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## **Cultural adaptation in different facets of life and the impact of language: A case study of personal adjustment patterns during study abroad**

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### **Abstract**

This case study paper focuses on the processes of adaptation that an Erasmus student, Angela, experienced during her study abroad period. It is a longitudinal study that explores how she coped over time with the various adaptation demands that she faced in the different aspects of her life: social-personal aspects (friends and social life, daily life, language for socialisation) and academic aspects (courses, administrative issues, language for academic purposes). The data gathered involved pre-departure and post return interviews, weekly “diary-tables” and monthly interviews while abroad. The findings show that Angela’s adaptive journey followed noticeably different trends in the personal and academic domains of her life, demonstrating clearly how adaptation can evolve at different speeds in these different domains, and can result in ups and down throughout the sojourn. Even an aspect such as language was perceived differently in the two overarching domains. Further research, involving a much larger group of respondents, is needed in order to identify whether there are more generalised patterns within these various domains, or whether the patterns are always subject to significant individual and contextual variation. Moreover, further qualitative research is needed in order to understand the reasons that lie behind the ups and downs within each of the domains, and the extent to which they seem to be idiosyncratic or predictable.

Il presente articolo riporta un caso di studio e si concentra sui processi di adattamento di una studentessa Erasmus, Angela, durante il suo periodo di studio all'estero. Si tratta di uno studio longitudinale che esplora le esigenze di adattamento avute da Angela in base a diversi aspetti della sua vita: gli aspetti socio-personali (gli amici e la vita sociale, la vita quotidiana, il linguaggio della socializzazione) e gli aspetti accademici (i corsi, le questioni amministrative e quelle legate alla lingua per scopi accademici). I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso interviste condotte prima della partenza e dopo il ritorno, una serie di “tabelle-diario” settimanali e alcune interviste mensili realizzate durante il soggiorno. I risultati mostrano che l’adattamento di Angela segue andamenti diversi nell’ambito personali e in quello accademico. Questo mostra chiaramente come l’adattamento può evolversi a velocità differenti in questi diversi ambiti, e può risultare in “alti e bassi” durante l’intero soggiorno. Anche un aspetto come la lingua è stato percepito in modo differente a seconda che l’ambito fosse personale o accademico. Sarebbero necessarie ulteriori ricerche che coinvolgessero un gruppo molto più ampio di partecipanti; ciò consentirebbe di verificare se ci sono andamenti più generalizzati all’interno di questi vari domini, o se gli andamenti sono comunque sempre soggetti a significative variazioni individuali e contestuali. Inoltre, un’ulteriore ricerca

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qualitativa sarebbe necessaria al fine di comprendere le ragioni che stanno dietro gli “alti e bassi” all’interno di ciascuno degli ambiti considerati, e la misura in cui cambiamenti di umore e prospettiva siano idiosincratici o prevedibili.

## **Keywords**

Study abroad; adaptation; student mobility; Erasmus; case study.

## **Introduction**

An increasing number of students worldwide are taking part in study abroad, and in Europe alone over three million of them have participated in the Erasmus programme since its creation in 1987 (European commission, 2014). As Coleman (2013) points out, research in this area is an ill-defined field and covers a wide range of disparate topics. A core focus, of course, is the impact of study abroad on students’ language proficiency, but since people’s goals for participation extend far beyond this, there are many other research strands. Students’ objectives for study abroad include personal and professional goals, such as “exploring the world” and enhancing employability skills, and within this broader spectrum there is now considerable interest in intercultural aspects of study abroad.

Research on these intercultural aspects is carried out in two main disciplines: in psychology and in language learning. Within the language learning field, an important focus has been on the communication aspects of intercultural competence, such as the development of pragmatic competence, intercultural communicative competence and skills for handling of misunderstanding and conflict (e.g., Belz, 2007; Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006). However, research topics have expanded considerably in recent years from communication to the whole person (Coleman, 2013), and now include issues such as the development of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, intercultural personhood, global mindsets, and identity change (e.g. Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Jackson, 2008, 2010, 2013; Kinginger, 2013).

In much of this research, the focus has been on the objectives and outcomes of the study abroad experience in terms of intercultural growth. A frequent finding has been the huge variation between individuals. Researchers from the fields of both psychology and language learning have therefore attempted to find out the reasons for these differences. Yet there is a growing awareness, at least within the language-learning field, that this individual variation offers valuable insights in their own right. As Coleman (2013, p. 25) argues, ‘individual trajectories are in fact the essence of recent study abroad research, in which the focus has shifted from quantitative to qualitative, from product to process, from a search for generalizability to a recognition of complexity and variation’.

The case study presented in this paper is in line with this viewpoint. It offers a longitudinal account with rich description and discussion of the multi-dimensional experiences of an Italian student involved in the Erasmus programme in the UK. It takes a strongly process approach and focuses on the adaptation trajectories of the student in the different facets of her life, paying particular attention to the role that language plays in helping or hindering her in adapting to the intercultural challenges she experiences. Adaptation is a topic that has been extensively theorised and researched within psychology and in this paper we draw significantly on this work. We extend

our understanding of intercultural aspects of study abroad by bringing together theories and approaches from the two disciplines. In line with Gezentsvey and Ward (2008, p. 213), we define intercultural adaptation as ‘changes arising from sustained, first-hand intercultural contact’.

### **Literature review**

Moving abroad to study involves adjusting to change, even when the sojourn is limited to a few months. The experience will involve all aspects of life, including the need to find accommodation, build new social networks, organise one’s daily life in a new city, adjust to a new language (whether that of the local community or a *lingua franca* used as the medium of study), and a different academic system. Psychologically, it can be a demanding and stressful experience, but also an exciting one.

Within psychology, this phenomenon has been researched from three different theoretical approaches: (1) the “stress and coping” approach, (2) the “culture learning” model, and (3) the “social identification and cognition” theories. The “stress and coping” framework has its origins in psychological research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and has been concerned in particular with the process of appraising stressful situations and developing coping strategies. The literature in this field has therefore focussed on the concept of culture shock (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), as well as on the identification of variables that affect it, including social support (Adelman, 1988) and personality factors (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1992). The “cultural learning” framework assumes that intercultural challenges are caused by an individual’s inadequate skills for dealing with unfamiliar social demands, and sees adaptation as a process of gradually learning to function in a different culture (Bennett, 1993; Bochner, 1986; Gardner, 1952; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978). This learning is affected by internal and external factors including, among others, culture-specific knowledge about the new environment (Ward & Searle, 1991), language skills (Furnham, 1993) length and type of residence abroad (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998) and social networks and friendships (Bochner, McLeod, & Lin, 1977). Finally, the “social identity and cognition” approach includes a number of aspects, such as the cognitive processes associated with perceived group and individual status differences (Tajfel, 1978), cultural maintenance and participation in the host society (Berry, 2006) and perceived discrimination (Ward & Leong, 2006). Ward et al. (2001) draw these strands together in their ABC model of adaptation. A stands for ‘Affective’ and refers to the “stress and coping” aspect of adaptation; B stands for Behavioural and refers to the “culture learning” aspect, and C stands for Cognitive and incorporates the issue of “social identity and cognition”.

In parallel with this psychological research, scholars within the language-learning field have investigated the experiences of study abroad students in a more individual yet holistic manner, using qualitative methods such as narratives and case studies in order to try and understand individual variation in adjustment processes. For example, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) offers a detailed analysis of the narratives of a group of Erasmus students in a European context, using the sociology of ‘the new stranger’ as a conceptual backdrop. Her study focuses on their holistic experiences of studying abroad and delves into a range of issues including the following: students’ motivations for wanting to study abroad, their arrival into the new culture as a rite of passage, culture shock and adaptation, and the development of ‘mobility capital’. Similar case studies outside of Europe include Jackson’s (2008, 2010, 2013) analyses of the experiences of Asian students in the UK, which explore issues of

identity, linguistic development, expectations, adaptation to a new culture and personal development, and Kinginger's (2008) narratives of American students in France, which focus primarily on language and identity issues.

In terms of the role that language plays in adaptation, psychologists have only paid limited attention. It has generally been associated with "culture learning", and therefore with the Behavioural component of the ABC model (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). However, language barriers have also been identified as a major source of stress for international students, affecting both the academic and sociocultural domains of their experiences. They can also affect self-esteem (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012) and can be perceived as a barrier to the development of social networks, particularly friendship with locals (Dewey, Bown, & Eggett, 2012). Academically, language difficulties affect the students' abilities to understand teachers and fellow students, to take part in seminars, and to complete course readings and assignments (Andrade, 2006; Savicki, Arrúe, & Binder, 2013). This can be a major problem for students engaged in long-term mobility, but it can also affect short-term participants such as Erasmus students.

A key factor that is of interest to both sets of researchers is that of social networks. Psychologists have asked whether some types of friendships are more valuable than others for combating culture shock and/or for aiding the development of intercultural competence, and empirical studies (e.g., Ward & Kennedy, 1993) have indicated that this depends on the timeframe (short-term versus longer-term). In the language learning field, contact with "locals" has traditionally been regarded as crucial for the development of language proficiency, but recently its intercultural relevance has also been studied (e.g., Jackson, 2008, 2013).

Development over time is also an issue of common interest. Psychologists have attempted to map patterns of adaptation over time, and one of the most well-known proposals, linked to the stress-and-coping approach, is Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve model. In a cross-sectional study of Scandinavian Fulbright scholars in the United States, he found that those who had lived in the country for between 6 and 18 months were noticeably less adjusted than those who had lived there for either a shorter length of time or a longer period. However, other researchers (e.g., Church, 1982; Ward et al., 2001) have pointed out that the empirical evidence for the pattern is weak, and recent research by Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) indicates that there is considerable individual variation. Other studies, including those carried out by researchers working within education and international business/management as well as psychology (e.g., Black & Stephens, 1989; Selmer & Leung, 2003; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Templer, Tay, & Chandrasekar, 2006; Wilson, 2013), have provided empirical evidence for different domains of adaptation, such as daily life, social life and work/study life, with different levels of adaptation in each. So this raises a number of questions, including the following:

- How similar or different are students' adaptation experiences across their different domains of life?
- How do their adaptation experiences change over time in each of the domains?
- What role does language play in their adaptation experiences?

The case-study presented in this paper addresses these questions by "mapping" an individual student's adaptation journey in the different aspects of their lives: personal/social and academic. We add language as an additional adaptation domain, in view of its critical role and in line with

recent psychological research (Wilson, 2013). We examine the similarities and differences in the student's patterns of adaptation over time and explore how she makes sense of them to herself.

## **Methodology**

The present study is part of a wider longitudinal study involving 21 students from a large university in Italy who spent their Erasmus programme in a number of different destinations in the year 2009-2010. The aim of the study was to understand the lived experiences of the students from before they left for their year abroad to the moment they returned, and to shed light on the process of adapting to their new environment from a personal, social and academic point of view. Only three participants (among which Angela) were language specialists.

The data was collected through a series of tools:

- pre-departure and post-return interviews. These lasted an average of 45 minutes each. They were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), under the six broad categories established for the weekly tables (see below). These were carried out in Italian, and the extracts were translated after analysis.
- weekly "diary tables" in which the students were asked to express a value between 1 (very bad) and 5 (very good) for three "personal/social" aspects ("Friends and social life"; "Daily life"; "Language for socialisation purposes") and three "academic" aspects ("Courses"; "Administrative issues"; "Language for academic purposes"). A text box was also available for explanatory notes and comments regarding the values given. These were mostly written in Italian, although occasionally the students chose to write in English. These tables were used to draw individual graphs which provide a visual representation of the ups and downs of the students' experiences throughout their period abroad. This approach follows in the extensive psychological tradition (e.g. Church, 1982; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Lysgaard, 1955) of using graphs to map psychological adaptation.
- Monthly individual Skype sessions to discuss the participants' experiences and changes, and the issues brought up in the weekly tables. Each session lasted about 30 minutes, was transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The conversations were mostly carried out in Italian, except when the participants themselves wished to speak in English. The analysis was carried out in the original language, and extracts translated at a later stage. In this paper, we have indicated when the extracts have been translated.

## **The case study**

### ***Background***

The present paper focuses on one of the 21 students involved in the broader study. The choice of the individual was guided by two factors: in the first place, notwithstanding the fact that adjustment processes vary significantly between individuals, we believe Angela's experience can be considered fairly typical, with no major upheavals and traumas, but with many of the difficulties most commonly mentioned by students abroad. Secondly, Angela provided rich data (in the comments to the weekly

tables and the monthly interviews), which will enable us to illustrate her case in detail from a longitudinal point of view.

## **Angela**

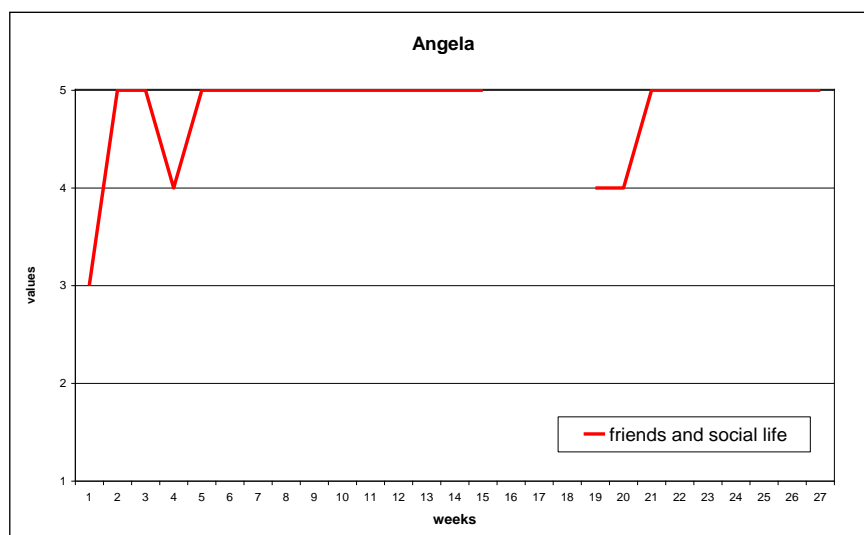
In September 2009, when she left for her study period abroad in Scotland, Angela was studying for a Bachelors' degree in Modern Foreign Languages, majoring in English and Spanish. She lived with her parents in a small town close to the city where she studied. Her main aims were related to the personal growth aspect of the experience and to the development of her language skills in English and Spanish.

During her pre-departure interview, Angela revealed her enthusiasm about her forthcoming sojourn in Scotland, and although she anticipated her greatest difficulties to be linguistic, she was confident that her English proficiency would increase rapidly as a result of being in an English-speaking environment.

### **Angela's social/personal experiences**

There are three graphs representing the social/personal domain, including the three sub-categories of "Friends and social life" (Figure 1), "Daily life" (Figure 2) and "Language for socialisation purposes" (Figure 3).

#### *Friends and social Life*



**Figure 1.** Angela - Friends and social life

Figure 1 shows the graph relating to the aspect "Friends and social life". It starts with a value of 3, revealing the mixture of excitement and anxiety typical of taking a freely chosen leap into the unknown. The first two weeks in Glasgow were taken up by the Orientation Programme organised by the host institution for incoming Erasmus students. This is usually a time of intense socialisation, in which the international students get to know each other, form groups, share information and advice

(Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Most are inevitably drawn to co-nationals, with whom communication is much simpler at a time of need (Brown, 2009). Many are also attracted to other foreign students, particularly other Erasmus participants (see de Federico de la Rúa, 2008). In this, Angela was no exception. In Angela's graph above, this explains the rise from 3 to 5 by the second week abroad.

However, the psychological urge to form what Angela calls her "new family" is at odds with the time usually required to build meaningful friendships. After the initial weeks, Angela was still excited by her intense social life, but was also feeling a little frustrated and emotionally confused (slight dip in week 4). Faced with these difficulties, like many other students, she turned to her close friends back home, with whom she was in touch almost daily through social media. By discussing the problems with them, she succeeded in making sense of her feelings, obtained the emotional support she needed from significant others, and was able to overcome this initial malaise fairly rapidly:

**Extract 1. Weekly diary table (English translation)**

At the beginning of this week I was a bit depressed because I didn't feel comfortable in the group of friends that I had found. I can't be myself when there are people who don't respect others. But after talking to some of my friends at home, I am convinced that the problem is only mine, because I stop myself from getting to know others better. In fact I can say that things have been improving! I've got to know some people better and I've tried to be myself. I've also discovered that some people in the group actually have some great qualities, which I was refusing to see.

In this specific case, Angela's identification of her feelings of discomfort as an obstacle in establishing a supportive friendship network, and her resulting coping strategy of turning to her old group of friends back home for advice, resulted in a positive outcome – she maintained a value of 5 for the remainder of her first semester abroad.

By November, Angela had also built a close friendship with a French Erasmus student, and wrote in her weekly diary table:

**Extract 2. Weekly diary table (English translation)**

Now I have a French friend that is really nice, C., it's one of the friends which I speak more and is a kind of confidante here ... it's difficult because the first week you have friends, but not really confidante, so sometimes I missed my friends in Italy, because I couldn't tell what I feel here to a friend. But now that you maybe trust someone more, it's better.

In the weeks running up to the Christmas break, friendships strengthened through doing other activities together, "cultivating" relationships and starting to see people from different perspectives:

**Extract 3. Weekly diary table (English translation)**

This week went very well! Despite studying for exams, it was a really good week. I spent every day from morning till evening in the library studying, but it was nice because I was with some friends and so we talked during breaks and "comforted" each other. It was great to see my friends from another perspective, not only when we go out. In my opinion these opportunities are very helpful for cultivating friendships.



The first week back after the Christmas break required re-adaptation, as the dip in the graph illustrates.

Nevertheless, practically all of Angela's friends were foreign: Rhona, her flatmate, remained her only local (Scottish) friend. The difficulty that international students have in establishing contact with locals has been amply discussed in the literature (for example, Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Townsend & Poh, 2008). When asked about this, Angela attributed the difficulty to the fact that the locals were not particularly interested in foreign students who were only staying for a short time: locals, she argued, did not think it worth investing in them and trying to build friendships. However, another major factor in friendship patterns is motivation:

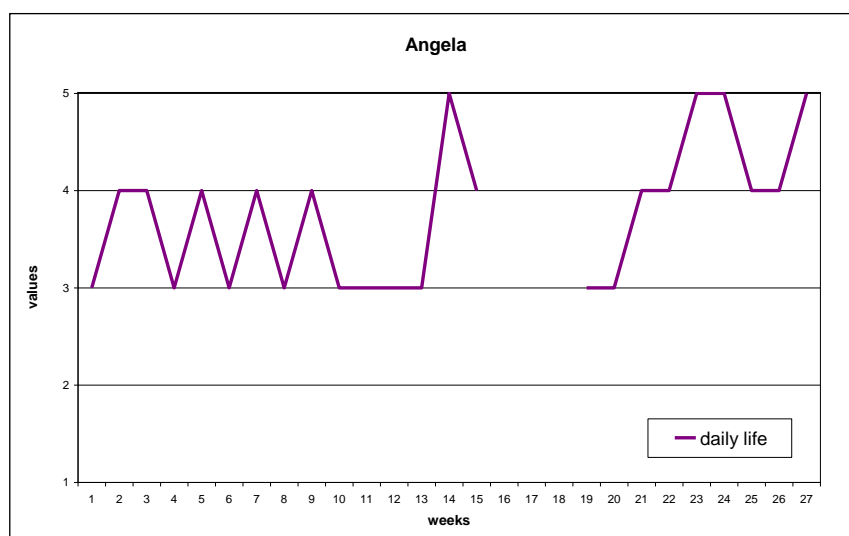
**Extract 4. Interview, 4 March (English translation)**

... I don't know...I mean... it's not a nice thing to say, but perhaps it's not necessary to get to know someone local... in the sense... perhaps Erasmus is just that, an international experience, not necessarily in order to get to know local people, well, it's nice to get to know people from all over Europe. In fact, this is one of the best things, in my opinion.

Her slight embarrassment reveals that she was aware that building friendships with local students constituted an important part of the study abroad rhetoric. However, being part of an international community may be one of the defining characteristics of Erasmus, one that differentiates it from the year abroad programmes in which the primary objective is to familiarise oneself with a local culture through its language and inhabitants.

*Daily life*

Angela was generally positive (remaining above 3) about her daily life throughout her period abroad, although the trend is less smooth than for social life. For this sub-domain, the period of adjustment lasted longer, until just before the Christmas break. For someone who had lived at home with her parents, it is perhaps not surprising that adjusting to an independent life would have presented some difficulties, even in her own country.



**Figure 2.** Angela - Daily life

Another aspect that affected Angela's daily life was that, while she was happy to live with a "native-speaker", she found understanding her Scottish flatmate more challenging than communicating with her Erasmus friends using English as a *lingua franca*. In fact, Angela sometimes found Rhona's company quite demanding, particularly when she was tired, although she also appreciated her flatmate's willingness to spend time together at home watching television, which provided some insights into cultural differences she had never understood, like humour:

**Extract 5. Interview, 18 October**

Sometimes she spends a lot of time to explain me something that maybe it's really ironic for her, that makes her laugh, but for me... I feel the different culture, because maybe something that for me is amazing or funny, for her it's not...and the opposite [...] Sometimes in Italy they say it's "English humour", but I've never understood about it. And actually I'm starting understanding that we laugh about different things, [...] well, we were looking a film one of these nights, and she always starts saying "Oh, but this is impossible, well... blablabla", like this. And sometimes, or I don't really listen because I'm concentrating on the film, or because I don't understand. So I just smile and... and she tells me "Oh sorry, I don't want to disturb you", and I say "Oh, no, nothing" (laughter).

These linguistic difficulties were never seriously problematic, probably due to the fact that both young women seemed relaxed, good humoured and ready to make allowances, in other words the affective aspects were under control. Had Angela been more anxious, or her flatmate less accommodating, the atmosphere at home could have been very different.

However, the main difficulty with her flatmate actually concerned household chores. This is a common problem in shared houses, and certainly not limited to foreign students. But Angela, who felt she was doing most of the work, was unsure how to address the issue, how to explain it in English without offending her flatmate. "I must find a way of making her understand", she wrote in week 2 and the following week added: "perhaps we have a different approach to house cleaning". Two months later, when an Indian student rented the spare room, Angela felt supported by the other foreign tenant, and together they succeeded in establishing a rota.

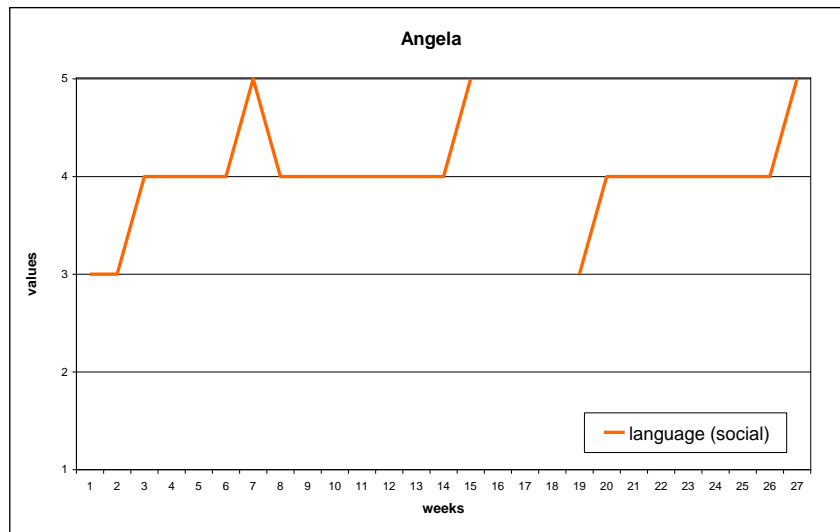
**Extract 6. Interview, 17 December (English translation)**

Yeah, we had some problems because she became really messy, and... I know she was really busy with orchestra stuff but well... at a certain point with the other flatmate we were a bit annoyed... but in the end the other flatmate spoke to her, so...now it's better. The problem is that different persons have different standards of tidiness...

The flexibility, reflexivity and understanding shown by Angela in the way she handled this problem were undoubtedly crucial to its successful resolution. Without this, it could have resulted in an exacerbation of national stereotypes regarding cleanliness or respectfulness for others. Angela's constructive attitude may have been the reason why many difficulties were relatively short-lived, and the second semester showed a positive trend.

*Language for socialisation*

If we turn to “Language for socialisation purposes”, the trend is relatively smooth and positive, remaining around a value of 4 for most of the period, with the exception of the beginning of both semesters where it was 3 and three peaks of 5 (two in the first semester and one in the second). This was despite the fact that Angela had anticipated language in general to be the source of her greatest difficulties.



**Figure 3.** Angela - Language for socialisation

Outside of class, Angela socialised mainly with other foreign students, with whom English was used as a *lingua franca*. With the exception of her flatmate, a native speaker, Angela’s level of proficiency was in line with those of her friends. The difficulties she encountered were mostly due, in her own words, to her inability to “be herself” in a different language. At the end of the first week she expressed mixed feelings: she was pleased with the opportunity she had to meet students from other countries, but was finding it hard to “be herself” in a different language, in the sense that she felt contrived and unnatural when she spoke in a language different from Italian. In other words, Angela felt a ‘paradoxical conflict’ between her ‘ideal sense of self’ and the image she actually conveyed through the second language (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005: 4). Nevertheless, this difficulty was only mentioned when she talked about her social life. Inside the classroom, as will be illustrated later, her language problems seemed related primarily to her inability to understand spoken interactions or articulate her thoughts. In other words, it seems she felt language to be more closely linked to her identity in her social world than in her academic world. The realisation that it was a common feeling among foreign students, coupled with sufficient time to reflect on this problem and find a way of dealing with it seemed to help. By week 5 she felt that some of her apprehensions had begun to disappear:

**Extract 7. Weekly table (English translation)**

This week, the highest score!!! It’s been really great. I’ve met even more people and I really felt I was being myself. I think now something has changed. In the beginning I was more apprehensive, I was afraid of the opinions of others. But now I feel just fine. Probably because

I've met people who are not pretentious, who are simpler and are usually the type of people I prefer.

When talking about this initial period during the monthly interview at the end of September, Angela reflected on how she had not anticipated this problem, believing that communication in a different language was simply a matter of "grammar and accent", not of identity and sense of self (in other words, she erroneously initially related it to the Behavioural rather than to the Cognitive domain in Ward's model):

**Extract 8. Interview, 27 September (English translation)**

Initially, there was the problem of the group, in the sense of the language, because it's strange, you have to speak in another language and it's not so straight forward, you say "ok, I know a little...", but there is also the problem of being oneself in a different language, and this is something I had never experienced. Initially I found it difficult, now it's a bit better, because it's like that for everybody [...] Because at the end of the day, accent, grammar, all those things don't count...

Gradually Angela's language proficiency and confidence increased and by the end of October she was beginning to adjust to this aspect of her life abroad:

**Extract 9. Interview, 18 October**

At the beginning I remember it was difficult also to socialise in English, because I didn't feel comfortable to speak in English and be myself in English, it was really strange, because I haven't ever thought about this kind of problem. But now it's better because I can talk without problems, or well, I do some mistakes but it doesn't matter. It's wonderful because I'm "opening my mind".

Her increased comfort in using English also affected her enjoyment of the cosmopolitan environment in which she found herself. In fact, it seemed that what Angela enjoyed most about her Erasmus sojourn was not so much being in Scotland, as being surrounded by students from different countries:

**Extract 10. Weekly diary table (English translation)**

How I love this international atmosphere! It's so interesting to have discussions with people of different nationalities. You have to explain everything, even the simplest things. I like it a lot!

Angela's return home at Christmas set her back a little with her English, which explains the dip at the beginning of the second semester. However, the problem was relatively short-lived.

***Angela's academic experiences***

Moving to the academic side of Angela's experiences, we can see that the three graphs, depicting respectively her feelings towards "Courses" (Figure 4), "Administrative issues" (Figure 5), and

“Language for academic purposes” (Figure 6), show greater variability than those describing her social experiences, and that all three contain negative values (below 3).

### Courses

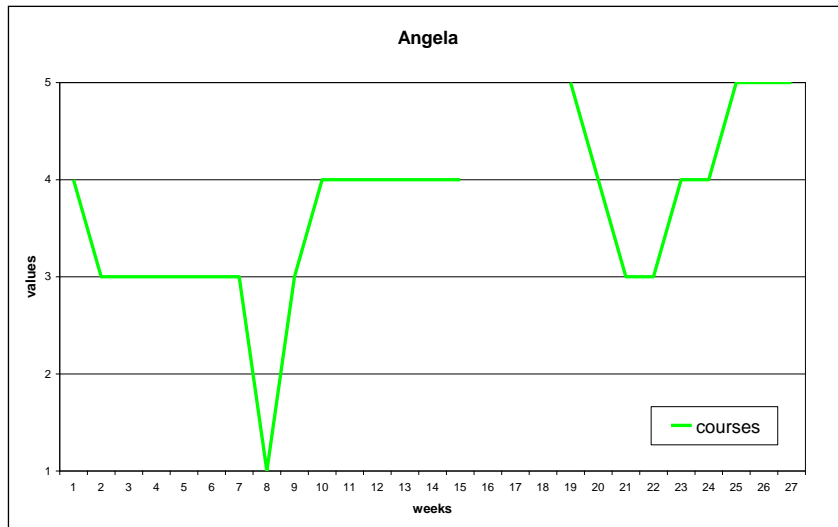


Figure 4. Angela - Courses

The initial phase of Angela’s academic experience involved, among other things, trying to understand the new system, which was rather different from that of her home institution. In week 2, which was marked by a dip, she observed:

#### Extract 11. Weekly diary table (English translation)

We’ve done the enrolment and I’ve already got homework for two courses!! I don’t really feel like studying because in Italy we usually follow lessons and start studying close to the date of the exam. Here, on the other hand, we need to have read the book we’ll be discussing in the next lesson! I’m bound to make a fool of myself if they ask me something...

During the following weeks, both her ratings and comments remained similar, and referred to her workload, the need to organise herself, write essays and prepare presentations. She appreciated the principle of participating in seminars and tutorials, but she found the workload extremely demanding, a problem exacerbated by her linguistic difficulties. Here the link between her language proficiency and academic experiences becomes evident, as the latter is necessarily mediated by the former. In the following weeks the problems worsened, causing further dips in both graphs (Figures 4 and 6), including a value of 1 (very bad) in the graph relating to “Courses”:

#### Extract 12. Weekly diary table (English translation)

**Week 4:** We started the seminars. The Scottish Literature one was very nice, because our tutor is very helpful. Comparative Literature less so. In any case, both are hard, because it’s difficult to understand and talk about complex issues in English. Anyway, the workload is really too much! I hope to be able to keep up with the pace [...] In the academic sphere I feel the problem of language much more now. Working in the seminar groups I found it hard to

understand what my classmates said. I already have a hard time understanding the set books, and on top of that it takes me twice as long to understand what others say, so once I'm ready to articulate my ideas on a topic, maybe they've moved on to something else. But okay, I'm not worried for now...

**Week 5:** ... the deadlines for the assignments and for my presentation are approaching... next week I'm going to have to work on them. The fact is that they overload us with homework! By the time I've caught up, I'm already behind again! ... it's a bit frustrating ... But I hope I can cope. Also, the Scottish students I work with in the group speak quickly, softly and have a Scottish accent!! It's a problem all of us Erasmus students have. We don't understand why they speak so softly!

**Week 6:** I have to study ... We have a lot of books to read and they are difficult. In some seminars I understood very little. The only positive thing is that I spoke with the tutors and they were very understanding and kind, which was nice. I think my speaking has improved, but I still find it hard to understand the students in my groups. They talk too fast!

**Week 7:** COURSES: a sore point ... I have two essays to hand in, so I have a week to get them done. [...] I'm very worried. For Comparative Literature I wasn't able to finish reading *Thus Spake Zarathustra* because it's too difficult [...] I'm very depressed about it and I don't know if I can write the essay. I really like Scottish Literature, the other students understand that I'm struggling and help me, as does the tutor. I'm very satisfied with that group.

**Week 8:** This week has not been that great from an academic point of view. I had two essays due yesterday but I only managed to write one. With the one about Nietzsche, I was stuck, so I didn't do it. Now I'll have to see how to solve the problem.

**Week 9:** I'm a bit sad because I had to drop Comparative Literature.

Week 9 was a turning point for Angela. Having abandoned the most difficult course, she was able to overcome her anxiety and start enjoying her academic life. The comments in the weekly tables over the following three weeks were much more positive - Angela used the phrase I'm happy in all of them:

#### **Extract 13. Weekly diary table (English translation)**

**Week 10:** I'm preparing an essay for Monday, Scottish Lit. It's difficult, but at least I have some ideas. During lessons I still find it difficult to speak, but overall I'm happy.

**Week 11:** I've just finished my essay for tomorrow and I'm very happy! I think I did a good job, or at least I tried hard. In any case I'm satisfied with what I wrote, so whatever happens, for me it'll be a success! The tutorials are going well, although I still can't speak much. Partly because I feel embarrassed and partly because it's difficult. Anyway, I'm happy.

**Week 12:** In the last tutorial I spoke more than usual, so I'm happy about it! Now we have to study, because there are just about 10 days before the exams!

After that, Angela remained positive about her academic experiences: her difficulties were limited to language, as graph 4 illustrates. She felt that she had adapted to the new academic system, and this was confirmed by the good marks she obtained in her assignments and exams.

#### *Administrative issues*

A significant aspect of the academic experience is having to deal with “Administrative issues” (Figure 5). This is relatively common among Erasmus students (Teichler, 2004), mostly due to the red tape attached to the “Learning agreement”, and to the fact that these students seem to live in a kind of “limbo” during their study abroad. Angela, like many of the students involved in the broader study, observed that she felt she didn’t belong to either the host or the home institution, and much of the difficulty derived from what she felt to be a lack of support from her home institution.

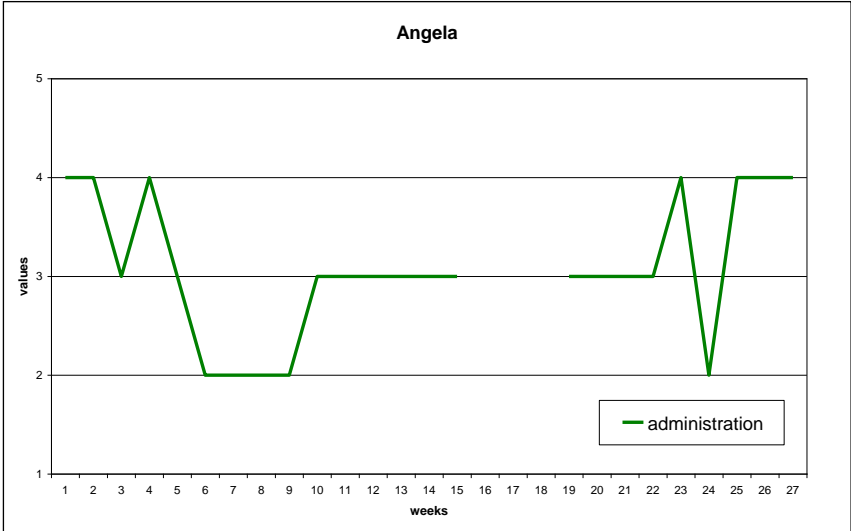


Figure 5. Angela - Administrative issues

*Language for academic purposes*

In the same way that language was a crucial aspect of the social and personal dimension of Angela’s experience, so was it of her academic adjustment.

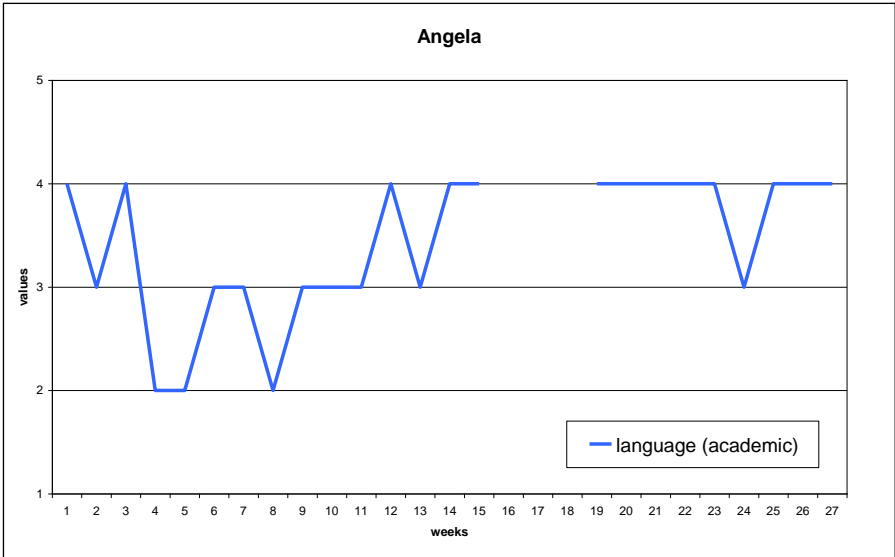


Figure 6. Angela - Language for academic purposes

As mentioned above, the graph relating to “Language for Academic Purposes” (Figure 6) has similarities with the one related to “Courses” (Figure 4). As was clear from her comments, Angela’s language difficulties affected her perception of the courses themselves, and language was identified by her as her main academic barrier. Initially she found it hard to understand the other students (more than the teachers), who did not always make allowances for her difficulties:

**Extract 14. Interview, 18 October**

It’s difficult to understand the students above all, they speak so fast! For example, for Scottish Literature it’s better, because I found a friend before than in the other tutorials... so it’s a bit better, because they understand I’m foreign so they ask me, the students I mean, they ask me if I understand, if I have some problems. But in Comparative Literature we started studying *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, you know, it’s philosophy, and it was really difficult for me, because... philosophy is difficult even in Italian!

Angela also found that her level of proficiency did not allow her to intervene promptly during seminars:

**Extract 15. Interview, 18 October**

I spend most of the time trying to understand what they’re saying, and then maybe if I understand something I want to say something, but they’ve changed... the subject (laughter), because I’m too slow!

Nevertheless, her good interpersonal skills enabled her to overcome some of the difficulties she faced when meeting her fellow-students after class, and she was even able to empathize with her peers, who seemed much shyer than she was.

**Extract 16. Interview, 18 October (English translation)**

With the Scottish students it’s really difficult, they told us to work in groups, so we sometimes have to meet after class, and during the first two or three meetings they didn’t speak, and I was the only one asking “how was your day?” And they were all silent, so it was a bit difficult, but now it’s better, because they are more confident and they speak... I think it’s probably difficult for them because they are in their first year.

With time, her level of proficiency – and therefore her satisfaction – improved, with values reaching 4 at the end of the first term. The slight dip in the second term indicates that these difficulties were still present, although to a lesser extent.

## **Discussion**

This paper has shown how the personal and academic domains can follow noticeably different trends in the adaptive journey of a student abroad. It is also clear that adaptation in these different domains can evolve at different speeds, and can result in ups and down throughout the sojourn. Even an aspect such as language may be perceived differently in the two overarching domains. During her pre-departure interview, Angela had anticipated language in general would be the source of her greatest difficulties. Nevertheless, the two graphs relating to language (Figures 3 and 6) show



different trends. The reason for this lies in the fact that Angela socialised mainly with other foreign students, with whom English was used as a *lingua franca*. At the same time, English was the medium of study, and this was a significant academic barrier for her, ultimately forcing her to abandon one of her courses. A difference in her perception of difficulty in these two areas was therefore to be expected.

Angela's case also shows clearly how the language aspect concerned all facets of Ward's ABC model: there was undoubtedly an issue of proficiency – belonging to the socio-cultural, or 'Behavioural' domain of the model – which improved with time as Angela developed her language skills. The psychological component – related to the Affective domain – was also evident: Angela's perceived limits in the second language were a source of stress, particularly at the beginning of the stay, with regard to communicating with her flatmate and to being able to study in English. Finally, the identity aspect – associated with the Cognitive domain – emerges in Angela's comments about "feeling herself" in the foreign language.

## **Conclusion**

This case study illustrates how patterns of adaptation may follow different trajectories in different domains of life and how language plays a differential role in these developmental pathways across the domains. Further research, involving a much larger group of respondents, is needed in order to identify whether there are more generalised patterns within these various domains, or whether the patterns are always subject to significant individual and contextual variation. Moreover, further qualitative research is needed in order to understand the reasons that lie behind the ups and downs within each of the domains, and the extent to which they seem to be idiosyncratic or predictable. In addition, it is likely that the impact of language on adaptation may vary according to the contextual situation, such as whether the language of instruction is the same as the official language of the country, and so further research that takes this into account is also needed. The case study reported in this paper provides just one small piece of the big and complex picture of adaptation through study abroad.

## **Biodata**

Ana Beaven teaches English as a Foreign Language at the University of Bologna Language Centre, Italy. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Warwick. Her main areas of interest are intercultural (language) education, intercultural adaptation during study abroad, and foreign language teaching and learning. She was the coordinator of the European project IEREST (Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers).

Helen Spencer-Oatey is Professor and Director of the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, UK. Her primary research interests are in intercultural interaction, intercultural adaptation and intercultural pragmatics. She has published extensively in these fields (e.g. *Culturally Speaking*, Continuum, 2000/2008; *Intercultural Interaction*, with Peter Franklin, Palgrave, 2009) and she has developed extensive resources for practitioners, many of which are freely available via the University of Warwick's Global PAD website. Her current research projects include *Global Leaders and Employees: Keys to Intercultural Effectiveness* and *Academic and Social Integration on Campus*.

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