

## Book Review

**Kalocsái, Karolina.** *Communities of Practice and English as a Lingua Franca. A Study of Erasmus Students in a Central European Context*, Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2013. ISBN: 978-3-11-029547-4, 254 pp.

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In the last decade, European universities have experienced a process by which they have increased their internationalization activities, including the promotion of student mobility programs. The Erasmus program has been saluted as one of the flagships of the European Union. It started more than three decades ago with the declared goal to promote European integration and it is arguably the most visible element characterising European unity and common development. In spite of the many differences – political, economic, social and cultural – existing among different European countries, university students from all Europe keep getting together and finding a common space of relationship thanks to this mobility program.

The impact of Erasmus experiences on students' life and development has been studied from different perspectives and there is still a huge area for further studies looking into the nuances and the fruits obtained out of such experiences. Despite this fact, it is surprising to note that most of the research regarding the impact of this experience has been conducted by the same institutions that promote and sustain the mobility programs, such as the European Commission (European Commission 2004; Vossensteyn et al. 2008). In this context, there is definitely a considerable demand of research on the identity construction of mobility students, as well as on their language uses and their social practices.

Karolina Kalocsái's *Communities of Practice and English as a Lingua Franca* is a timely and highly valuable book which really captures the ways in which social meanings are construed through ELF by a group of Erasmus students in Hungary, while getting inside the intricacies that using English as a common language of communication among speakers coming from different countries can imply, providing an extensive and rich study of a group of Erasmus students sharing a few months of their lives at the University of Szeged. The study successfully conveys the atmosphere of this particular micro-cosmos and it does so in a very readable and informative way.

The book appears to be based on the PhD thesis of the author and its structure follows the canonical model normally used in such documents. It must be said, however, that the fact that the book is based on a thesis does

not make its reading a burdensome and heavy task, as it is clear that the author has made a good effort to transform the thesis into a readable and amenable text, clear, informative and pleasant to the reader, while at the same time rigorous and empirically sound.

This volume contains eight chapters. The first one is an introduction, where the author clarifies the two notions by which her work is conceptualized: firstly, the notion of space, focusing on third cultures or third spaces (Kramsch 1993a, Kramsch 1993b; Jenkins 2006), local and global spaces (Canagarajah 2005; Pennycook 2007) and Blommaert's concept of scales (2007); and secondly, the notion of communities of practice (Wenger 1998; Seidlhofer 2007). Also, an overview of the Erasmus program is made in this chapter, together with the aims of the study, which the author summarizes in a simple sentence: "to illuminate the ways in which Erasmus exchange students, as purposeful active agents, exploit the resources of ELF (in combination with other languages) to construct local social meanings" (p. 1).

After this introductory part, the book starts with a detailed description of the main theories on which the study is based. Thus, the concepts of "community of practice" and "English as a Lingua Franca" are placed in their historical context and developed. It is in this chapter where the reader's curiosity is arisen with regard to understanding in which ways a group of university students can form a community of practice and how language(s) contribute to bringing together this international and multilingual community of students.

Chapter 3 gives a detailed account of the ethnographic methodology followed in the study, which is based on interviews, naturally occurring conversations, fieldnotes, online journals, Facebook posts and circular e-mails, all of them analyzed using Conversational Analysis, thus involving transcribing, coding, analyzing and comparing linguistic and social practices.

Chapter 4 digs into the different dimensions of the Erasmus community of practice, namely "the jointly negotiated enterprise, the forms of mutual engagement and the shared negotiable resources of social practices" (p. 77). The author concludes that Erasmus exchange students settle in a "third space" (Duff 2007) and calls for a reconsideration of the goals of the EU Commission regarding the Erasmus exchange, towards facilitating students' integration in the local social networks.

In the fifth chapter, the linguistic resources that built and sustained that particular Erasmus group are looked into. In general terms, ELF is used on a daily basis and socializing practices into the linguistic code are employed when some students do not adapt to the rule. Kalocsái's findings are in line with other studies, such as Smit's (2010). The author emphasizes that the democratic choice concerning the use of ELF "was not a threat to linguistic diversity: it helped the

participants gain access to the multilingual setting, and once in there, it opened up the way for using other languages” (p. 135).

Chapter 6 is dedicated entirely to the analysis of humor in and through ELF. For this aim, the prepositions “in” and “through” are of considerable importance, since besides ritualized linguistic practices, students make fun of the use of ELF itself and, at the same time, the content of the message is also a reason to create humorous situations. A special mention is needed by the fact that this use of humor contributes to strengthening the bonds among the Erasmus family, as speaking non-standard forms of English is considered an intrinsic characteristic of the community.

Chapter 7 provides evidence on how the students became more self-confident speakers of ELF and the strategies they used to improve communicational understanding. Among the tactics that were used, special attention is devoted to the collaborative utterance construction and the resolution of non-understandings. All of these strategies contributed to boost the self-confidence of students with lower English skills, who “realized that they did not have to accomplish problematic moments *alone*, but they could anticipate the co-participants’ help” (p. 196). The study shows how, by constructing meaning collaboratively, the Erasmus students in Szeged brought their community together.

The final chapter reaps the benefits of the project and delves into the implications that result from them. As a conclusion, the author states that the Erasmus students in Szeged aimed to and achieved the goal of creating an Erasmus family, based on having fun and developing self-confidence. This common aspiration was attained both by social and linguistic means and always in a cooperative and supportive manner. As for the last ones, the use of ELF seems to be mandatory, especially at the very beginning of the stay. In spite of that, “Hungarian came to be another language which to a certain degree they all shared” (p. 208).

In summary, this book is a highly valuable account of the challenges and complexities of the social and linguistic activities performed by Erasmus students, which adds to current discourses on the way that mobility students construct social meanings through ELF. Its real value remains in the way it manages to combine the notions of communities of practice, ELF and CA methodology, thus providing the reader with a thorough description of the community building and communicative ELF practices of a group of international students in Hungary that could well be considered representative of similar international student groups in other European contexts.

The study opens up new directions for further investigations into the role of ELF in the communities of international students, as well as more in-depth research on the multiple effects that an Erasmus experience may have on

students. On that note, I would plead for more accurate insights and descriptions of the multiplicity of identities of these subjects, as well as of the cultural significance of the international experience, which would serve as a perfect complement for this study.

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