

Chapter #6

LIVING ABROAD: IRISH ERASMUS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES' OF INTEGRATION IN SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

Living and studying in another country requires students to pursue a process of integration into a number of areas of life, among them university itself, as well as social and cultural events and day-to-day activities, all of which require the building of relationships. As English has become the *lingua franca* in many countries, English-speaking students nowadays face increased challenges to using Spanish as a means of communication to fully integrate into the host country. This paper identifies the strategies employed by a cohort of students from an Irish university during their year abroad in Spain with the aim of explaining their process of integration into the host country. The data used for this study were an integral part of a module completed by the students during their study abroad, where students wrote two reflective assignments in Spanish to analyse their experiences during study abroad. Results show that students who made efforts to move out of their comfort zone had a positive experience of integration. The experiences of students who did not integrate so successfully are discussed and recommendations that may be relevant for students and institutions in their preparation for study abroad are provided.

Keywords: study abroad, integration, foreign languages, higher education, reflection.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus programme was established in Europe in 1987 with a view to enabling mobility of staff and students across higher education institutions in Europe, and over 3 million students have benefited from the programme by 2013 (European Commission, 2015). Although spending time studying abroad as a means of developing language skills is not a new phenomenon (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2015), many university programmes in Europe nowadays include a period of studying and living in another country as an integral part of the course of study. Spending time abroad for students from European institutions has taken on new significance given the large increase in the number of students attending higher education institutions (Coleman, 2015) and the fact that mobility is one of the objectives of European policy for higher education as part of the Bologna Process (Teichler, 2015).

During their time abroad, students go through a process of integration and immersion into different spheres of life, among them, university itself, as well as social and cultural events and day-to-day activities, and this requires effort on their part, in particular to move out of their comfort zone and be open to new experiences. The term integration is used in this paper to refer specifically to the building of relationships through educational, social, cultural and day-to-day activities undertaken by students during their time abroad. Immersion and integration are used interchangeably in this paper, although in Second Language Acquisition the term immersion is usually reserved for formal education delivered through the medium of the L2 (Coleman, 1997). Linked to integration is the concept of intercultural

adaptation that relates to issues arising as a result of contact with other cultures (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). The integration process generally results in numerous gains, including in linguistic ability, personal development and a life experience that the students will treasure forever. Engberg and Jourian (2015) advocate the idea of intercultural wonderment, which entails students pushing themselves outside their comfort zone and being immersed into the culture of the host country, as contributing to students' development of a global perspective. However, embarking on such a journey is not easy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jackson (2018) states that, prior to departure for the host country, many students are excited about the opportunity to make friends and experience another way of life. However, Meier and Daniels (2013) report that many students find it difficult to make meaningful contact with locals during their time abroad. As far back as 1998, Freed already concluded that student interactions with native speakers during study abroad "may be far less intensive and frequent than was assumed" (Freed, 1998, p. 51). Linder and McGaha's (2013) study on American students spending a semester in Brussels noted that students' isolation was often discussed in their reflective journals, particularly by introverted students, whereas students who made the effort to get out of their comfort zone and joined activities outside the classroom were able to make friends more easily. Thus, Di Silvio, Donovan and Malone (2014, p. 180) argue that interaction with native speakers "requires a personal commitment", while Engberg and Jourian (2015) note that students should be prepared "to deal with discomfort and disequilibrium" (p.1). Integration into the social environment does not happen easily and should not therefore be taken for granted. Goldoni (2013) adds that for immersion to happen students need to be motivated and willing to invest in developing contacts with L2 speakers and the host community; this is supported by O'Reilly (2012), who notes that positive experiences of integration were reported by Irish students who developed friendships with other European students while participating on Erasmus programmes in Germany. In addition, in a study of Chinese students in the UK, Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, and Lifei (2017) argue that universities should address the issue of integration of international students to ensure student satisfaction and academic success.

Although there are many factors involved in accounting for the integration made by students during study abroad, some researchers have argued that students themselves need to be more actively involved in exploiting all the possibilities at their disposal (Ife 2000), while others contend that academics can play a significant role in the intercultural preparation of students in order to encourage meaningful interactions between local and study abroad students (Jackson, 2018; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). However, even the best intercultural preparation cannot entirely prevent students experiencing difficulties in making friends during study abroad, because many locals already have established friendships and see no need to make new friends with exchange students whose stay is temporary and whose linguistic skills may make conversation difficult (Coleman, 2015). As observed by Jackson (2018), "study abroad learning is much more complicated and variable than is often assumed" (p. 368).

When students of languages are faced with using the L2 either in the classroom or in an L2 context, many of them experience foreign language anxiety (FLA). MacIntyre (2007) defines FLA as "the worry and usually negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using an L2" (p. 565). Woodrow (2006) reported that one of the most frequent sources of anxiety occurs when interacting with native speakers, while in classroom situations oral presentations were cited as the greatest stressor. His study concluded that perseverance and

the development of language skills were the coping strategies most widely used by the students when addressing FLA. A particular challenge for English speakers during their study abroad is that English is very often the *lingua franca* available to them (Ife, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2015) for communicating with their peers as well as with other exchange students whose English skills are often better than those in the L2 and even with the locals who are eager to practise their English with L1 native speakers. Thus, the process by which students integrate into the host country during study abroad is not a smooth one and its pace may differ for each student, as reported by Beaven and Spencer-Oatey (2016). Besides, such journeys are highly influenced by emotions, either positive or negative ones, and more research is needed to establish the extent to which students do indeed fully integrate with locals as well as to identify possible reasons for their lack of integration.

Many studies on integration have focussed on the students' homestay experiences, emphasising the effect of the host families on the immersion process (see Di Silvio et al, 2014; Kinginger, 2015) and some have reported a lack of integration in the community beyond the homestay family (Allen, 2010). Furthermore, few studies have addressed issues of integration with native speakers through building relationships and by examining their participation in social events. In order to better understand the emotional journey undertaken by students during their study abroad, this paper examines that gap in the literature by exploring affective factors contributing or hindering to the building of relationships during study abroad. The rationale for undertaking this study is to gain a better understanding of students' experiences during study abroad so that a pre-departure programme can be developed to address linguistic and sociocultural issues faced by them. The research questions to be considered are:

1. What role does language competence play in the process of integration?
2. In which sphere of life do students experience greater challenges regarding integration?

3. BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

Students of International Business with Spanish at University College Dublin undertake a compulsory academic year in Spain during the third year of their undergraduate studies. During that year, students complete a number of academic modules on Business subjects at the host universities; these are taught in Spanish. Many students also take language specific courses during their year abroad, including an intensive course prior to the start of the academic year and regular language courses that may continue for a full semester. Furthermore, students from the UCD Business programme are required to complete two 5ECTS year-long modules for their home university. These two modules focus on student reflection and intercultural experiences. Normally, these modules differ from ordinary academic modules in that they focus not on content but on a number of tasks that students complete in order to use and develop their language skills, as well as to reflect on their experience abroad. All the tasks for the second of those modules, namely *SLL30070 Language Experience Abroad*, are completed using the target language. Students are required to submit a total of four assignments for the module, two of which are group tasks (an oral presentation and a blog). The other two are individual written assignments submitted online via Blackboard, the university's VLE. The first reflection is submitted after 6-7 weeks of their stay in Spain and the second at the end of the academic year. In the first assignment, students are asked to reflect about their experience abroad to date. More specifically, they are asked to examine how their language competence has changed since their arrival in the host country. The second reflection asks students to capture key moments throughout the

year that have had a special meaning because they represented a significant development, or because they were challenges that they had to face, and what they have learnt in relation to themselves as learners of a language while immersing themselves in the culture where that language is spoken. Each assignment is about 900 words long and is written in Spanish.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach, more specifically a case study, was employed for this research. Gall, Gall and Borg (2003) define a case study as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 436). This study belongs to the category of educational research which aims to contribute to better learning and teaching, in particular during preparation for study abroad.

4.1. Participants

During 2016-17, a total of 20 students from the Business with Spanish programme spent their academic year at a host university in Spain. Nineteen out of the 20 students returned to UCD in 2017-18 and registered for the final year of the programme while one student took a leave of absence. The researcher contacted the 19 students in September of 2017 via email, providing them with an information sheet about the research project and a consent form. If they agreed to participate, they were asked to sign and return the consent form to the researcher, allowing her the use of the two reflection assignments from *SLL30070* for the research project. When completing the assignments, students were not aware of the research project and the grade approval process had been completed by the time they were contacted. Twelve students (six male and six female) out of the 19 agreed for their assignments to be used for this research project. The host universities where the participants spent the year abroad are set out in Table 1.

Table 1.
Host Universities.

University	Number of students (n=12)
Carlos III, Madrid	1
Comillas, ICADE, Madrid	3
Deusto, Bilbao	2
Deusto, San Sebastian	2
Navarra	2
Salamanca	1
Valencia	1

4.2. Procedure

Two written assignments, submitted during their 2016-17 year abroad by the students as part of the *SLL30070 Language Experience Abroad* module, were used to provide data for this study. The data of interest from the assignments relates to the strategies adopted by the students during their integration into the host country and the resultant feelings they experienced after 6-7 weeks abroad (in their first reflection) and at the end of the academic year (in the second reflection). This research had received approval from the University Ethics Committee and students were assured that participation in this study had no effect on their grades. The written texts were subjected to a content analysis that was carried out in Spanish, and relevant extracts used for this paper were translated into English after analysis.

5. RESULTS

Strategies used by the students to integrate into the host country, the challenges they experienced, and the emotions that arose in the process were ascertained. The foreign language anxiety (FLA) construct (MacIntyre, 2007) was used to analyse the results of this study. Thus, students' positive and negative experiences of integration are examined below.

In their first assignment, all the participants except one describe their lack of confidence in using the L2 when they arrived in Spain. They experienced significant anxiety in all spheres. They mention, for example, the difficulty in understanding university lecturers and a fear of being asked questions in class (academic sphere), and also their anxiety in situations such as dealing with landlords (day-to-day). One of the participants expresses his anxiety in the following excerpt:

I was afraid during the first weeks in CITY. Being totally submerged and surrounded by a new culture and language, I did not have much confidence using Spanish. (A1_N02) [My own translation]

A number of participants recognise that their anxiety about using the L2 was due to their fear of making grammatical mistakes. One of the participants explains in the following excerpt such fear in relation to his housemate:

At first, I was afraid talking to him because I did not want to be wrong, but he does not care so I can talk without anxiety now. (A1_N03) [My own translation]

As a result of their anxiety and fear about using Spanish during their first weeks in Spain, a significant number of participants were reluctant to move out of their comfort zone. Thus, they spent a lot of time with English speakers, and refrained from social or cultural activities involving native speakers. However, after 7 weeks in Spain most had recognised that their anxiety and lack of confidence in using Spanish was decreasing and they were beginning to reflect on the strategies they needed to develop in order to feel more confident using the language. Some recognised that a Tandem exchange with a native speaker gave them increased confidence to speak Spanish. Other participants identified the intensive language course they completed at the start of the academic year as a major factor in reducing their anxiety. After two months in Spain, they were ready to take a more proactive role in integrating into the host country. Most of the participants explicitly mention their intention to spend more time watching TV in order to develop listening skills as well as making a bigger effort to speak Spanish daily. This reflection on language competence was significant in allowing them to identify the strategies needed to improve their second language.

By the end of the academic year, the students reflected on the challenges, key moments and achievements of their integration into the host country. Many of the challenges they described are language related, the principal one being the lack of language competence (perceived or real), both in understanding others and in oral expression itself. All students except one recount key moments in the integration process relevant to their integration into the different spheres of life. They describe such moments as achievements, among them linguistic improvement, academic successes and feeling comfortable alongside native speakers in social, cultural and sporting events. Samples of key challenges, key moments and achievements are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2.
Integration process.

Challenges	Key moments	Achievements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Making friends at university (studies/social) * Development of listening skills (studies/day-to-day/social) * Oral presentations (studies) * Participation in class (studies) * Understanding lecturers (studies) * Group work with native speakers (studies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Visit to chemist (day-to-day) * Dinner with native-speaker family (social) * Team leader of group project (studies) * Feeling comfortable with native-speaker housemates (day-to-day) * Feeling prepared to deliver a group presentation (studies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Integrating in the rugby team (social) * Good grades in a written assignment (studies) * Increased listening comprehension and vocabulary (studies/social/day-to-day) * Confidence speaking Spanish (studies/social/day-to-day)

The following excerpt exemplifies how students felt more integrated into the host country as time went on:

*Another very important moment in which I realized that I had improved my Spanish a lot was during Holy Week. I went to Marbella with my friend X. Before going, we booked a moped for the week. The man in the store did not speak a word of English. ...When we got to the store, there was a problem with the moped. The lights did not work, and the man did not want to change them because it cost money. We argued, and I decided to write down in Spanish what we needed. The lights were finally changed. **I felt great after this event because I had just had an argument in Spanish with a local and I won.** And also, I had used my oral and written Spanish.*
A2_N14 [My own translation and highlight]

All students expressed some regrets at the end of the academic year and listed things they would do differently if they could go back in time. While they give examples from all spheres of life, the missed opportunities listed relate mainly to participation in social activities with native speakers and to living with English speakers. Table 3 presents some examples as described by the students:

Table 3.
Regrets.

Sphere of life	Example from students' responses
Social	Join sports clubs earlier in the year. Join more sports clubs. Be more proactive in joining social activities. Get out of my comfort zone early in the year as it was difficult to join clubs late in the academic year.
Personal/Day-to-day	Live with native speakers. Live with Spanish or non-English speakers. Live with native speakers from the start of the academic year.
Day-to-day/Social/Studies	Greater participation in activities (day-to-day and university events) that would contribute to the use of Spanish. Spend more time using Spanish in authentic situations. Make more efforts to meet native speakers.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that the L2 plays a significant role in students' integration into the host country. Fear of communicating in Spanish at the start of their time in Spain resulted in some students relying too much on English, as supported by Coleman (2015). Most of the students in this study expressed anxiety regarding understanding and using Spanish in the day-to-day activities, corroborating Woodrow's study (2006) that a frequent source of anxiety was interacting with native speakers. Such anxiety was due to the normal process of adjustment; as for many students it was the first time they had lived in Spain, surrounded by the Spanish language. Students will need reassurance about their language competence in order to move out of their comfort zone in the knowledge that although they will initially experience frustration and encounter problems understanding and speaking the L2, they will soon realise that the linguistic difficulties are temporary. Rather than relying on using English as the easy way out, their acceptance of the situation, and their attitude and perseverance will result in overcoming their anxiety, as argued by Woodrow (2006). Part of the pre-departure preparation needs to place greater focus on addressing student confidence and other affective factors.

This study has established that in the earlier part of their stay, the strategies used by students to integrate in Spain varied significantly; some students opted for stepping out of their comfort zone and made efforts to integrate into the host country while others decided to wait until they felt more confident and ready to use the L2. It is argued that because English is widely spoken as a *lingua franca*, L1 English students face greater challenges when going abroad given how easy it is to speak their L1, as contended by Ife (2000) and Mitchell et al. (2015). That explains why the participants of this study had less need to use Spanish than would be the case for students whose L1 is not English. Undoubtedly, the first weeks in the host country are not easy, but starting out with the right frame of mind would help, as pointed out by one of the respondents, "I think it's extremely important to make a decision before you

go on Erasmus that you will speak as much Spanish as possible from day one” (A2_N01). It is important to note that those who chose to remain within their comfort zones by living with English speakers, tended to socialise, as well, with English speakers and this resulted in them missing opportunities to live with native speakers, or to join social and sports activities where more native speakers were participating. As time went on, it became more difficult to break into the circle of native speakers.

It is evident from the findings of this study that participation in social and cultural events, in particular team activities such as sports, was an effective way of breaking into the circle of Spanish speakers. A shared interest made participation in such events much easier. Students who did not seek involvement in social activities attributed this to a lack of confidence in their language skills. Interestingly, many of these students regretted this as they recognised that, even if involvement in socio-cultural activities required a large initial effort, it would have enabled them to integrate better with native speakers, to speak more Spanish and to develop better knowledge of day-to-day life and traditions. As pointed out by Goldoni (2013), students’ attitude, interest in the host culture and openness to integration are key to their success during study abroad as this study has revealed.

Students’ Erasmus journeys start before departure and preparation is a key aspect. This study concurs with Coleman (1997) and other researchers in stressing the importance of preparing students before they go abroad. This preparation should include intercultural awareness as an integral component of the programme in the home university, as advocated by many researchers (See Coleman and Parker 2001; Goldoni 2013; Ife 2000; Jackson 2018; Vande Berg et al. 2009). Furthermore, as this study shows, preparation for study abroad should address some of the socialisation challenges that students will face so that they may be better prepared to step out of their comfort zones at an early stage of study abroad. In order to address those challenges, we might design workshops or courses that focus both on L2 use and intercultural issues to enhance students’ language and cultural awareness prior to departure. Activities may include simulations and role-plays that require students to think about how they would approach similar situations during study abroad. Additionally, sharing experiences with returnees from Erasmus programmes may provide an ideal opportunity to develop knowledge of the host country as well as intercultural learning. However, it is important to ensure that students are supported during their time abroad by helping them to integrate with native speakers. While some host universities provide pre-orientation sessions to Erasmus students, these tend to be language classes with an emphasis placed on speaking and general information about logistics; more emphasis could be placed on cultural activities where Erasmus students could interact with native speakers. Ideally, as suggested by Vande Berg et al. (2009, p. 25), having a ‘cultural mentor abroad’ might contribute positively to students’ integration and increase their intercultural learning.

Integration into the host country, as revealed in this study, does not happen easily and requires effort. However, overcoming the initial language barriers seems to be the key to better integration. This study found that the principal factors contributing to fuller integration were living with native speakers of Spanish and participating in social activities and sports. Respondents found it easier to communicate in Spanish when they took part in social activities, sports or when living with Spanish speakers.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants. The analysis relied on assignments written during study abroad and, since it is not common for Irish Erasmus students to complete modules for their home university reflecting on their experiences while on study abroad, the cohort of participants was necessarily small. With that in mind, the findings of this study should not be generalised to other contexts. However, considering that many of the findings of this study concur with previous literature, it may be

safe to conclude that students from other institutions may face similar challenges. This study may therefore help programme directors and academics when preparing students in advance for the challenges of the year abroad.

Further studies will be needed to expand this study beyond a single programme within the university to include other programmes and other institutions participating in Erasmus programmes at Spanish universities. As pointed out above, it may not be feasible to use reflective assignments as a means of data collection beyond this programme. Instead, focus groups and interviews may provide the necessary data to expand the study.

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