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Profiling the Intercultural Communicative Competence of university students at the beginning of their Erasmus placements

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Abstract

Drawing on seminal notions of culture to help diagnose and evaluate intercultural training (Byram 1997), this paper reports on the preliminary results of a research project seeking to explore key elements of the intercultural dimension during Erasmus placements. Preliminary data from a questionnaire distributed to students from Nottingham Trent University (UK) and Salamanca University (Spain) show that, in spite of their differences, both groups display positive attitudes towards the host country at the beginning of their placements, even if the eradication of deeply ingrained prejudices still pose the main educational challenge for the students and their home and host institutions.

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1. Introduction

As cultural beings, language learners build bridges from familiar to uncharted territories through communication systems that affect the cultures in contact, to the extent that previously assumed views and behavior patterns never remain intact. Intercultural Communicative Competence (henceforward ICC) is, therefore, considered a transformative process entailing a dialogic reflection and relation between cultures (Zarate, 1995; Kramsch, 1993; Penbeck et al., 2009). The traditional idea of language teaching as a way of expressing universal meanings is challenged by ICC. Instead, particular meanings, contextual differences, and the complexity and tolerance of ambiguities within languages and cultures are key to language learning (Kramsch, 1993).

Furthermore, developing ICC involves an educational integration of language and culture insofar as it places students between cultures, performing a mediating role (Risager, 2001) that would allow them to become aware of their own identity and the way it is perceived by members of the host culture; in the last instance, it makes it possible to explain and accept cultural diversity.

Byram's ICC framework has proved a useful tool to attest to which extent Intercultural Communicative Competence can be fostered and achieved (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002). This model may be likened to a compass comprising four main components, namely, attitude, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness, that help us trace our own and our students' cultural profile: attitude operates as a "decentering" factor in its attempt to see how one's own cultural practices and products might look from the perspective of the other; "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in

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one's interlocutor's country" is built on what members of the other culture perceive as meaningful; intercultural skills are needed in new cultural scenarios to avoid possible cultural misunderstandings; critical cultural awareness is made effective "on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12). Educators may thus play a pivotal role in overcoming prejudices and stereotypes by making explicit that which would otherwise remain implicit.

2. Objectives

This paper offers the preliminary results of a comparative analysis of a pre-placement questionnaire completed by British and Spanish university students, focused specifically on their perceptions on the awareness, knowledge, attitudes and skills involved in their Erasmus placement. It aims at finding out the way these may differ and how they are affected by age, gender, and linguistic background at the beginning of their stay abroad. These findings will be followed by a further comparison once the questionnaire is completed again after their stay in the foreign country to design training activities that may meet their own, and their home and host universities' ICC perceived needs.

3. Methodology

A questionnaire, adapted from Fantini (2006) and Buynsters (2012), which contained five point Likert scales, was distributed to two groups of students participating in the Erasmus exchange programmes from the University of Salamanca (USAL) placed in British universities and the Nottingham Trent University (NTU) hosted by diverse Spanish universities during the academic year 2013/2014. A total number of 55 students (25 British and 30 Spanish) completed the questionnaire, comprising four sections: a) personal details, b) reasons to participate in the programme, c) intercultural experience and d) everyday experience. This paper will exclusively report on sections a and c.

4. Research subjects

The cohort of students was comprised by NTU third year students of Spanish and another subject and by USAL third and fourth year students. They differ in two respects. In the first place, for NTU students the placement abroad is an integral part of their course and therefore they do not have to go through a selection process regardless of their grades. On the contrary, there are only limited places available for students from Salamanca, and grants are awarded to candidates according to their academic records. A second and equally important difference lies in the academic expectations from both cohorts. Thus, while Spanish students are expected to bring back credits of which they will be assessed as a component of their degree, British students, in addition to other assessment tasks, need to complete 30 credits per term and take exams but they are not required to pass them.

5. Results

5.1. Biographical data

No significant age differences that may impact on the data were found as the average age of British and Spanish students differs in less than a year: NTU students are on average 23 years old whereas USAL students are 22.2. Regarding their gender, most students are female in the two groups, although the percentage of women is higher among the Spanish Erasmus students (35 % of British students were male versus 13 % in the Spanish group). Coleman (2001) found that there are no significant differences in the attitude shown by female and male students towards target language speakers. As in other studies (Buynsters, 2012) we presume that this variable will not greatly affect the students' development of ICC during their placement.

5.2. Linguistic and Cultural Background

It is important to note that the figure below reflects the students' self-assessed rather than the accredited level of their target language.

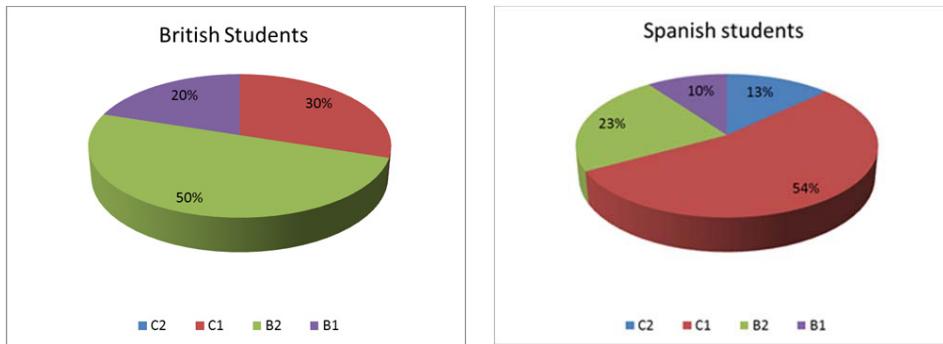


Fig. 1. Erasmus students' CEFR self-assessed level of target language

Having access to their self-perception of the language abilities may also provide us with the basis for discussions both on the pressure non-native speakers of English may feel to learn it due to the way it is viewed as a “world language” in an increasingly interdependent society, and on the role played by foreign languages in their career prospects and academic profiles. Mention should be made of the fact that, besides their acquaintance with English or Spanish as second language, in the two groups half the students speak a third language. Yet it is interesting to note that, regarding their level of the target language, while 70 % of English students consider their language ability to be intermediate, that is, B2 (50%) and B1 (20 %), 64 % of Spanish students assessed their command of the language as advanced, that is, within the C1 (54%) and C2 (10%) CEFR levels. Although 4 Spanish students placed themselves in C2, none of the British students did. And while only 3 Spanish students placed themselves in B1, 14 British did.

The final consideration within this category is whether this is the first time students have been in the target country. Perhaps not surprisingly, for most of the Spanish students this placement is their first experience abroad longer than a month (74 %) while it is just the opposite in the case of British students (25 %). These data are similar to Coleman’s (2001), whose sample of British students had shown to be familiar with the target country before their placement. His results show that British students maintained and sometimes reinforced stereotypes concerning the speakers of the target languages while at the same time the appreciation for their home country increased.

5.3. Critical cultural awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills

No significant differences between NTU and USAL students were thrown, on average, by the data on the four dimensions in this section of the questionnaire – awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills – but a closer reading lends itself to an interesting reading of the awareness dimension. The dimensions have been sequenced starting with the one showing fewer differences and finishing with the one where major differences can be appreciated.

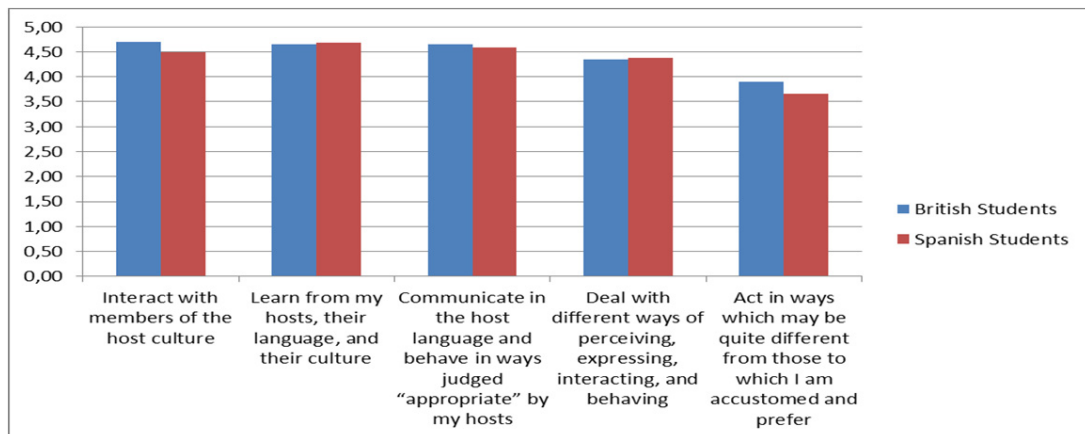


Fig. 2. Average frequency of students' attitude towards the host culture.

Figure 2 shows very few differences between both cohorts of students, with an attitude which is remarkably positive in both British (4.45) and Spanish (4.36) students. In spite of some reluctance, perhaps difficulty, to change their own behavior, the two groups display a similar disposition to interact, communicate with, and learn from the host culture. As we shall see, awareness and knowledge precede but may not always lead to real attitudinal transformations, at least not immediately, and we may assume that deep changes will not occur unless a longer immersion in the host culture is experienced. Even so, for deep rather than superficial behavioral changes to occur a constellation of factors must coalesce in addition to the time factor, amongst them varied and meaningful opportunities for interaction with people from the host culture involving engaged ways of cooperation, and an investment of their whole thinking, feeling and doing well beyond the academic boundaries. Hua (2014, p. 220) observes that “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”.

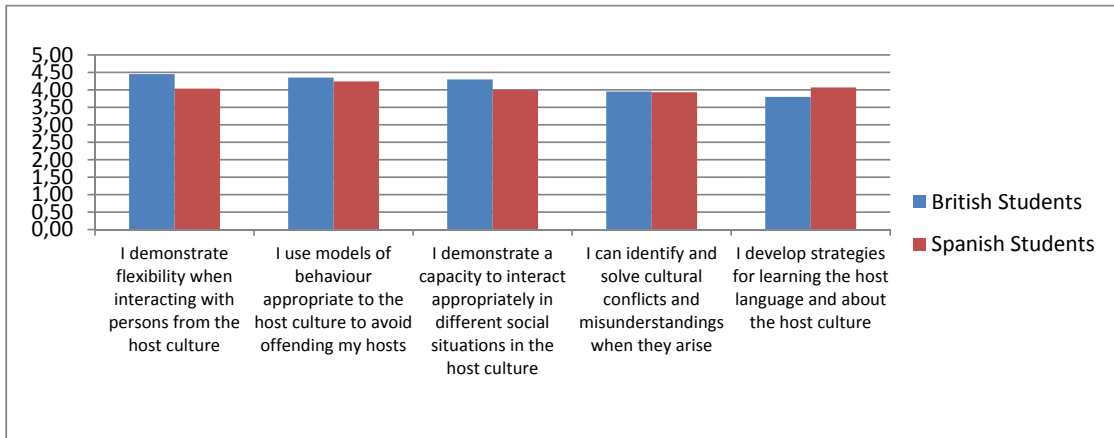


Fig. 3. Average frequency of students' skills towards the host culture.

Regarding the second dimension, even if both NTU and USAL students share a very similar high perception of their intercultural skills (4.05 Spanish vs 4.17 British), a close scrutiny of individual items of this dimension shows some differences; thus, 73 % of Spanish students vs 90 % of their British counterparts see themselves as being flexible or very flexible during their interactions with people from the host country. Both groups remark that they would not find it difficult to behave in a way which would not offend their hosts, although it seems that Spanish students find it slightly more difficult (British 4.3 and Spanish 4.0). In a similar vein, the two groups deem the most difficult skill to be identifying misunderstandings and solving conflicts. However, Spanish students perceive themselves as better equipped than the British (4.07 vs 3.80) to develop strategic ways of learning about the host culture and the effective use of the target language.

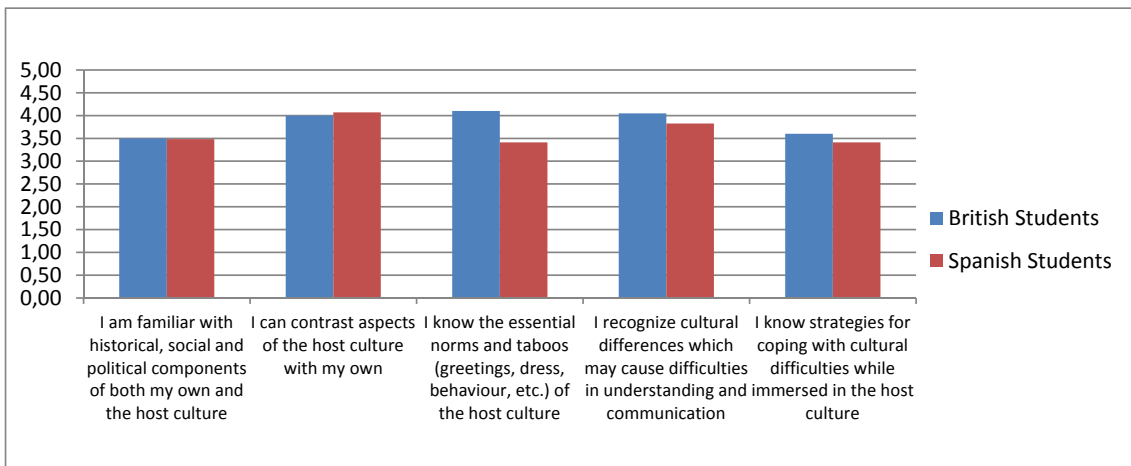


Fig. 4. Average frequency of students' knowledge towards the host culture.

No significant differences between both groups of students (British 3.85 versus Spanish 3.64) are revealed by the overall result of the third dimension, knowledge of the target culture. Nonetheless, greater differences are shown regarding the item concerning being familiar with norms and taboos associated to the host country. Spanish students are less knowledgeable of aspects such as greetings, dress, behavior, etc. of the host country than their counterparts (3.41 vs 4.10), perhaps owing to the heritage of postcolonial British multicultural realities.

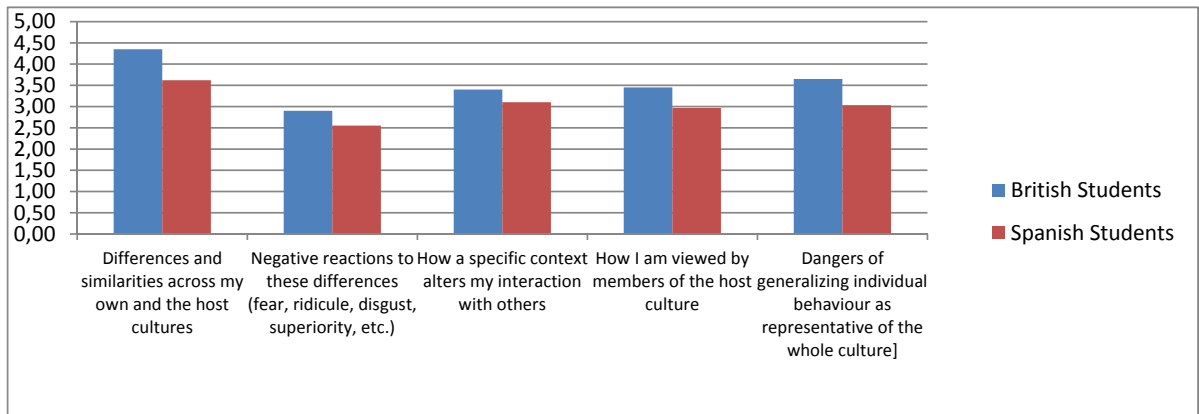


Fig. 5. Average frequency of students' awareness of the host culture.

The results of the awareness dimension exhibit the greatest differences between the two groups and with the other dimensions. Even if students from the two countries seem to be less aware of intercultural aspects (3.05) and British students (3.55) is greater. The latter seem to be more aware (4.35) of “the differences and similarities across my own and the host cultures” than the former (3.62). NTU students also express greater awareness of the way they are regarded by people from the host culture and of the extent to which contextual factors may affect their interaction with others, and they claim to detect more the dangers of overgeneralizations and to be more perceptive of negative reactions to cultural differences.

6. Conclusion

In spite of the differences between the two groups, mainly regarding expectations from home university, their previous experience abroad, and linguistic level, from the analysis of these preliminary data we can conclude that the most relevant issues so far are that at the beginning of their placements both display a positive attitude towards the host country; although they consider that identifying and solving conflicts and misunderstandings pose the greatest challenge they regard themselves flexible enough as to adapt to new cultural environments. They are aware and have knowledge of some similarities and differences between their own and their host cultures. Students seem to share a willingness to have a better professional prospect and to grow personally regardless of whether their access to an Erasmus placement may be a university requirement, depend on their academic results, or be a personal choice. However, the disparity between the initial zeal and positive attitude shown by students and their admitted difficulty to change behavior and eradicate prejudices and stereotypes still requires that all agents involved work towards greater collective responsibility.

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