

Developing (new) language skills through student mobility - the impact of an Erasmus+ experience

Florentina-Cristina COJOCARU*

Abstract:

Language learning “folklore” has framed study abroad as one of the most efficient means of improving students’ language competences. At the European level, Erasmus has been acting as the flagship student exchange programme for more than 30 years. In this context, the present paper proposes a “zoom in” on the influence that an Erasmus+ mobility for studies can have on developing (new) language skills for the participants. The analysis will reveal important details about the characteristics of students who decide to pursue a mobility for studies or about the status of English as a *lingua franca* during the mobility, emphasizing as well the difference between students’ perception with regards to language acquisition after the mobility and the results revealed by the linguistic assessments taken through the Online Linguistic Support platform. Last but not least, it shall also look at the impact of the mobility duration on the level of language competences.

Keywords: student mobility, language skills, Erasmus+, higher education

1. Introduction

It has long been assumed that study abroad is one of the most efficient means of improving (students’) language competences, as it enables direct contact with native speakers and other international peers, immersion in a new culture and various opportunities to interact with foreign language(s). But despite this broadly accepted idea,

* PhD Candidate, West University of Timișoara, cristina.cojocaru@e-uvt.ro



the research surrounding this topic, and more particularly related to the impact of an Erasmus study mobility on language acquisition is rather scarce.

The Erasmus programme celebrated recently its 30th anniversary, being one of the most successful initiatives of the European Union. Thus, for three decades it has been offering to more than 3 million students the opportunity to have a mobility for studies in a higher education institution from another country and hence to develop (new) language skills, expand their personal development, gain new academic experiences, get to know a new country and culture, increase their employability prospects and, overall, broaden their horizons. Moreover, in terms of capacity building in the field of higher education, we could look, on the one hand, at the impact of the programme at the institutional level of the higher education institutions that are implementing it, or we could look, on the other hand, at the impact of the programme at the individual level of the participants. This latter approach shall be the one taken by this article, in an attempt to "zoom in" on the impact that an Erasmus+ mobility for studies can have on the participants' language skills.

In the literature, the impact of an Erasmus experience on student participants who pursued a mobility abroad has been approached from various perspectives, in different attempts to "unpack" its influence. Very acknowledged is its impact on employability and career development (European Commission, 2014; Engel, 2010, Bracht et al., 2006). Also, the impact on developing a supranational, European, sense of identification has been intensely discussed (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Sigalas, 2010; Wilson, 2011; Van Mol, 2013,). Other aspects, such as the impact on personal development (Dolga et al., 2014) or the influence in developing the so called soft skills or transversal skills (Jacobone et al., 2015; Abermann and Tabuenca-Cuevas, 2016) have not been ignored in the literature.

2. The Erasmus programme - general considerations

Initiated in 1987, the programme takes its name from Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch philosopher, but the name is actually a backronym meaning *EuRopean community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students*. In its first year of implementation alone, it enabled a number of 3244 students to pursue mobilities between 11 European states (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and United Kingdom). Between 1994 and 1999 it was part of the wider initiative of the European Commission in the field of education called *Socrates*, followed by the *Socrates II*

programme between 2000-2006, by the *Lifelong Learning Programme* between 2007-2013 and now by the *Erasmus+* programme, functioning between 2014-2020.

In its more than 30 year old history, the Erasmus programme has facilitated over 3 million student mobilities (European Commission, 2013) being considered as a “success story” of the European Union. The European Commission estimates that 2 million more higher education students will benefit from the programme during the 2014-2020 timeframe and the programme is expected to contribute substantially at making mobility the “hallmark of the European Higher Education Area” (Bologna process, 2009) and at reaching the 2020 target of 20% of the graduates having had study (or training) period abroad (Bologna process, 2009).

In terms of individual mobilities, a series of novelties have been introduced starting with 2014 and the launch of the Erasmus+ programme, meant to “upgrade” the programme and increase the quality and quantity of mobilities, as well as diminish the administrative burden of the programme’s implementation. Among the most noteworthy novelties would be the fact that every student can benefit from up to a maximum of 12 months of Erasmus mobilities during one study cycle (bachelor, master, PhD) (European Commission, 2017a:36), or the fact that the programme extended outside the European area, thus giving the status of “partner country” to (almost) every state on the map (European Commission, 2017a:22-23) and extending the “Erasmus model” worldwide. Moreover, a series of new on-line tools have been introduced, aiming to facilitate the implementation of the programme, data collection and communication between all the parties involved, the management and reporting process, etc. (these processes are mainly supported by the *Mobility Tool* programme of the European Commission) or to increase the quality of mobilities by supporting the language learning process (the Online Linguistic Support platform). These on-line tools also represented the starting point for the exploratory incursion proposed by this article, as they collect data that are also useful for a better understanding of the impact of the programme on individual participants in relation to the language acquisition process. While the first tool would provide data from a subjective perspective of the participant, through a questionnaire applied at the end of the mobility experience, the second tool would bring forth an objective perspective, through language assessment at the beginning and at the end of the mobility period.

3. Aim and Methodology

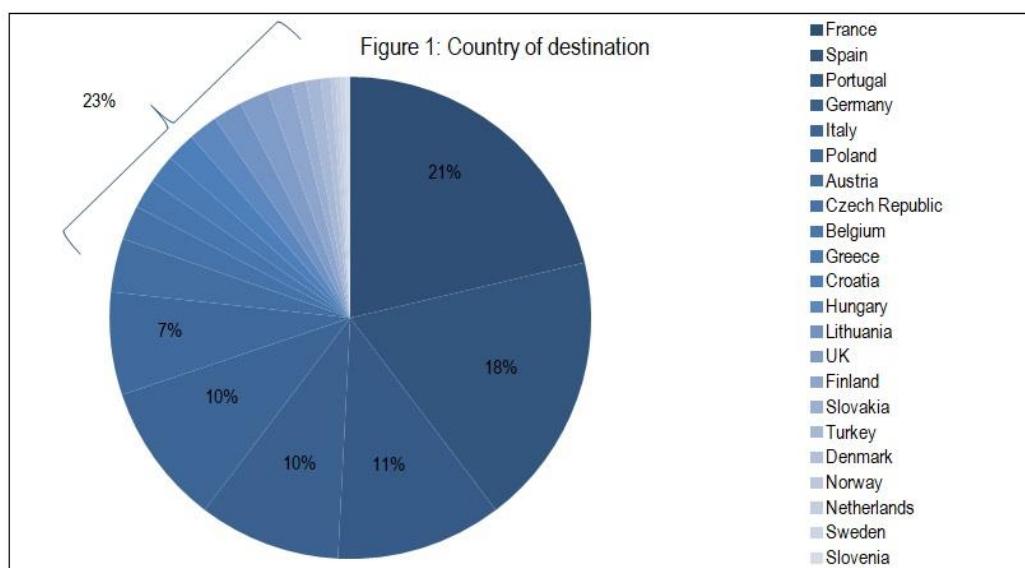
Through the lenses of the aforementioned new on-line tools used in the context of the Erasmus+ programme, the present paper proposes a “zoom in” on the influence that an international study experience can have on developing (new) language skills for the participants. The results presented below are based on data gathered from two cohorts of Erasmus+ outgoing students ($n=305$) from one of the biggest universities in the Western part of Romania, who pursued a mobility for studies of one semester or one academic year, during the past 2 academic years (2015-2016 and 2016-2017). This exploratory incursion will be done through a quantitative approach, consisting of analysis of survey data gathered through questionnaires at the end of the mobility and on the analysis of participants’ language assessment results on the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) platform supported by the Erasmus+ programme.

The questionnaire applied at the end of the mobility period gathers data about various aspects of the mobility and how the participant feels about subjects such as integration, satisfaction, practical and organizational aspects, support, personal development or the details important for the purpose of this study related to language competences.

The OLS platform offers Erasmus+ participants the opportunity to assess their skills in the foreign language used during their mobility, as well as the possibility to follow an online language course to improve their language competences. The online assessment assesses participants' language skills (listening, reading and writing) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. While this type of linguistic assessment is far from being perfect, with a major component- the speaking skills- being left out of the assessment, it can still provide important information and the opportunity to monitor the progress (if any) regarding the language competences in the main language of instruction during the international experience abroad. Since this is a mandatory step for all participants, at the beginning and at the end of the Erasmus+ mobility, this tool has a lot of potential both on short and on long term, for the mobility participant, for the sending institution as well as for the European Commission, making it possible to measure the impact of such an experience in relation to the process of language learning.

4. Results and discussion

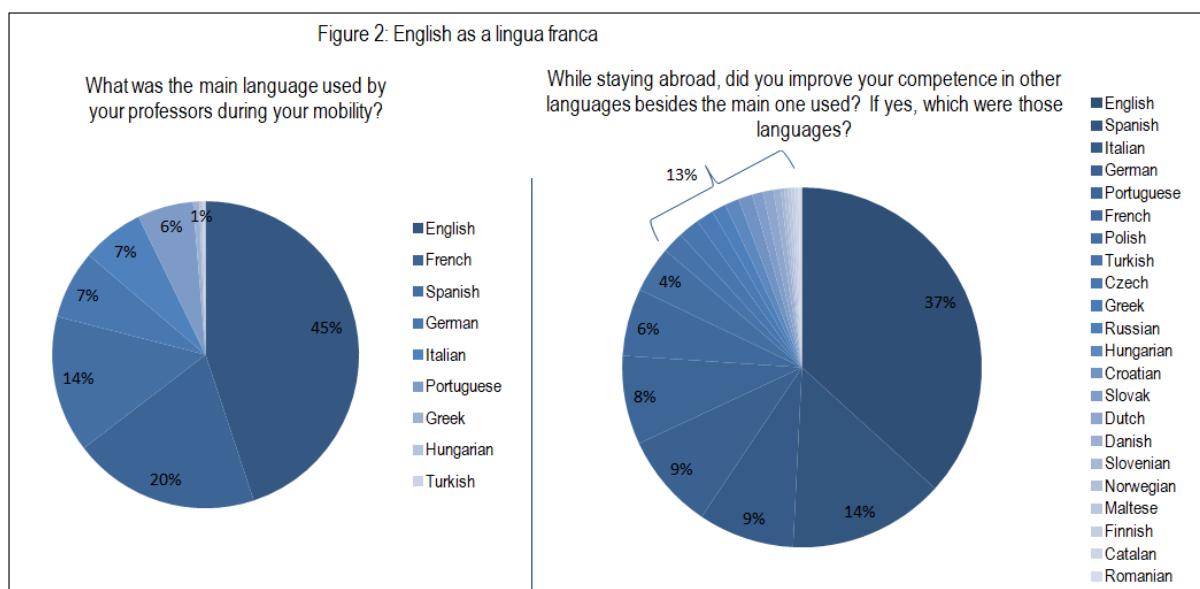
The data gathered through the questionnaire at the end of the mobility proved to be useful also in drafting a profile of the Erasmus+ student from the selected Higher Education Institution (HEI). When looking at the mobility duration, 70% of the mobilities lasted for one semester and 30% had a duration of one academic year. In terms of gender, 72% of the Erasmus+ students were females and 28% were males. When looking at their study cycle, 56% were bachelor students, 41% master students and 3% PhD. candidates. These data are comparable to the characteristics of the typical Erasmus student at the European level (European Commission, 2017b). With some variations, but still comparable to the data at the European level (European Commission, 2017c:33-34) is also the situation about the country of destination for the Erasmus+ mobilities at the selected HEI, as shown in Figure 1. As we shall see further on, the country of destination is also connected to the foreign language(s) competences that students develop/improve during their mobility. Moreover, the “language element” is an important factor when deciding to apply for a mobility, and also when selecting the host country and host institution. Among the first five receiving countries, four are from the category of Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian), just like Romanian, thus being easier to learn by Romanian students, given the common roots and the existing similarities.



Furthermore, when being asked about their main motivation for studying abroad, 72% of the students selected “To learn/improve a foreign language” among their motifs. Also,

"To follow a study programme in a foreign language" was a motif selected by 40% of the students

Zooming it even more, towards the impact on the process of selecting a host institution, 57% of the students mentioned that the language criteria was very important when selecting it and 29% rated it as important. Only 7% of the students had no opinion on this matter and 7% considered it as being less important or not important. The level of language competences is expected to play an important role in the decision to apply for such an experience in the first place, and also in deciding on the destination, given the fact that the duration of a mobility can range from 3 to 12 months, thus being a long term mobility. Moreover, the academic activity will take place in a foreign language and so will most of the communication during the mobility period, which might imply that the adaptation process to the new country, city, university, etc, might be directly influenced by the level of language competences, among other factors. In order to ensure the quality of mobilities, the European Commission recommends a minimum B1 level of language competencies in the main language of instruction used during the mobility, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.



Another noteworthy result is in relation to English as a *lingua franca* during the mobility period. English as a *lingua franca* can be defined as "a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and

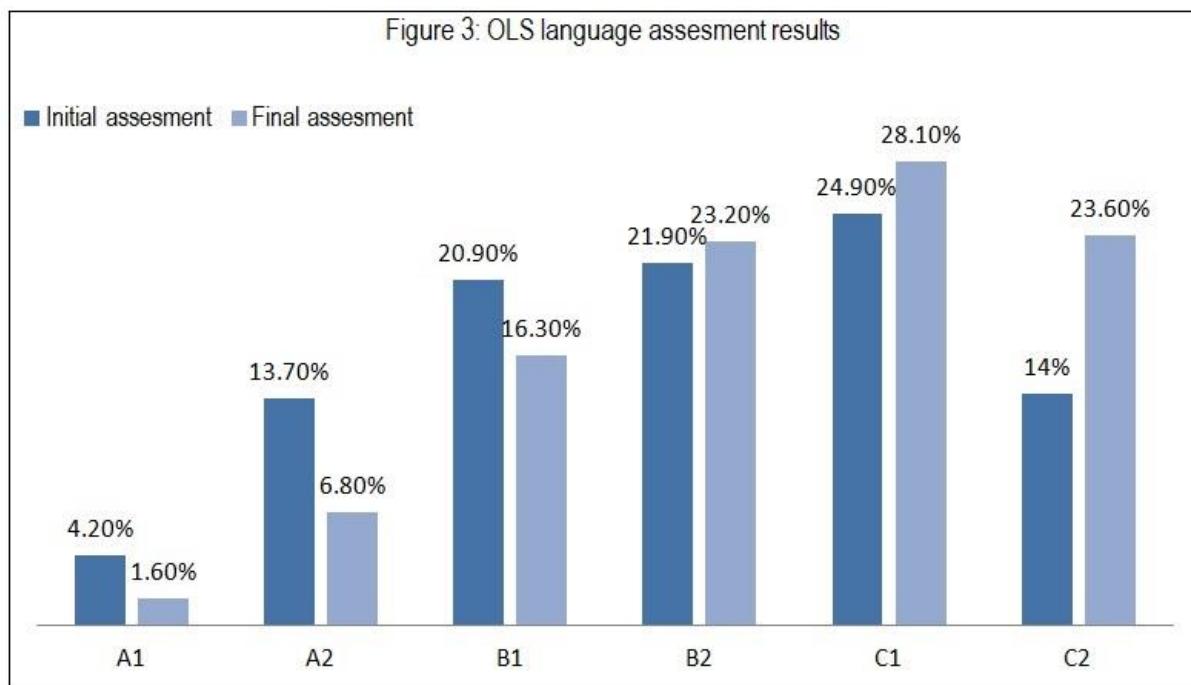
for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth, 1996:240). As illustrated in Figure 2, when asked what was the main language used in their academic activity during their mobility, 45% of the students mentioned English, followed by French (20%), Spanish (14%), German (7%), Italian (7%), Portuguese (6%) and 1% other languages (namely Greek, Hungarian, Turkish). Not surprisingly, the picture is more nuanced when speaking about other language(s), besides the main language of instruction. 77% of the students mentioned that they also improved their competences in other language(s), besides the main one used. If we look at which were those languages, English is again the most widely spread (37%), followed by Spanish (14%), Italian (9%), German (9%), Portuguese (8%), French (6%), Polish (4%) and so on, as illustrated in Figure 2. In this second case, the language acquisition process also takes place through other channels, besides the formal one implied by the academic experience at the host HEI. Very often it is the language of the host country, a language used within the new social group, in the interaction with other colleagues, roommates, flatmates, and so on. Nonetheless, despite these new contexts that can facilitate the development of (new) language skills, English is the most widespread language used throughout the mobility, consolidating its status as a *lingua franca* during Erasmus student exchanges. However, we should not ignore that other foreign languages are also being used in significant proportions, being plausible that their proportion might increase in the future. These languages are also the main foreign languages used at the European level, besides English, namely French, German, Spanish (Special Eurobarometer, 2012:19), together with other widely spoken languages like Italian or Portuguese.

Another detail revealed by the questionnaire answers is related to students' self assessment regarding the improvement of their language skills in the main language of instruction. Thus, in big proportion (84%) they felt that they have increased their language competences, while 14% mentioned that they were already fluent in the main language of instruction and 2% stated that they feel that they have not improved their skills.

But when comparing these self assessment data, which are subjective and reflect the students' perception about their language skills improvement, with the objective results from the language assessments taken by these students on the Erasmus+ OLS platform, we can notice considerable differences. Through the OLS platform, Erasmus+ students are

required to take two language assessments, one before the start of the mobility and one at the end of the mobility, for the main language of instruction used during their stay abroad. Thus, by comparing the two sets of results, it is possible to observe the progress (if any) regarding the level of language competences. The assessments results are shown using the six levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, ranging from A1 to C2.

A graphic illustration and a comparison between the initial and the final assessment are presented in Figure 3. In real terms, this would mean that 45.2% of the students proved an increased level of language competences, being either with one level higher (30.5%), two levels higher (12.1%) or three levels higher (2.6%). On the other hand, 41.5% kept the same level of language competences and surprisingly, 13.1% registered a decrease in their language skills by one level (11.4%) or in isolated cases even two (1.3%) or three (0.3%) levels.



When comparing the fact that 84% of the students reported in the questionnaire at the end of the mobility that they felt they have increased their language competences with the OLS assessment results which show that only 45.2% actually proved an increased level of language skills, the difference is noticeable. Moreover, the fact that some students also

showed a decrease of language knowledge in the final OLS assessment is surprising and would deserve further investigation for a better understanding of the causes that lead to these results. A possible explanation could lay in the imperfect nature of the way in which OLS platform is designed. Moreover, the assessment is not sensible to slight increases in the language performance, an important amount of progress being necessary for advancing from one level of language competence to another. Thus, it is plausible that a higher proportion of students actually improved their language skills, but the progress is not big enough to be reflected in an actual increase from one level of language competence to another. Moreover, the attitude of the participants towards the two language assessments might be different. While before the mobility students are paying more attention to all the details regarding their future Erasmus+ experience, including the language assessment, after the mobility their attitude might differ and the final language assessment might be just another administrative burden (given the fact that it is a mandatory component of their mobility) that they want to resolve hastily.

Furthermore, one of the general assumptions regarding mobility and the process of foreign language acquisition would imply that the duration of a mobility will have a direct impact on the level of language competences of students. Thus, a longer mobility period would also translate in a higher level of language competence.

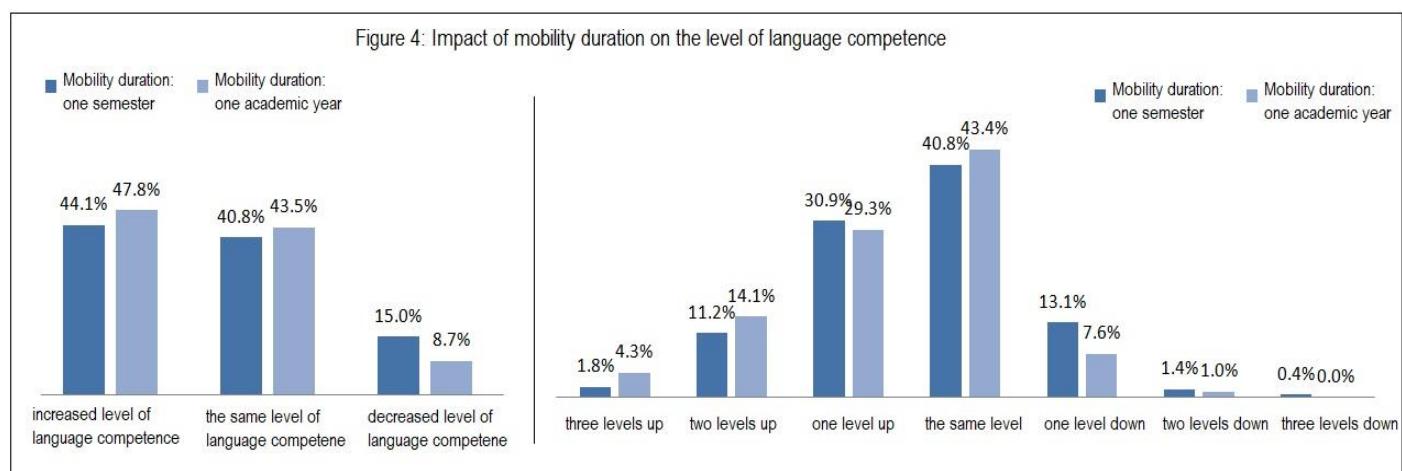


Figure 4 shows the results of testing this hypothesis. Thus, the data provided by the OLS language assessments reveal that there are, indeed, some differences and that the students whose mobility lasted longer (one academic year) are more prone to have an increased level of language competence or to keep the same level of language skills, while being less prone to

show a decreased level of language competence than the students who had a shorter mobility (one semester). Nevertheless, the differences revealed are not very substantial. For this reason we can conclude that mobility duration has only an incremental effect on the level of language competence of students who pursue an Erasmus+ mobility for studies.

This would suggest that the first months of the mobility have the greater impact in developing new language competences and that they should not be expected to increase proportionally to the duration of the mobility. In this context, it would be interesting to try to correlate this data to the situation of shorter term mobilities, like the student mobilities for Placement.

5. Conclusions

Starting from the popular belief that a study abroad experience is one of the most efficient ways for students to improve their language competences as it enables direct contact with native speakers and other international peers, immersion in a new culture and various opportunities to interact with foreign language(s), while also having an academic activity in a foreign language, this article proposes a "zoom-in" on the Erasmus programme, the biggest mobility programme at the European level. Through the lenses of two on-line tools used within the Erasmus+ programme, we go on an exploratory incursion and try to look at the influence that an international study experience can have on developing (new) language skills for the participants.

One of the first noteworthy elements that emerged from the analyzed data is that we can use it for drafting a profile of the typical Erasmus+ student. Details such as gender, mobility duration, field of study, country of destination, language of instruction, etc., would prove to be very useful in outlining the Erasmus+ student profile from a particular institution, region, country, etc. (depending on the source of the analyzed data).

Also, when looking at the main language of instruction used during a mobility and also at the language(s) that students report to have improved their competences in during the mobility, we notice that English is the most widespread language used. While this consolidates its status as a *lingua franca* during Erasmus+ student exchanges, we should not ignore that other foreign languages (French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc.) are also being used in significant proportions, being plausible that their proportion might increase in the future.

The data analyzed also reveals that the Erasmus+ experience contributes to improving the language competences of the participants and also to developing new language skills, but there are considerable differences between the students' perception about their language skills improvement and the results of the on-line linguistic assessments taken on the OLS platform.

Furthermore, there doesn't seem to be a substantial difference in terms of language acquisition between students who pursued a mobility of one semester and those who benefited from a mobility of one academic year, which indicates that we should not necessarily expect an increase in the level of language skills proportionally to the duration of the mobility.

Besides some answers, this exploratory incursion also brought along a series of more questions that would require further investigation for a better understanding of the impact of an Erasmus+ experience on its beneficiaries. Also, since this study is small scale, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Erasmus+ population. Nonetheless, despite the limitations, this study provides valuable information about the contribution of an Erasmus+ mobility for studies to the process of developing (new) language skills. This analysis also contributes to the larger discussion about the process of internationalization of higher education and the role that the Erasmus+ mobility programme plays in this context.

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