

Identifying students' intercultural communicative competence at the beginning of their placement: towards the enhancement of study abroad programmes

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A pre-placement questionnaire was completed by a cohort of 30 students participating in the Erasmus exchange programmes from the University of Salamanca (USAL) placed in British universities and by a group of 25 Nottingham Trent University (NTU) students hosted by diverse Spanish universities. The questionnaire was then analysed with the aim of providing a profile of their intercultural communicative competence, based on data about their self-perceived motivation and their intercultural awareness, knowledge, attitudes and skills, prior to their stay abroad. Despite the fact that their previous experience abroad, level of language proficiency and home university requirements for the placement differ, both groups share a positive attitude towards the host country, consider themselves ready to adapt to new cultural environments, regard misperceptions and solving conflicts as their greater challenge, and express a willingness to grow personally and professionally. These data will inform a larger research project seeking to identify the factors which promote the acquisition of intercultural competences, as a basis for universities to equip students with tools aimed at overcoming obstacles that may pose an educational challenge for them and hinder the development of their intercultural communicative competence while on placement abroad.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; foreign language learning; Erasmus placements; study abroad; intercultural dimension

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“His use of ‘they’ suggested an ‘us’...”
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*)

1. Introduction

During their study abroad, understood “as simply undertaking all or part of university education abroad” (Coleman 2013, 22) language learners cross, and sometimes build, bridges from familiar to uncharted territories through communication systems that affect the lives of people and cultures in contact as a whole, in concrete rather than abstract ways. In tertiary education, study abroad is a specially relevant instance within a range of possibilities towards the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This has been seen as a transformative process entailing a dialogic reflection and relation between cultures (Zarate 1995; Kramersch 1993; Penbeck, Yurdakul, and Cerit 2009) and through persons as “self-reflective, intentional agents” embedded in a “fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, and multiple micro- and macro contexts” (Ushioda 2009, 20). This definition, to which we adhere, is in consonance with a statement in the opening page of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*, a document recommended by the European Union Council as a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines and systems of validation of language ability, covering the cultural context in which languages are set, and promoting mobility within Europe. It adopts an intercultural approach that establishes the development of not only linguistic competence but of the learner’s personality as a central objective of language education (Byram and Parmenter 2012, 3).

ICC challenges traditional views of language teaching as a way of expressing universal rather than particular meanings. Instead, “the essentialization of cultures that was prevalent in applied linguistics 20 years ago has given way to a more nuanced understanding of the ‘foreign’” (Kramersch and Uryu 2012, 222) and now, contextual differences, and the acknowledgement and awareness of ambiguities within languages and cultures are key to language learning, which is progressively seen by teachers and researchers as “a complex, human

endeavour, involving unique people” (Kinging 2013, 333). Furthermore, developing ICC places students between cultures (Risager 2001) and makes it possible to explain and accept cultural diversity and “to create a sense of citizenship beyond the state” (Byram 2012, 91).

Based on the comparison of a European mobility programme questionnaire completed by UK Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Spanish University of Salamanca students, we will next report on the preliminary results of an international macro-study seeking to explore key elements of the intercultural dimension during Erasmus (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) placements, examine the students’ changes towards their host culture, themselves and their home culture, analyse the relationship between the intercultural learning occurring pre and during the placement abroad and identify the factors which encourage or hinder the acquisition of intercultural competences during their placements. The findings of the overall research are aimed at informing curriculum designers from both universities to improve students’ preparation prior to their Erasmus experience and increase the benefits of their placement abroad.

2. Theoretical background

Intercultural communicative competence, closely bound to students’ mobility and their status as “educational travellers” or “sojourners” (Fantini 2012a, 273), is seminal to the creation of a European Higher Education Area, meant to make “academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe” (Jackson 2012, 450).

According to Holliday (1999), a fundamental distinction needs to be established between what he labels paradigms of large and small cultures. The large culture paradigm refers to prescribed ethnic, national and international entities, while the small culture paradigm considers culture as emerging from small social groupings and avoids stereotypes. In fact, “wherever we go we automatically either take part in or begin to build small cultures” (Holliday 2013, 3). For him, the way

“different elements of culture relate to each other within an open dialogue between the individual and social structures” shapes a map or a “grammar of culture” (2013, xvi-xvii).

For decades, culture within language teaching has only been taught as the background for the teaching of the grammatical and lexical systems of the language. Moreover, the teaching of the cultural component focused almost exclusively on the transmission of facts, which was prioritized over the cultural values they represented. Little or no time was dedicated to help students understand other attitudes and ways of thinking that would challenge their own. However, just the same as there is a difference between learning about a language and learning to use a language, learning about a culture and acquiring ICC should be seen as related but distinct practices yielding different outcomes. In fact, an ICC approach to language learning does not seek that the learners assimilate or acculturate to the target culture by resembling the native speakers and their culture as closely as possible, but that they become aware of their own cultural identity, which is not limited to their national identity, and of the way they are perceived. This awareness precedes and is the condition for a greater knowledge, a change of attitudes and new skills. By getting to know the identities and cultures of the people they are interacting with and using this to reflect on their own culture, the learner may become an “intercultural speaker” (Byram and Zarate 1997), a phrase which was coined “to indicate that intercultural competence is worthwhile itself and should not be considered a poor imitation of native speaker competence” (Byram 2012, 89).

Within this approach, learning a new language becomes a process of consciously looking at what may be obvious of one’s own culture while at the same time recognizing that preconceived ideas of the target culture can be challenged. The learner begins to identify different cultural voices, and as a consequence reads the familiar signs with new eyes. From a language and study abroad perspective, Allen observes, “many foreign language students begin their sojourns abroad lacking strategies to negotiate encounters with speakers who do not scaffold and sustain interactions according to classroom discourse

norms” (2013, 69). Hence, the learning process becomes a conscious endeavour towards uncovering linguistically mediated meanings and practices of their own culture and identities thus giving way to a new interpersonal and intercultural reality that is different from both the native and the target cultures, and which needs to be negotiated and constructed. In other words, this process allows for different levels of intercultural competence to be enhanced and, by interacting “with one’s individual motives, past history and personal capabilities”, it “can open up possibilities for moving (perhaps, temporarily) into a third space” (Smolcic 2013, 95).

Briefly put, intercultural awareness starts with an awareness, or “cognitive” perspective (Chen and Starosta 1998-9, 28), of oneself and one’s own culture, which “implies an awareness of the role of the self in interaction and the ability to learn from interaction” (Toll 2000). Byram points out that intercultural awareness is a pre-requisite for intercultural competence. “Intercultural competence is defined as ‘the ability to interact successfully with others across cultural difference’, and can only be ‘developed and assessed in action’” (Byram 2000). We will henceforward assume Byram’s conceptualization of “intercultural (communicative) competence” (ICC), combining “the concept of ‘communicative competence’ in another language – with emphasis on the ability to use a language not only with correct application of its grammar but also in socially appropriate ways – with ‘intercultural competence’” (Byram 2012, 87-88).

Within the above framework, we understand that ICC is achieved through a relational process where the mobile learner places the host culture in relation to their own, engaging in a many-sided communication system where neither cultural patterns of behaviour nor the people who embody them will remain unaffected. This demands a readiness to confront self and other perceptions, and to change. After all, the history of culture is embedded within the stories of personal communicative encounters and the dialogue with people with similar experiences, as it is the case of students participating in mobility programmes: “In and through these dialogues, they may find for themselves this third place that they can name their own” (Kramsch 1993, 257).

Thus, developing ICC involves an educational integration of language with culture. By this we mean that students should place themselves between cultures and perform a mediating role by using the L2 as the contact language (Risager 2001). This allows the students to become more aware of their own identity and the way it is perceived by the members of the host culture; and, in the last instance, it makes it possible for them to explain and accept the differences. These differences should not be seen as permanent, as this would imply that cultures are static and homogeneous. Instead, language learners need to constantly negotiate their cultural and social identities in the specific contexts they find themselves in. All in all, “intercultural experiences are typically transformative” (Fantini 2012b, 404).

In the educational context, for the purposes of our macro-study, we have found Byram’s model of intercultural competence to provide a useful framework for analyzing to what extent ICC can be fostered and achieved (1997; Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002). This compass-like model comprises four main components that should be developed to grow more interculturally competent: *attitude* entails seeing how one’s own cultural practices and products might look from the perspective of the other; *knowledge* is built on what members of the home and host culture perceive as meaningful; intercultural *skills* are developed in diverse cultural scenarios to avoid possible cultural misunderstandings; and *critical cultural awareness* is “the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002, 13).

Byram recently added a fifth component as a consequence of the previous, which is no other than taking action, that is, “being willing and able to become involved with other people in making things different and better” (Byram 2012, 95). It is, then, the task of educators to move “from intercultural competence to intercultural responsibility” in order to help the implicit be made explicit with a view to overcome parochial views and deeply rooted prejudices (Guilherme 2012, 365-368).

3. The study

3.1. Objectives

Internationalization policies in Europe “are shaping the scope and direction of ‘academic mobility’” (Jackson 2012, 450). The extent to which European language and cultural policies are bound together can be seen in tracing back the origins of the *CEFR* to the work of the Committee for Out-of-school Education and Cultural Development of the Council of Europe in the 1970s, which set as one of its aims the development of “a common European cultural identity by unforced mutual influence” (Trim 2012, 23).

Drawing on key notions such as “small culture” (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman, 2010), “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram 1997), and “the third place” or “space” (Kramsch 1993; Byram and Feng 2006), recently redefined as “symbolic competence” (Kramsch 2011), this article discusses the results of a comparative analysis of a pre-placement questionnaire completed by British and Spanish university students, focused specifically on their reasons to take part in the period of residence abroad, and on the self-perception of their awareness, knowledge, attitudes and skills previous to their Erasmus placement, based on Byram’s model of intercultural competence (1997; Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002).

This questionnaire seeks to find out whether and how the differences between them with regards to their age, gender, and linguistic background may impact on their ICC in the face of another culture. Data drawn at the beginning of their placement abroad constitute the core of the present micro-study. Further data drawn from a post-questionnaire, together with other qualitative information based on students’ blogs and interviews, will be integrated within a macro-study seeking to inform the programmes designed by the Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and the University of Salamanca (USAL) to equip students with tools to identify and overcome obstacles to their development of the ICC during their residence abroad since the induction sessions offered by both institutions do not seem to sufficiently address these specific difficulties.

3.2. Methodology

The present macro-study uses a mixed-method approach combining statistical data from both a pre and a post-Erasmus placement questionnaire with qualitative findings on return to their home institution. We follow the antecedent of linguists who “have been focusing on ‘whole person development’, including the processes involved in language and (inter)cultural learning using an array of introspective techniques” (Jackson 2012, 454). Thus, evidence from students’ reports on their experience abroad gathered from blogs assigned to describe and reflect on their study abroad, and interviews on return to their home institutions, will widen the quantitative findings reported in this article.

Both questionnaires, adapted from Fantini (2006) and Buynsters (2012), contain five-point Likert scales. The pre-questionnaire, on which this micro-study is based, was distributed to two groups of students participating in the Erasmus exchange programmes from the USAL placed in British universities and the NTU hosted by diverse Spanish universities during 2013/2014.

A total number of 55 students (25 NTU and 30 USAL) completed the questionnaire, which comprises three sections: personal details, reasons to participate in the programme and intercultural experience. It is important to note that the data gather information on the students’ self-perceptions, including their self-assessed rather than accredited level of their target language. The questionnaire was sent to both cohorts of Erasmus students in September of 2013, prior to their placement abroad.

3.3. Research subjects

The questionnaire was filled in by NTU third year students of Spanish and another subject and by USAL third and fourth year students. Two differences should be mentioned regarding participation requirements and expected outcomes. Whereas for NTU students the placement abroad is an integral part of their course regardless of their grades, provision of places is limited at the University of Salamanca and

candidates are awarded study grants according to their academic records. As for the academic expectations, NTU students need to complete 30 credits and take exams but they are not required to pass them while their Spanish counterparts have to bring back credits of which they will be assessed as a component of their degree.

There are no significant age differences that may impact on the data: USAL students are on average 22.2 years old whereas NTU students are 23. As for their gender, in both groups most students are female although there are more male students in the NTU group: 35 % versus 13 % in the USAL group. Our study confirms that the study abroad is a largely feminized experience (Kinging 2010).

Their self-perception of the language abilities lends itself to further explorations both on the role foreign languages may play in their respective academic profiles and career prospects and on the pressure felt particularly by non-native speakers of English to learn it as a foreign language because of its status as *lingua mundi* in an increasingly interdependent society (Kinging 2013, 7), which will be dealt with in further stages of the study. Regarding their perceived level of the target language, 64 % of USAL students set themselves within the advanced range of *CEFR* levels - C1 (54%) and C2 (10%) - whereas 70 % of NTU students consider their language ability to be intermediate: B2 (50%) and B1 (20 %). According to their self-assessment, the group of Salamanca considered their language level higher. It is also worth noticing that half the students from both groups spoke at least a third language apart from English or Spanish as their second language.

Finally, for most of the USAL students this placement is their first experience abroad (74 %) while it is the opposite in the case of NTU students (25 %), a percentage strikingly similar to Coleman's (2001) more than ten years ago. His sample of British students was already familiar with the target country before they started their placement.

Most students will enjoy a one-year placement: 83.4% in the case of the USAL and 85% in the case of the NTU. The main difference between this half year placements is that the NTU students who study two languages will have spent the other half of the year in the other

target country either within Erasmus study programmes or in work or language assistant placements.

While we seek to address in a more advanced phase of the study the question of whether there is a positive correlation between length of stay and increased levels of intercultural competence, Coleman's (2001) data suggested that, paradoxically, long periods of residence abroad tend to increase ethnocentrism in some students. This may be compared with a relationship: falling in love with a country and falling out of love when your ideal image is replaced with a more realist one which will lead to disillusionment which may even result in reinforcing national stereotypes. The type of placement will also be related to the kinds of interactions students will have during their stay abroad and a future phase of the research will analyse what if any impact different contexts may have in their intercultural competence. All USAL students are in a university placement, while 25 % of the NTU students are assigned Spanish schools where they will act as language assistants.

4. Results

Our results confirm that there is no major difference between both cohorts of students and they feel very positive about the host country and about their disposition to integrate at the start of their placement, as the following tables show.

4.1. Motivation to participate in the Erasmus programme

As Table 1 shows, the average result of the dimension that serves to compare the reasons to participate in the Erasmus programme is statistically quite similar in both groups of students.

Table 1. Percentage of frequency of students' reasons to participate in the Erasmus programme (n=55). 1 equals not important and 5 equals very important.

		1	2	3	4	5	Average	Standard Deviation
Required by my university course	NTU	10.0	15.0	20.0	0	55.0	3.75	1.51
	USAL	16.7	23.3	30.0	13.3	16.7	2.90	1.32
Personal interest in the culture and	NTU	0	0	10.0	25.0	65.0	4.55	0.69
	USAL	0	0	13.3	16.7	70.0	4.55	0.72

people of the country								
Improve my future professional career	NTU	0	5.0	20.0	30.0	45.0	4.15	0.93
	USAL	0	3.3	0	16.7	80.0	4.72	0.64
My friends also participate	NTU	30.0	35.0	30.0	5.0	0	2.10	0.91
	USAL	36.7	23.3	36.7	0	3.3	2.10	1.03
Pressure from my family	NTU	80.0	15.0	5.0	0	0	1.25	0.55
	USAL	73.3	10.0	13.3	3.3	0	1.48	0.86
Willingness to grow personally	NTU	0	5.0	35.0	25.0	35.0	3.90	0.97
	USAL	0	0	13.3	30.0	56.7	4.45	0.72
Enrich my academic skills	NTU	0	10.0	25.0	35.0	30.0	3.85	0.99
	USAL	0	0	3.3	13.3	83.3	4.79	0.48
Get more life experience	NTU	0	0	15.0	35.0	50.0	4.35	0.74
	USAL	0	3.3	6.7	13.3	76.6	4.62	0.76
Enjoy my student life to the fullest	NTU	0	0	20.0	30.0	50.0	4.30	0.80
	USAL	0	6.7	16.7	26.6	50.0	4.21	0.96
Travel and expand my world view	NTU	0	0	15.0	10.0	75.0	4.60	0.75
	USAL	0	0	10.0	40.0	50.0	4.41	0.67
Improve my social skills and meet new people	NTU	0	0	20.0	40.0	40.0	4.20	0.77
	USAL	0	3.3	13.3	23.3	60.0	4.41	0.85
Become more independent	NTU	0	5.0	35.0	30.0	30.0	3.85	0.93
	USAL	6.7	3.3	26.7	20.0	43.3	3.90	1.21
Break with the daily grind	NTU	5.0	15.0	10.0	30.0	40.0	3.85	1.3
	USAL	6.7	6.7	23.3	43.3	20.0	3.62	1.09

In a more detailed analysis, however, we can see that out of the thirteen reasons listed in this dimension, seven of them are more highly rated by the USAL group, two are equally rated by both groups – “personal interest in the target culture” and “my friends also participate”, and the ones referring to enjoying student’s life and travelling show a very small difference between both groups. Nevertheless, there is a slightly greater contrast between the rating of the items “improve my future professional career” (USAL 4.72 vs NTU 4.15) and “willingness to grow personally” (USAL 4.45 vs NTU 3.90). “Enriching my academic skills” is also regarded as a more important reason by the USAL cohort (4.79) than by the NTU one (3.85). There is just one item that the USAL group considers less important and that is “required by university course”: 16.7 % of the group from Salamanca, versus 55 % of NTU students, chose the maximum rating of the scale.

These results show that some differences in both cohorts of students regarding their perceived reasons to participate in the Erasmus programme also reflect the curricular status of the Erasmus programmes in both universities. As anticipated, while in Britain a stay abroad is part of the language programme and it is a requirement for all students to spend the third academic year in at least one foreign country, for the Spanish students applying for an Erasmus grant is a personal, proactive decision, based on the firm belief that the experience will contribute very positively to their personal and professional development.

4.2. Awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills

On average, the four dimensions in this section of the questionnaire – awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills – don't show significant differences between both groups of students but a closer scrutiny of the data may offer interesting insights, in particular with respect to the awareness dimension.

Table 2. Average frequency of students' awareness and attitude towards the host culture (n=55). 1 equals not important and 5 equals very important.

AWARENESS								
I am aware of		1	2	3	4	5	Average	Standard Deviation
differences and similarities across my own and the host cultures	NTU	0	0	15	35	50	4.35	0.74
	USAL	6.7	10	16.7	46.6	20	3.62	1.13
negative reactions to these differences	NTU	15.0	10.0	50.0	20.0	5.0	2.90	1.07
	USAL	26.7	13.3	36.6	23.3	0	2.55	1.13
how specific contexts alter my interaction with others	NTU	0	10.0	40.0	50.0	0	3.40	0.68
	USAL	3.3	26.7	30	36.7	3.3	3.10	0.96
how I am viewed by members of the host culture	NTU	0	15.0	35.0	40.0	10.0	3.45	0.88
	USAL	3.3	30.0	36.6	26.7	3.3	2.97	0.93
dangers of generalizing	NTU	10.0	10.0	15.0	35.0	30.0	3.65	1.30
	USAL	10.0	16.7	40	26.7	6.7	3.03	1.06

individual behaviour as representative of the whole culture								
ATTITUDE								
I am/will be willing to		1	2	3	4	5	Average	Standard Deviation
interact with members of the host culture	NTU	0	0	10	10	80	4.70	0.66
	USAL	0	3.3	10	23.3	63.3	4.48	0.81
learn from my hosts, their language, and their culture	NTU	0	0	15	5	80	4.65	0.74
	USAL	3.3	0	6.7	3.3	86.6	4.69	0.87
communicate in the host language and behave in ways judged “appropriate” by my hosts	NTU	0	0	10	15	75	4.65	0.67
	USAL	0	3.3	6.7	16.7	73.3	4.59	0.77
deal with different ways of perceiving, expressing, interacting, and behaving	NTU	0	0	15	35	50	4.35	0.74
	USAL	3.3	0	10	30	56.7	4.38	0.92
act in ways quite different from those to which I am accustomed and prefer	NTU	0	5	25	45	25	3.90	0.85
	USAL	6.7	13.3	13.3	40	26.7	3.66	1.20

Table 2 shows the greatest differences regarding the awareness dimension between both groups and with the other dimensions. NTU and USAL students claim to be less aware of intercultural aspects (3.30). At the same time, there is a greater gap between the degree of awareness shown by NTU (3.55) and USAL students (3.05). NTU students seem to be more aware of “the differences and similarities across my own and the host cultures” than USAL students: 50 % of the former vs 20% of the latter chose the maximum rating of the scale. They also claim to be more perceptive of negative reactions to cultural differences and to detect more the dangers of overgeneralizations, and express greater awareness of the way they are viewed by people from the host culture and of the way specific contexts may alter their interaction with others.

In contrast, it shows very few differences between both cohorts of students concerning the attitude dimension, which is remarkably positive in both NTU (4.45) and USAL (4.36) students. In the two cases, students declare a similar willingness to interact, communicate with, and learn from the host culture but, at the same time, they show some reluctance to change their own behaviour.

Deeper transformations will probably occur when a longer immersion in the host culture is experienced. For the time factor to result in in-depth rather than shallow behavioural changes manifold factors may need to converge, amongst them varied and meaningful opportunities for interaction with people from the host culture beyond the academic context involving their engaged collaboration, and an investment of their whole thinking, feeling and doing. Indeed, “intercultural experiences are multidimensional” and transformative, “resulting in a profound paradigm shift” (Fantini 2012a, 277). There are “many [...] sites in our everyday lives where intercultural communication issues are relevant, such as education, family, travel, study abroad, the workplace, politics, the media, law, medical communication and service encounters”, etc. (Hua 2014, 220).

Table 3. Average frequency of students’ skills and knowledge of the host culture (n=55). 1 equals not important and 5 equals very important.

SKILLS								
		1	2	3	4	5	Average	Standard Deviation
I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture	NTU	0	0	10	35	55	4.45	0.69
	USAL	3.3	3.3	20.0	33.3	40.0	4.03	1.03
I use models of behaviour appropriate to the host culture to avoid offending my hosts	NTU	0	0	10	45	45	4.35	0.67
	USAL	0	6.7	13.3	30.0	50.0	4.24	0.93
I demonstrate a capacity to interact appropriately in different social	NTU	0	5.0	10.0	35.0	50.0	4.30	0.86
	USAL	0	10.0	10.0	50.0	30.0	4.00	0.91

situations in the host culture								
I can identify and solve cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arise	NTU	0	0	40.0	25.0	35.0	3.95	0.89
	USAL	0	3.3	16.7	63.3	16.7	3.93	0.69
I develop strategies for learning the host language and about the host culture	NTU	0	10	30	30	30	3.80	1.00
	USAL	0	6.7	6.7	60	26.7	4.07	0.78
KNOWLEDGE								
		1	2	3	4	5	Average	Standard Deviation
I am familiar with historical, social and political components of both my own and the host culture	NTU	0	5.0	55.0	25.0	15.0	3.50	0.83
	USAL	0	16.7	30.0	43.3	10.0	3.48	0.89
I can contrast aspects of the host culture with my own	NTU	0	0	25.0	50.0	25.0	4.00	0.72
	USAL	0	3.3	20.0	43.3	33.3	4.07	0.83
I know the essential norms and taboos of the host culture	NTU	0	0	35.0	20.0	45.0	4.10	0.91
	USAL	3.3	16.7	30.0	36.7	13.3	3.41	1.03
I recognize cultural differences which may cause difficulties in understanding and communication	NTU	0	10.0	15.0	35.0	40.0	4.05	0.99
	USAL	0	6.7	23.3	50.0	20.0	3.83	0.83
I know strategies for coping with cultural difficulties while immersed in the host culture	NTU	0	15.0	35.0	25.0	25.0	3.60	1.04
	USAL	0	13.3	43.3	33.3	10.0	3.41	0.85

Regarding the third dimension, Table 3 shows that both groups of students have a very similar high perception of their intercultural skills (4.05 USAL vs 4.17 NTU) although some differences arise after a close comparison of individual items. 90 % of NTU students vs 73 % of their USAL counterparts see themselves as being flexible or very flexible when interacting with people from the host country. Both

groups consider that they are able to behave appropriately to avoid offending their hosts, although USAL students (4.0) seem to find it slightly more difficult than NTU (4.3). Similarly, both groups of students find that the most difficult skill is to identify and solve conflicts and misunderstandings. The USAL students perceive themselves as more able than the NTU (4.07 vs 3.80) to develop strategies to learn the target language and about the host culture.

The overall result of the fourth dimension, knowledge of the target culture, does not throw relevant differences between both groups of students (NTU 3.85 versus USAL 3.64). However, the item concerning an acquaintance with the essential norms and taboos of the host country shows greater differences. Again, NTU students are more knowledgeable of aspects such as greetings, dress, behaviour, etc. of the host country (4.10 vs 3.41), perhaps because of the long established multicultural reality of postcolonial British society.

5. Conclusion

It is true that despite the difficult economic situation that Europe is facing at the moment and the cuts that are being constantly applied to many educational programmes, more students decide to embark on Erasmus placements (over 230.000 students took part in the programme in 2010-11, an annual increase of 8.5% compared with the previous year, with 33 participating countries). This experience can be life changing. When asked after their return, in our professional university contexts it is frequent to hear students say things like “I definitely feel much better equipped to live and work in a different country and culture now”.

In the analysis of these preliminary data, the most relevant issues so far are that, despite the differences between the two groups, mainly regarding their previous experience abroad, expectations from home university and linguistic level, both display a positive attitude towards the host country at the beginning of their placements and, at the same time, a lesser awareness of the intercultural dimension, especially in the case of the group from Salamanca. Both groups regard

themselves flexible enough as to adapt to new cultural milieus although they consider that identifying and solving conflicts and misunderstandings pose a greater challenge. They claim to have knowledge of some similarities and differences between their own and their host cultures. Regardless of whether students' access to an Erasmus placement may be a personal choice, depend on their academic results, or be a university requirement, they express a shared desire to grow personally and to have a better professional prospect.

Yet, in spite of the linguistic and culture gains after a time of residence abroad, Coleman (2001) found that stereotypes and negative comparisons of target country with their own country may, in some occasions, be reinforced with time. If this were still the case, our macro-study would need to explore more in depth what interactions, what previous preparation and cognitive, emotional and motivational strategies during their stay abroad students have or lack which may prevent them from developing a more rounded view and a much richer understanding and appreciation of the host country and an in-depth knowledge of their own dialogic subjectivities.

The findings from this questionnaire may provide a contribution to curriculum designers of pre-departure modules, as they particularly point to the need to introduce awareness raising tools since, although the NTU students feel they are more aware than those from Salamanca, this in itself does not necessarily mean they will develop more positive attitudes or achieve higher levels of intercultural knowledge during their placements and, in spite of their differences, at this point of the research no less work can be anticipated with the former group than with the latter. Students' attitudes may also be challenged, and change, by anticipating scenarios and making students face possible areas of conflict arising from cultural differences, while skills may start to be systematically developed through a deliberate exposure to other cultural practices at home and in the light of the experience gained by other students who have participated formerly in study abroad programmes. Finally, workshops where students are given a chance to interact with people from the host country prior to their stay abroad may make knowledge relevant, that is, formative rather than only informative, experienced instead of just transmitted, constructed and

not given.

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