennifer (Excerpt 1) seem to be confident that the impact of their stay in Finland will be positive for their CV. However, they struggle to explain how this positive impact is going to materialize in the future. Instead, they refer to “knowing languages and so on” and to the Spanish term “desparpajo”, whose closest translation is “ease of manner”, when it comes to explaining how this increased employability will provide rewards:

Excerpt 1: Jennifer and Claudia (PRE-interview)

Jennifer: probably/ it’s always said that an Erasmus looks good in a CV/ and that ah you know/ you know languages and so on also/ so I imagine it helps/ actually/

Claudia: mm maybe not more employment opportunities but we might have more ease of manner when it comes to looking for them/

Similarly, Mila (Excerpt 2) brings to the fore the fact that improving her foreign-language skills together with her connections with other people alike who have the same mindset “to succeed in life” is the way in which her SA in Oulu will impact her identity. Nevertheless, it seems that Mila is not able to explain in which palpable ways these language skills and social connections will positively impact her.

Stefaan (Excerpt 3) also mentions employment benefits due to the improvement of the English language, and the idea of creating a network of connections. While he is doubtful about the academic contribution of the experience, the participant acknowledges the value of English skills – a condition *sine qua non* in order to get a better job, especially on an international market for which he seems to have aspirations. Interestingly, the participant states that he is learning a lot while affirming that this learning is not related to the subject that he is studying but to the connection (drawing on his discourse, he probably refers to social connections built through the sojourn abroad).

Excerpt 2: Mila (PRE-interview)
yes of course/ because you make a lot of friends here/ you... I I will be able to learn the language better/ so/ and communicating with different people who also learn and want to succeed in life/

Excerpt 3: Stefaan (PRE-interview)
Stefaan: a: h/ yeah/ yeah of course/ because ah/ the better my English gets/ the more chance I got of a better job/ also internationally/ since it's a requirement to have good English... so yeah/
Interviewer: OK/ and what about the training?
Stefaan: a:h/ I'm/ not/ sure in which way it will affect ah/ my career/ but I'm pretty sure ah/ I'm learning a lot there and/ yeah/ I don't know if it adds extra X for the subject I'm in/ but ah/ it does for the connection/

Diego (Excerpt 4) goes beyond the sojourn abroad as an asset in his CV. The participant actually envisions a job interview in which candidates are asked if any of them has been an Erasmus student. Answering affirmatively automatically projects them as people with an open mind towards mobility who know how to manage their own life, thus alluding to the neoliberal idea of the individual as an entrepreneur of himself or herself. In Diego's discourse, this appears to distinguish the Erasmus student from students who had not participated in SA. Thus, the Erasmus experience becomes a key element in an imagined episode from the future in which he will have the credentials that demonstrate he has the will and knowledge of how to improve.

On a similar token, Jussi (Excerpt 5) also embodies his future self as a jobseeker and imagines a job interview in which employers will acknowledge that he is a former Erasmus student. By using adjectives like "courageous" and "international", the participant is translating soft-skills achieved through SA to benefits on the job-market. Sami (Excerpt 5) envisions himself working abroad and affirms the SA

experience is important for his endeavor. Strikingly, the participant ascertains that studying and improving professionally is not the most important asset of the sojourn abroad.

The accounts of the three participants appear to be perfectly aligned with the marketable identities that sell well on the neoliberal employment market in which open-mindedness, willingness to become mobile, management of foreign languages and the individual as an “entrepreneur of himself” converge.

Excerpt 4: Diego (PRE-interview)

yes/ yes/ yes/ a lot/ I mean I believe that... nowadays an Erasmus has/ it helps a lot with respect to... that it opens my mind to go to... I don't know if in a job interview or whatever they will ask “has anyone participated in an Erasmus program?” and if/ if you say that/ I mean if you've participated in an Erasmus/ it means that you were able to say well I'm going on my own to a foreign country and I know how to improve/ you know what I mean? (...) and speaking another language/

Excerpt 5: Sami and Jussi (PRE-interview)

Sami: to be honest ah I...don't think it's gonna affect too much because we are not really here to study/ right? well/ we had to pick some courses/ of course some in/ interesting courses but it's not the main thing/ really/

Interviewer: mhm/ OK/ and professionally?

Jussi: professionally I think when you are applying for jobs/ they will recognize you have been an exchange student/

Interviewer: mhm/

Jussi: and I think that will have a positive influence because you had/ had the courage to go there/ they know you can ah ... be international/

Sami: yeah/ yeah/ it's true/ (...) and I'm actually planning to work abroad/ so this is a big thing for me/ yeah/

On a similar token, Meyer (Excerpt 6) and Jesús (Excerpt 7) report on low expectations in relation to academic gains from the experience and directly refer to the employment market. This time, the market takes the shape of companies (with no exceptions) that look for employees who have international experience and capability to deal with different cultures. Once more, soft skills, and not professional learning appear as the most desirable and beneficial assets of SA.

Excerpt 6: Meyer (PRE-interview)

I think every company is looking for somebody who has ah experience in a foreign country/ or experience dealing with different cultures/ and for that way I'm pretty sure that/ mm/ such a program can only be an advantage for oneself/

Excerpt 7: Jesús (PRE-interview)

me professionally I don't think I will learn more physics here than in Spain/ nor less (...) I will have the same knowledge but I think that... that professionally it helps that you've seen how things are done in other places and so/ that... when you go to a company/ that company will know you are a person open to/ to different... to different ways to see things/

When they are at the end of their SA, the participants show the same alignment with the subjectivities thought to be sought for by the neoliberal market. Claudia and Jennifer (Excerpt 8) enact future selves in which employment doors will open to former Erasmus students. In their account, their job and their life become a single project positively affected by SA, an authentic rite of passage that prepares you for a future in which looking for a job abroad is a must.

Excerpt 8: Jennifer and Claudia (POST-interview)

Claudia: because many doors open after when you look for a job/ or not even for a job but for life itself/ that: it is a lesson/ and and... from my point of view/ it's easier to go on Erasmus and know another country being able to return home without any type of commitment/ that the only commitment is that they won't give you the scholarship/ so well/ so well/ you went on Erasmus and then if you go to look for a job/ get a job/ and then you see you don't like it and...

Jennifer: you don't like it/ and you must stay cause you have a contract/

Claudia: and you have to stay/ yeah/ and so it's always better to try the Erasmus and not that you jump in the deep/ so/

On a similar note, Diego (Excerpt 9) and Sami (Excerpt 10) imagine themselves as employees in a multinational corporation and bring to the fore their responsibility for themselves, a characteristic of the neoliberal subject: "by seeing people as businesses, a neoliberal perspective presumes that people own their skills and traits" (Gherson 2011: 539), "a collection of assets that must be continuously invested in, nurtured, managed and developed" (Martin 2000: 582). Once more, their prophecy with regard to the fact that at the academic level, the SA has not been too important seems to be a reality.

However, the participants focus on the impact of SA on their perspectives to work and live abroad. In a neoliberal fashion based on continuous self-improvement and seeking of opportunities, another door, though, appears to have opened in their life project: an ongoing migratory process in which further destinations are contemplated:

Excerpt 9: Diego (POST-interview)
 yes/ yes/ as I said before/ firstly it may help me for/ so...I mean
 imagine I'm doing practices in a corporation and the corporation has
 an offer in Finland/ who will they take there? someone who doesn't
 know anything or the guy who's been in Finland? The guy who's been
 in Finland/ (...) which is a small thing/ right? a drop there in the ocean
 that/ it seems right but well/ it's already there/ and also to decide to go
 abroad and these things/ you know? If they tell me "you go to Dubai"/
 then well/ I go/ let's go/

Excerpt 10: Sami (POST-interview)
 mhm/I think academically not so much/mhm well I didn't focus on
 my studies too much there but/but maybe in a way that I I learnt to
 take more responsibility of myself now/ in this way/ (...) professional/
 professional I have have this dream for a long time that I'm gonna work
 abroad and this only made it stronger/ but maybe now I have/ more more
 possibilities around the world not just in let's say Russia/

Despite not considering that his sojourn abroad will have a deep impact on his professional life *strictusensu*, Meyer (Excerpt 11) asserts that SA will equip him with soft skills such as managing people and things, added values that become professional values that enhances one's possibilities to achieve any kind of job. Similarly, Jesús (Excerpt 13) brings to the fore corporations that value individuals with people-managements skills and a global vision. Problem-solving skills also appear to be an asset, even though the participant is not able to name such problems. This discourse points to the malleable and multi-purpose worker who can easily adapt to the needs of the market. Both accounts are connected to the relationship that is established between the neoliberal worker and the employer: "Under neoliberalism, the employer and the worker enter into a business partnership, albeit an unequal partnership. The worker provides a skill set that can be enhanced according to the employer's requirements-part of what is being offered is the worker's reflexive ability to be an improvable subject" (Gherson 2011: 540).

On a similar token, Stefaan (Excerpt 12) asserts that his sojourn abroad enabled him to learn a lot on a professional level and improved his chances of getting a job

later in his life. Strikingly, this is preceded by the affirmation that Finnish education did not have the outstanding quality that he imagined. Instead, his openness to become mobile in the future appears to be more acute, among other personal changes that seem to account for the professional benefits which are not related to subject-learning.

Excerpt 11: Meyer (POST-interview)
yes/ ah/ because/ maybe/ maybe not like ahm... super professionally seen/ probably not/ ah but just like in the way you learn to handle with people and like or to to do/ to deal with people/ ah/ or to handle things/ ahm/ I think you just get a lot life experience which is gonna help you/ let it be in marketing but also let it be in any other kind of job/

Excerpt 12: Stefaan (POST-interview)
ah/ well/ I think the education in Finland was not as great as I hoped it to be/ but on the other hand I did learn a lot professionally and it's great XX/ I also improved my chance of a job later on/ personally it also made some pretty big changes because I already knew that the Netherlands is not the place where I want to stay for the rest of my life/ this confirmed it even more more/ and it also confirmed that I don't want to live in Finland/ it's way too cold...

Excerpt 13: Jesús (POST-interview)
well I believe it does because if...I mean/ I know that/ that in the corporations of this type it is valued the fact that you know how to deal with other people/ and the fact that/ I mean besides knowing how to deal/ of having dealt/ for the reason that it gives you a more global vision/ and not all problems or situations are solved with what you already know/ but with other things you might have seen and you think they can't be useful/ but they can/

A slightly different view is provided by Mila who believes that the fact she has studied education in Finland, a country with a much-praised education system, will be a big asset in her CV in the future. Even though Mila's account appears to be different from those given by the rest of the participants, it is still fashioned in a similar vein. The participant mentions the educational credentials of a Finnish university as a huge asset in a CV, providing room to believe that she refers to institutionalized cultural capital expected to be transformed into economic capital based on recognition (Bourdieu 1986).

Excerpt 14: Mila (POST-interview)

Mila: yes/ definitely/ especially that I studied education in Finland/ and even if it was only for four months/ I think that this is ah highly-praised in other countries/ like you know that there was/ there was so much noise about the Finnish educational system so I think that this will be a huge plus in my CV/

Judging from the frequency language skills are referred to in the students' accounts, language learning appears as one of the most outstanding assets of the sojourn abroad. However, the participants seem to make a clear distinction between those languages that are materially worthy to invest in and those that are not. They come up with a myriad of reasons to justify why they did not invest in the local languages (with the only exception of Spanish).

For instance, Diego (Excerpt 15) and Meyer (Excerpt 16) allude to improving their English level as an outcome of their Erasmus experience:

Excerpt 15: Diego (PRE-interview)

Diego: I hope I will leave this place with an English/practically/not perfect/but...

Excerpt 16: Meyer (PRE-interview)

yeah/ I think they will improve a lot because I really don't have another opportunity than speaking English here/

Similarly, Mildri asserts her intention to learn Spanish. Interestingly, the participant refers to the Spanish B2 language course as "the language course", as if it was the only language course offered, in spite of the fact that the university offers Spanish and Catalan courses alike. Even though she tries to hedge her discourse in relation to learning Catalan, it is clear that her degree of investment in each of the two languages is substantially different: she has no plans to enroll in any Catalan course, which she considers a lack of time. This does not seem to be the case for the Spanish course:

Excerpt 17: Mildri (PRE-interview)

I hope I will feel more secure about my Spanish when I leave/ (...) I'm doing the language course here in Rectorado/ the B2 Spanish course/ and also I want to learn a little bit Catalan/ but right now I don't have the time to do any course/ but I have my classes in Catalan so I learn maybe a little bit everyday/ but not systematically/

At the end of their stay, the participants display even more adverse feelings towards the local languages (once more, with the only exception of Spanish).

On the one hand, Judith (Excerpt 18) hedges her lack of investment and proficiency in Finnish by bringing to the fore her limited relationship with the language during the sojourn abroad. On the other hand, Carla refers directly to the lack of usefulness of the language when compared with other types of languages, probably those understood to have a higher economic value because of their international projection. In a similar vein, Meyer (Excerpt 19) seems to have calculated the effort-benefit ratio of learning the Finnish language and the balance came out negative. The participant refers to the complexity and lack of value of the Finnish language, on a derogatory note:

Excerpt 18: Carla and Judith (POST-interview)

Judith: Finnish is more about writing/ it's more for speaking/ it's about practicing it/ because it's quite complicated/ right? but... then...to be sincere/ I would like to learn more Finnish...

Carla: oh/ well/ I wouldn't/ what I learnt it's there/ (...) but it's useless/ you know? I will keep the basics and that's it/ but I would have liked to have learnt another type of language/ because Finnish is only useful for Finland/

Excerpt 19: Meyer (POST-interview)

it was extremely hard and then I compared/ OK/ there are five million people in the world speaking like this fucking-hard language/ so the effort is maybe not really worth it/ it's maybe not so OK to say it/ but this is how I felt/

Sami and Jussi (Excerpt 20) remark their considerable investment in English. In fact, Sami seems to have invested even in sounding like a native English speaker. However, this comes in contrast with their relationship with Romanian. In this case, a bad schedule and even the higher importance of party-time are brought to the fore as explanations for their lack of investment in the local language.

Excerpt 20: Sami and Jussi (POST-interview)

Sami: I've been working on my own/ English/ a lot/ I'm I'm trying to sound like some/ native speaker (...) we would have had this language course and I I was gonna go there but/ ah/ it took place on Thursday evenings and you know/ it's not the perfect time/ because we had all the parties then/

Jussi: I would have wanted to learn more more Romanian/ but the/ courses were not/ kind of like not possible/ because of the other courses and stuff like that/

In Lleida, Federico (Excerpt 21) alludes to his decision to invest time in learning Spanish (which appears like the natural thing to do) as an impediment to learning Catalan. Among his reasons, the participant brings to the fore esthetic characteristics of the languages, which he seems to perceive as more appealing in Spanish:

Excerpt 21: Federico (POST-interview)
Catalan...I did the A1 course but...then...it was a little bit difficult to learn also Catalan besides Spanish/ and it was a little bit confusing/ and also/ I like Spanish better/ (...) how it sounds/ right?

Mildri (Excerpt 22) refers to similar reasons: the natural choice to learn Spanish, since in an imagined future, this will be the language that she will use:

Excerpt 22: Mildri (POST-interview)
Ah...it was mainly because I was focusing on Spanish/ because that's the one I can use later/

Finally, Petronela (Excerpt 23) offers a sharp account that explains her lack of investment in Catalan. On the one hand, an intrinsic characteristic of the language is mentioned: its difficulty. In this regard, the participant does not initially provide any other explanation on where her perception comes from. Instead, she declares her lack of interest in the language. As reasons that account for it, the participant refers to usefulness, in an economic fashion, and level of difficulty between Spanish and Catalan, where the former comes out as easier. Given the fact that Catalan and Spanish are similar languages which will probably have the same learning difficulty for a Polish speaker, there is room to believe that the higher level of difficulty of Catalan when compared to Spanish is just a product of her perception. In relation to these discourses, previous research on language attitudes (e.g. Garret 2006; Giles and Billings 2004) showed how evaluative judgments of language can have a social nature.

Excerpt 23: Petronela (POST-interview)
because it's difficult/ (...) I didn't care a lot about this language/ (laughs)/(...) I think it was more useful Spanish than Catalan/ and maybe more also easy to learn/ yes/ it's more easy/

5 Discussion

Previous research examining the connection between SA and identity (e.g. Jackson 2008; Pellegrino Aveni 2005) has already pointed to what some of the results above indicate: a significantly higher sense of being able to deal with cultural difference

and an increase in the multiplicity of viewpoints is reported at the end of the SA period.

With regard to the expectations for SA, in the students' narrative accounts, personal and professional expectations and outcomes converge and give shape to their identities and eventually end in their CVs, where an Erasmus "always looks good" and "it can only be an advantage for oneself". These commodified, marketable identities, scaffolded on a continuum of personal and professional assets and with language skills at the forefront appear as the highest asset of the experience. Nevertheless, the participants struggle to define which particular skills or traits will contribute to this development, showing an alignment with neoliberal discourses on SA as a magic, an ill-defined formula to become more employable.

Most of the times, these identities are not rooted in professional gains but in rather personal ones. This is, the outcomes of SA seem to transform higher education students in a "bundle of skills" (Urciuoli 2008) that are expected to increase one's value on the job market. On the one hand, there is the improvement of foreign language skills, most of the times referring to English or Spanish. These appear to positively correlate with job opportunities – in a pragmatic and instrumental fashion, in which language becomes human capital (Urciuoli 2008). On the other hand, we find the ability to establish connections with people with the same mindset to "succeed in life", evidenced by the students' courage to participate in SA.

Together with the exposure to different cultural, social, and linguistic realities, these seem to be the sort of capital, which "unlike other forms of capital, it cannot be separated from the individual who owns these resources" but "they nevertheless constitute resources which can be sold in a market" (Olssen 2006: 219), that reshapes the identities of Erasmus students and repositions them on a more privileged level on the neoliberal market. All of the above seem to be fashioned in a style that characterizes education under neoliberalism, in which: "abilities, skills, and creative capacities of individuals all constitute 'human capital', which serves as the basis for profit they can earn on the market" (Bae and Park 2020: 277).

In the narratives of the students, corporations appear frequently when it comes to the impact of the program in their lives. Within these discourses, companies are entities that have a fine-grained understanding of what sort of individuals are shaped through SA and make the distinction between those who studied abroad and those who didn't, giving advantage to (and eventually hiring) the former.

These themes are deeply connected to the imagined futures that are at the basis of how neoliberalism operates (cf. Bae and Park 2020; Zimmermann and Muth 2020). In Norton's definition of identity, the future – this is, an imagined self – plays an outstanding role: "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2013: 45). Under this light, individuals invest

resources (of time, economic, etc.) with the rationale that their investment will contribute to the development of the desired imagined identities. Taken to the terrain of neoliberal conditions, “neoliberal desires about entrepreneurial selves play out differently within different social, politic, or linguistic contexts” (Zimmermann and Muth 2020: 269) that “underlies the logic of human capital development” (Bae and Park 2020: 277). Since education is increasingly aligning with the development of the neoliberal subject, “visions of the future emerge as an important way through which neoliberal subjects are governed, as those subjects make decisions regarding their education based on a speculative forecast of what the future will be like” (Bae and Park 2020: 278).

This article shows that, in essence, three different ways are identified by the participants as benefits of SA for a future in which they imagine themselves as workers on the neoliberal market.

The first one is what the mobility says about the participants; this is: the mere fact of choosing to participate in the sojourn abroad projects a neoliberal self. An alleged freedom of choice has come to be understood as a characteristic of neoliberal agency, which “emerges as conscious choices that balance alliances, responsibility, and risk using a means-ends calculus” (Gherson 2011: 540). This identity is characterized by open-mindedness, autonomy, courage to take risks, openness to future mobility, and knowledge about how to improve. The Erasmus student shows a capacity to be an entrepreneur of his/her own life, an ongoing project that is based on endless development, for which the sojourn abroad is just the beginning, an authentic rite of passage that opens the door to new and more distant avenues for work-related migration. Gherson (2011) alludes to risk as a necessary component of neoliberalism and a centric neoliberal strategy: “managing risk frames how neoliberal agents are oriented towards the future”, which implies that “neoliberal agents are responsible for their own futures – they supposedly fashion their own futures through their decisions” (p. 540).

The second are the skills that the participation in SA gives to students. Even though one might think about academic learning to be transformed into work-related skills, most of the times the educational aspect is deliberately left aside – this is, students are not invested in gaining professional knowledge because they understand “it’s not the main thing” of the experience. It is language skills (of languages that are regarded as important and profitable), the capability to interact with people from different cultures and also oneself in different cultural settings that seem to add to their professional value.

Finally, the third is the ability to build a network of connections: people with a similar mindset, reportedly defined as “people who want to succeed in life”. However, as most of the benefits that the participants mention, these connections, born in and maintained on the social and personal level, are also contemplated as eventually

benefiting competitiveness on the neoliberal market – “(i)nternational educational sojourns, seen in this light, can be understood as an enabling practice, with cultural capital and social networks opening possibilities for onward migration to new destinations within the global labour market” (Findlay et al. 2017: 201).

This article shows how SA through the Erasmus program, independently of the context, constitutes an authentic machinery of the participants’ identity that responds to neoliberal flows in need of not just highly-skilled workers but workers who are, at a personal level, shaped according to the needs of the market: open-minded, risky and brave, equipped with foreign language and intercultural skills, eager to continuously improve and willing to embrace further forms of mobility. This is, the European mobile student embodies “an autonomous entrepreneur responsible for their own selves and their own progress and position” (Olssen 2006: 219). These students seem to prepare the way for a new type of migrant, for whom migration, rather than a single act, becomes a continuous, progressive process (Findlay et al. 2017; Murphy-Lejeune 2004), “an additional dimension of the flexible, entrepreneurial subject imagined in neoliberal societies” (Courtois 2020: 237).

All of the above resound with Bourdieu’s (1986) theory on the forms of capital. On the one hand, the creation of a network of connections with “people alike”, established through SA, constitutes a form of social capital. In Bourdieu’s (1986) words: “(t)he volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (p. 21).

On the other hand, there is an alleged cultural capital, in its embodied state, that is expected to be achieved by means of the hands-on experience of living and studying in a foreign culture. But it is not only this “invisible” sort of cultural capital that is achieved. The fact that the Erasmus program is an official, legitimate scheme for SA endows the possessors with capital in its institutionalized form. Because there are recognized credentials (i.e. a certificate) of the sojourn abroad expected to be acknowledged, what Bourdieu (1986) referred to as “social alchemy” – “the performative magic of the power of instituting, the power to show forth and secure belief or, in a word, to impose recognition” (p. 20–21) is created through SA.

Language skills as a sort of cultural capital that can be embodied, institutionalized, or both, must be approached aside. The results of this study show that SA students align with dominant ideologies on multilingual repertoires that are part of the “prophesying marketing produced by universities and students alike” (Zimmermann 2020: 299). The participants declare high degrees of investment in major languages (i.e. with a high number of speakers and considerable international projection) such as English and Spanish and very little interest (if not aversion) for the local languages.

On this note, Mitchell and Güvendir (2023) have signaled a hierarchical model, together with interpersonal relationships and local contextual factors could partially explain the language affiliations of mobile students. In this model, perceptions of English, as the hypercentral language and other supercentral languages, which serve purposes of long-distance and international communication (de Swaan 2001: 5) have “an important influence on students’ language affiliations” (Mitchell and Güvendir 2023: 14). The authors also signaled that the language hierarchy model was sometimes neutralized by SA students by means of new language affiliations, an increased awareness of the relationship between languages, and a sense of increasing self-efficacy as a language learner. In the present study, one of the participants (Stefaan) declared that he was interested in learning Czech due to the fact that he found a Czech girlfriend during his sojourn abroad. In relation to the second neutralizing factor, these results show that the SA students did not have much awareness of the relationship between languages, such as for example, concerning the fact that Catalan and Spanish have a similar difficulty for language learners. Instead, very adverse, and sometimes despicable references were made in relation to unfounded traits of the local languages.

With a view to these accounts, there is not much room to believe that the SA participants in this study improved their self-efficacy in the local languages (with the exception of Spanish) due to their decision to refrain from learning them and an alleged lack of opportunity to interact in these language created by either the students’ willingness to detract from it or an alleged lack of need to use the language for cultural interaction (attributed to the high level of English in the SA destination).

These results shed light on a few controversial implications with regard to the relationship between SA through the Erasmus program – an experience that is embedded in formal education – and the development of human capital regarded as desirable by the political economy of neoliberalism.

In the first place, while autonomy is a desirable asset, the fact that the students are investors of “their own selves, their progress, and position” (Olssen 2006: 219) leaves the full responsibility of employability to the individual and it “is directed at the subjectivity of the person, not through the body but through the mind, through forms of educational practices and pedagogy which, through choices in education, shape the subjectivities of autonomous choosers” (Marshall 1995: 322). This tendency was already pointed out by Dvir and Yemini (2017) who claimed that “EC’s [European Commission] policies related to macro-problems that were traditionally addressed solely by governments are now mainly addressed through the fostering of individual agency” and “internationalisation seems to be used to sharpen individual citizens’ skills and competences in a pragmatic matter, thus reconfiguring traditional governmental solutions to macro-socio-economic problems by focusing on the micro (individual) level” (p. 206–207). Taken together with the increasing precariousness of

the job market, the personal impact that it might have on the participants is still to be explored.

Secondly, these results leave us wondering about the educational value of an experience that despite being embedded in formal education, does not seem to have educational benefits at the forefront. What's more, the participants do deliberately leave aside this aspect of the experience because they understand it is meant to be about something else. Language learning seems to be an exception. However, it is framed as a highly practical, instrumental, and job-oriented asset, pointing to the fact that despite the vast majority of sending and receiving higher education institutions being publicly founded, the values that are transmitted through the experiences are mainly related to the "marketization" of the employment market.

This study showed how SA through the Erasmus program is "marketized" in a discourse on neoliberalism that is normalized by mostly middle-class students of many different nationalities and across different contexts, demonstrating that the European Commission's imagined contribution of the Erasmus program to fostering employability is a reality in the participants' accounts.

The results of this study reveal that in spite of the fact that SA is perceived to lead to the improvement of language skills, what the students display is a very utilitarian type of multilingual identity and they deliberately choose to invest in marketable languages and divest from learning all the local languages within all the three contexts that were approached in the present study (with the only exception of Spanish). These results connect to the ones in Mitchell and Güvendir (2023), which indicate that SA students' "perceptions of a language hierarchy have an important influence on students' language affiliations" (p. 14). However, Mitchell and Güvendir's (2023) study points to the availability/non-availability of language learning opportunities previous to SA and to the opportunities for language learning during SA, as well as on interpersonal relationships and local contextual factors. On the contrary, the present study demonstrates how students deliberately decide to detract from investing in local languages whose knowledge is not perceived to lead to substantial economic rewards. What is more, the sojourn abroad leads to an increased animosity towards the local languages (again, with the exception of Spanish), to which the students end up referring in an almost derogatory way. Local languages, therefore, are consciously refused entrance into the participants' linguistic repertoires and constantly referred to as difficult, complex, less likeable, and useless.

Taken together, these results call for reconsidering how "the university can become a space that resists as well as reproduces larger sociopolitical and epistemic inequities", favoring the already privileged – the vast majority of SA students in the present study declare to belong to the middle class – in order to respond in an uncritical way to the demands of "free markets, rational choice, structural adjustments, and transnationalization" (Chrakavarty et al. 2020: 124). It is of fundamental

need to look into the meaning and social contributions of such a neoliberally-driven experience that has come to be almost a label of a whole generation of Europeans, “which need to be examined by asking who generates these processes and who benefits – or not – from this added value” (Duchêne 2011: 3).

Appendix 1: Pre – interview guiding questions

1. What's your name and where are you from?
2. Which were the reasons that determined you to enroll in a mobility program?
3. Why Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest?
4. In which ways do you think this mobility plan will influence your life?
 - Personally
 - Academically (languages)
 - Professionally
5. How would you define yourself? Do you feel you belong to a country/a province/ Europe? What makes you feel this way?
6. Do you think a mobility plan can have any effects on your sense of belonging?
7. Are you planning to socialize more with local/Erasmus/people from your own country? Do you think Erasmus students usually get along together? Why? Which is the common language of the Erasmus communities?
8. Which were your expectations before coming to Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest? How has your stay here been so far?
9. Which are your hopes with regard to your stay here? And fears?
10. How do you see your role in this new society?
11. How do you see yourself in 5 years? And where do you see yourself?
12. Had you had any experiences with foreign people before coming here? Which kind of experiences? How do you react to different manners to do things? Do you think they affected your choice to be here in any way?
13. Which kind of jobs do you imagine yourself having in the future? Do you think this experience will help you with that?
14. Do you think that the Erasmus programs are a place to make friends for a life? How will you stay in contact with them?
15. Do you think there are any elements that define the European culture/identity?
16. Do you think the fact you belong to a European country made your stay here easier?
17. How do you see the world in the future? Do you think it will resemble more and more an Erasmus community?
18. How do you see the future of the European Union?

Appendix 2: Transcription conventions

- / – indicates the minimal but clear pause between phrases/ sentences in normally-paced speech
- ... – indicates pause of significant length (more than 0.5) seconds
- : – indicates elongated vowel
- “ ” – indicates that the speaker is overtly voicing her/himself or someone else
- X – indicates incomprehensible speech
- ? – indicates rising intonation (including questions)

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