

Universitat de Lleida

A Mixed Methods Approach to Identity, Investment, and Language Learning in Study Abroad: The Case of Erasmus Students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia

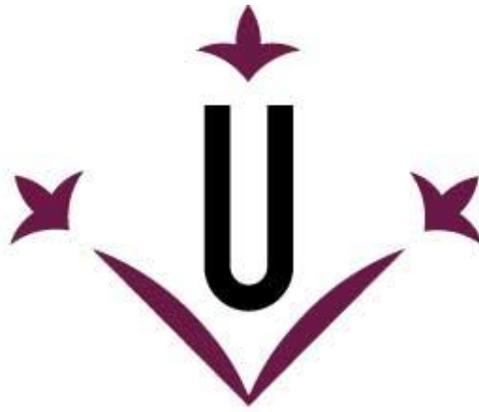
Vasilica Mocanu

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Universitat de Lleida

TESI DOCTORAL

**A Mixed Methods Approach to Identity, Investment,
and Language Learning in Study Abroad: The Case of
Erasmus Students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia**

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Celor care mi-au dat viață, Mirela și Ion.

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Abstract

Existing research on the impact of sojourns abroad on identity and on the relation between study abroad, identity, and language learning shows a variety of, sometimes contradictory, results. While some scholars doubt that study abroad is a long and destabilizing enough type of mobility having a direct impact on the identities of the participants (e.g. Block, 2014), others claim that study abroad can trigger an ‘alteration’ or modification of the self, due to the need to live in a foreign language (e.g. Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

This research project adopts a mixed methods longitudinal framework to approach the issue of identity, investment, and language learning in study abroad. The study follows a PRE-POST design with data obtained at different moments during the academic year 2015-2016 through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with Erasmus students in three different contexts: Oulu (Finland) in Northern Europe, Bucharest (Romania) in Eastern Europe, and Lleida (Catalonia) in Southern Europe. The study examines the sense of belonging, imagined identities, attitudes towards languages and cultural difference, expectations and degree of investment in both personal and professional learning among European higher education students in the three settings. The results of the study reveal the Erasmus experience has an impact on the participants’ identities, language attitudes and uses, as well as on their perception of employability. However, the outcomes of the stay abroad are influenced both by the expectations and the degree of investment of the students as well as by the contexts and the linguistic landscapes of their stay.

Keywords: identity, study abroad, investment, language learning, Erasmus.

Resum

La recerca al voltant de l'impacte de les estades a l'estranger sobre la identitat i la relació entre l'estudi a l'estranger, la identitat i l'aprenentatge d'idiomes, majoritàriament duta a terme mitjançant mètodes qualitius, mostra una varietat de resultats que poden arribar a semblar contradictoris. Mentre que alguns acadèmics manifesten una actitud escèptica sobre el fet que un període d'estudi a l'estranger constitueixi un tipus de mobilitat suficientment llarg i desestabilitzador perquè pugui tenir un impacte en les identitats dels participants (Block, 2014), altres afirmen que estudiar a l'estranger pot desencadenar una 'alteració' o una modificació del jo a causa de la necessitat de viure en un idioma estranger (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

Aquest projecte d'investigació adopta una metodologia mixta amb un enfocament longitudinal per tal d'abordar el tema de la identitat, la inversió i l'aprenentatge d'idiomes en estades de mobilitat universitària a l'estranger. L'estudi segueix un disseny PRE-POST, amb dades obtingudes en diferents moments durant el curs acadèmic 2015-2016, mitjançant qüestionaris i entrevistes semiestructurades amb estudiants Erasmus en tres contextos europeus: Oulu (Finlàndia) al nord, Bucharest (Romania) a l'est, i Lleida (Catalunya) al sud. L'estudi examina el sentit de pertinença, les identitats imaginades, les actituds cap als idiomes i les diferències culturals, les expectatives i el grau d'inversió en l'aprenentatge personal i professional entre els estudiants europeus d'educació superior. Els resultats de l'estudi revelen que l'experiència Erasmus té un impacte en les identitats dels participants i en la percepció de la seva pròpia ocupabilitat. No obstant això, els resultats de l'estada a l'estranger estan influenciats per les expectatives i el grau d'inversió dels estudiants, així com pels contextos i els paisatges lingüístics de la seva estada.

Paraules clau: *identitat, estudis a l'estranger, inversió, aprenentatge d'idiomes, Erasmus.*

Resumen

La investigación en torno al impacto de las estancias en el extranjero sobre la identidad y de la relación entre el estudio en el extranjero, la identidad y el aprendizaje de idiomas, mayoritariamente llevada a cabo mediante métodos cualitativos, muestra una variedad de resultados que pueden llegar a parecer contradictorios. Mientras que algunos académicos manifiestan una actitud escéptica sobre el hecho de que un periodo de estudio en el extranjero constituya un tipo de movilidad suficientemente largo y desestabilizador para que pueda tener un impacto en las identidades de los participantes (Block, 2014), otros afirman que estudiar en el extranjero puede desencadenar una ‘alteración’ o una modificación del yo debido a la necesidad de vivir en un idioma extranjero (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

Este proyecto de investigación adopta una metodología mixta con un enfoque longitudinal para abordar el tema de la identidad, la inversión y el aprendizaje de idiomas en estancias de movilidad universitaria en el extranjero. El estudio sigue un diseño PRE-POST, con datos obtenidos en diferentes momentos durante el curso académico 2015-2016, mediante cuestionarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas con estudiantes Erasmus en tres contextos europeos: Oulu (Finlandia) al norte, Bucarest (Rumanía) a la este, y Lleida (Cataluña) al sur. El estudio examina el sentido de pertenencia, las identidades imaginadas, las actitudes hacia los idiomas y las diferencias culturales, las expectativas y el grado de inversión en el aprendizaje personal y profesional entre los estudiantes europeos de educación superior. Los resultados del estudio revelan que la experiencia Erasmus tiene un impacto en las identidades de los participantes y en la percepción de su propia empleabilidad. Sin embargo, los resultados de la estancia en el extranjero están influenciados por las expectativas y el grado de inversión de los estudiantes, así como por los contextos y los paisajes lingüísticos de su estancia.

Palabras clave: *identidad, estudios en el extranjero, inversión, aprendizaje de idiomas, Erasmus.*

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List of abbreviations

ELF – English as a lingua franca

FL – foreign language

IC – intercultural competence

L2/SL – second language

MMR – mixed methods research

SA – study abroad

TL – target language

Transcription conventions

- / - indicates the minimal but clear pause between phrases/ sentences in normally-paced speech
- ... - indicates pause of significant length (more than 0.5) seconds
- : - indicates elongated vowel
- “ “ – indicates that the speaker is overtly voicing her/ himself or someone else
- XXX – indicates incomprehensible speech
- ? – indicates rising intonation (including questions)
- [sic] – indicates an error on purpose

Introduction

The present project examines the study abroad experience of university students participating in the Erasmus mobility program in three different European countries. Study abroad (SA) is understood in the present project as a period at a foreign university which can last for one or two semesters where the study of or studying through a second language(s) is implied, even though it might not always be the main purpose of the sojourn. Study abroad became a matter of concern around the 1960s (e.g. Carroll, 1967) though it remained exclusively focused on the terrain of language gains until the 1990s (e.g. Willis *et al.*, 1977; Magnan, 1986; Dyson, 1988) when it shifted direction towards a more socioculturally oriented framework (e.g. Freed, 1995). From that moment on, the studies conducted in the field of study abroad can be divided into those that have had a more linguistic orientation (e.g. Sasaki, 2007; Cubillos *et al.*, 2008; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Kang, 2014; Juan-Garau, 2014) and those with a more sociocultural inclination (e.g. Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Jackson, 2008; Kalocsái, 2014). The present study is situated in the latter group.

Overall, the results of the studies concerned with language gains show that study abroad seems to be a productive environment for language learning. As a matter of fact, in her review of research on study abroad, Kinginger (2009) makes the point that each modality of language use appears to benefit from sojourns abroad. However, as Kinginger (*ibid*) points out, more often than not, comparisons are made against monologic, native speaker models, and therefore a model of competence based on multilingualism and dialogic models of intercultural communication seems to be needed.

Studies oriented towards the sociocultural side of the experience are related to the need to look into language learning as part of a complex life experience, in which language(s), identities, motives, desires, opportunities to learn, circumstances, and reactions to them are deeply entangled. It

is in this category where the few existing studies on study abroad and identity can be situated (e.g. Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Jackson, 2008; Benson *et al.*, 2013; Llurda *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, research up to this moment points to a sojourn abroad as an opportunity for students to encounter and face difference. Since difference and conflict are at the core of identity construction (e.g. Block, 2014), study abroad appears to be a context that offers challenges both to the language skills as to the identity of the participants.

However, research on the impact of sojourns abroad on the identity of the participants and on the relation between study abroad, identity, and language learning, mostly conducted through qualitative methods, has brought to light a variety of sometimes contradictory results. For instance, while Block (2014) seems to be skeptical of study abroad being a long and destabilizing enough type of mobility so that it could have an impact on the identities of the participants, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) states that study abroad does trigger what she calls a ‘deprivation’ or an ‘alteration’ of the self due to the need to live in a foreign language. In another study, Murphy-Lejeune (2004) claims that Erasmus mobility opens the way for a particular form of migration due to the international experience that ultimately affects the participant’s lives and increases their willingness to become mobile in the future. Similarly, Jackson (2008) shows that, despite study abroad being a valuable and life-changing experience, there is a tremendous diversity and complexity in international students’ life journeys.

Besides the above mentioned studies, there are others that explore some social and cultural aspects that can be easily related to identity change. For instance, Llurda *et al.* (2016) looked at the development of Catalan students’ attachment to European citizenship during their Erasmus stay, to conclude that the stay abroad brought no positive impact in this respect.

All in all, there seems to be a need for what Block (2014) has called an opening of SA studies, taking on board a range of subject positions in order to examine identity, which should

involve “different nationality combinations as regards sending and receiving countries” (p. 223). The present study goes in this direction by considering a wide array of students’ nationalities as well as a combination of three different contexts across Europe and “representing the experiences of a broader range of students, questioning students’ motives for particular language-related choices, and attending aspects of identity that are of clear relevance but have remained unexamined” (Kinginger, 2013: 354).

The present research project therefore is concerned with study abroad within the European Union through the Erasmus Program. The program, whose name stands for the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students and recalls the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam who lived in many European countries, started in 1987 with 3244 students from 11 countries (Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013), and the European Commission claimed in 2016 that Higher Education participants reached 1 million in the first three years of the implantation of the Erasmus+ program (European Commission, 2016b). The Erasmus+ program is “the EU Programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport for the period 2014-2020” (European Commission, 2017c: 7) and it is based on the idea that education, training of the youth, and sport can significantly contribute to tackling the socio-economic changes that Europe is supposed to encounter until the end of the decade. Consequently, it is expected to support the application of the European policy agenda concerning growth, jobs, equity, and social inclusion. Among the main objectives of the program, we find fighting unemployment, promoting European values while fostering social integration, enhancing intercultural understanding and a sense of belonging to a community, promoting the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, sustaining the development of social capital among young people, and empowering young people and their ability to participate actively in society.

This research project adopts a mixed methods longitudinal framework to approach the issue of identity, investment, and language learning in study abroad. It does so by examining the sense of

belonging, imagined identities, attitudes towards languages and cultural difference, expectations and degree of investment in both personal and professional learning among European higher education students in a Northern, an Eastern, and a Southern European setting.

The project aims at answering the following research question:

What is the impact of the participation in the Erasmus study abroad program on the identities, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as reported by international university students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia?

In order to structure the investigation, the main research question has been divided into the following sub-questions:

- 1) What are the expectations of the participants, their forms of investment, and their imagined identities at the beginning of the stay?
- 2) In what ways Erasmus students relate and adapt to the languages present in the Erasmus community in the three analyzed contexts?
- 3) What are the identity and employability-related outcomes of the experience as reported by the students at the end of the stay?
- 4) What changes in identities (with a focus on European identity) and in attitudes are experienced among university students as a result of a stay abroad?
- 5) How expectations and outcomes in three different European settings are different and what profiles of students can be established according to their chosen destination.

The motivation behind writing this thesis stemmed from my personal life journey through which different kinds of mobility have positioned myself in different spots, and changed both my condition in, and my relation to the societies I have inhabited. The first and the one with the biggest

impact on my identity was my family's decision to migrate from Romania to Catalonia. This migratory process put my whole life, and almost all its certainties, under a big question mark, which has never ceased to exist, making the constant questioning of my own identity an ongoing process. So, as a matter of fact, I am myself one of those people who is still struggling to find some sort of balance between who my own eyes and who the eyes of the others see in my person.

In any case, the conclusion I drew from all of the above is that life can be as puzzling and bordering absurdity as to drive someone who will have to look for an identity to a place with a community that is struggling to find its own collective identity, as Catalonia. And most importantly, it led me to understand that above all, what we are, how we define ourselves is very much related to the languages we speak. It was never clearer to me as when at the entrance of the Bucharest underground ten years after I had moved to Catalonia, a Romanian lady offered many foreign language alternatives to my supposedly Romanian question. Her answer bewildered me and I am still wondering if it might have been my Mediterranean ways or the traces of a foreign language in my question what drove her not to respond to me in plain Romanian. What I have no doubt about is that that moment convinced me that "another language is another soul" (Wilson, 2013) and that for that lady, my soul was foreign.

So I started this project mainly because I wanted to understand what changes are prompted by mobility in different people moving to different places. In Spanish, it is said that "nunca vuelve quien se fue, aunque regrese" (who's gone never returns, even if he/she comes back). But what does this mean? Does everyone who leaves come back changed? Does it matter where he or she leaves? Does it matter under what circumstances? What about the languages they encounter and the people they meet? Does what they want to become play any role in the outcome? These were all questions that motivated me to put language, mobility, and identity, at the forefront of this project whose structure I am going to present in the following lines.

This thesis is composed of three main parts, followed by a conclusion.

Part I offers the theoretical background of the study. It examines some of the theories on language and identity most relevant for the present study, as well as a series of studies on the effects of study abroad on language learning, and on how the construct of European identity is affected by the Erasmus+ program. Part I is configured around three chapters. Chapter 1 delves into language and identity. Firstly, it explores language in its social dimension as investigated initially outside the field of applied linguistics. Secondly, it examines the ways identity is shaped and the role language plays in the process, trying to construct a chronological evolution of the studies on language and identity. Lastly, the chapter investigates the development of language and identity under globalization and explores the relationship between language, identity, investment, and employability. Chapter 2 focuses on the literature related to language learning in study abroad by bringing to the fore studies on the effects of program variables and the host context in study abroad and studies on the different language-related and sociolinguistic outcomes of sojourns studying abroad. Finally, the chapter introduces four studies which explore the social, individual, and linguistic effects of study abroad from different angles. Chapter 3 approaches European identity and explores the Erasmus+ program as one of the most zealous tools for promoting a common identity among European citizens, serving to shed light both on the literature among which the present study is situated and on the institutional discourses of the program whose impact it examines. Conclusively, the role of the English language in the construction of a hypothetical European identity is considered, focusing on the key concept of English as a *lingua franca*.

Part II comprises the research methodology of the study. Firstly, it introduces mixed methods research as the paradigm in which the study is embedded, its main characteristics, and their connection to the present research project. Secondly, the design of the study is explained, offering a detailed account of the locations, the participants, the instruments, and the procedure. Finally, the analytical procedures are described.

Part III encompasses two chapters of analysis of the results and a third chapter of discussion. Chapter 5 comprehends the quantitative results that emerge from the analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaires that were administered at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. The chapter is structured in two sections, according to the internal structure of the questionnaire. The first one deals with identity, and it covers aspects related to sense of belonging, capacity to adapt to other cultures, as well as representations of Europe and European identity, with a special focus on the role that languages play in the processes of identification. The second focuses on investment and expectations, with an emphasis on the role languages and language learning play along the sojourn abroad, which starts with the initial expectations, continues with the actual investment as reported by the students, and ends with the outcomes of the experience and their expected impact on the imagined futures of the participants. In this section, the connection between the stay abroad, language learning, and the concept of "employability" is also explored aiming to understand how language competences are ultimately transformed into human capital and what purposes this capital is expected to serve.

Chapter 6 exposes the qualitative results stemming from the analysis of selected semi-structured interviews conducted at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad with sixteen participants, following a similar structure to the one in Chapter 5. It deeply explores the evolution of the participants in terms of identification, sense of belonging, capacity to adapt to other cultures, and representations of Europe and European identity; and their expectations from the stay, the type of investment they are ready to make, and the one they actually report to have made, the linguistic and other types of capital they report to gain, and the imagined impact of this capital on their future.

Chapter 7 synthesizes, contrasts, and discusses the most outstanding results of the study. It is intended to serve as a means to bring together and jointly discuss the quantitative and the qualitative results, as well as to compare and contrast the results of the present project with other findings from the literature on the same topic.

Finally, the conclusion of the thesis summarizes the most important findings of the study and its relevance. Furthermore, apart from voicing the limitations of the project, the conclusion also brings to the fore its implications for the implementation of institutional policies that better approach the issue of identity and language learning in study abroad.

PART I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Part I comprises three chapters of literature review. Chapter 1 examines some of the most outstanding studies on language and identity. In the first place, it explores language in its social dimension as investigated initially outside the field of applied linguistics. Secondly, it delves into the ways identity is shaped and into the role language plays in the process, trying to construct, at the same time, a chronological evolution of the studies that had language and identity at the forefront. Finally, the chapter examines the development of language and identity in the light of globalization, and delves into the relationship between language, identity, investment, and employability.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on language learning in study abroad. In the first place, it presents some of the most prominent studies on the effects of program variables and the host context in study abroad programs. Secondly, it examines noteworthy studies which examined the different language-related and sociolinguistic outcomes of sojourns studying abroad. Finally, the chapter presents four studies which explore the social, individual, and linguistic effects of study abroad from different perspectives.

Chapter 3 deals with European identity and explores the Erasmus+ program as one of the most ambitious projects for promoting a common identity among European citizens of the EU. Consequently, the chapter serves as a means to shed light both on the theoretical framework of the present study and on the institutional discourses of the program whose effects it studies. Finally, Chapter 3 reviews the role of the English language in the construction of a hypothetical European identity, focusing on the key concept of English as a *lingua franca*.

Chapter 1. Language and identity

Chapter 1 examines the literature on language and identity. Firstly, it explores two theories on the social dimension of language, on which much of the identity research in applied linguistics to the moment has relied and which will also guide the present project. These are Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1991) and Chris Weedon's (1987) work. By introducing these two theories, Chapter 1 is meant to serve as a means to enter both the theoretical and the methodological framework of the present study: each of them combining structural-constructivist and poststructuralist elements, general and individual perspectives, structure and agency, the group and the subject, the numbers and the words, the material and the emotional, the results and the process, similarities and contradictions. Secondly, the chapter explains and delves into the key concepts of identity, investment, and language learning, to introduce afterwards their relevance for the idea of employability. Finally, Chapter 1 brings to the fore the connection between globalization, language learning, and the formation of transnational identities.

1.1. The social dimension of language: from economics to subjectivity

In the following lines, two theories on the social dimension of language will be explored. Firstly, Pierre Bourdieu's theorizations on the economics of linguistic exchanges will be introduced. Secondly, Chris Weedon's work on subjectivity will be presented. As mentioned above, these two theories were selected due to their relevance for subsequent studies on language and identity in applied linguistics.

In his theorizations on the economics of linguistic exchanges Bourdieu (1977) approaches the complex issue of the right to speak and the right to be listened to. Bourdieu was not a linguist but he brought the social dimension into the study of language. He introduced concepts such as 'authorized

language’, to indicate that communication is not just about speaking but also about the degree of power a speaker has to impose reception on a listener. The author further claimed that “an adequate science of discourse must establish the laws which determine who (*de facto* and *de jure*) may speak, to whom, and how” (Bourdieu, 1977: 648). Of considerable interest are the *bourdieussian* concepts of ‘habitus’, ‘capital’, and ‘market’. These concepts are instrumental in describing the complex and permanently changing relationship between the speakers’ position and that of their interlocutors.

According to Bourdieu (1991: 38):

Every speech act and, more generally, every action is a conjuncture, an encounter between independent casual series. On the one hand, there are the socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus, which imply a certain propensity to speak and to say a number of things (the expressive interest) and a certain capacity to speak, which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a given situation. On the other hand, there are the structures of the ‘linguistic market’, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorship.

Therefore, linguistic competence is contemplated as another type of ‘capital’ related to a certain ‘market’, which regulates what is appropriate in different situations. This is to say that “what determines discourse is not the spuriously concrete relationship between an ideal competence and an all-purpose situation, but the objective relationship, different each time, between a competence and a market, actualized practically through the mediation of the spontaneous semiology that gives practical mastery of the social level of interaction” (Bourdieu, 1977: 657). The ‘linguistic habitus’ is the extent to which an individual is capable of using the different potentialities of a language and to consider the conditions in which to use them. Consequently, language learning involves mastering not only a language as a code but also the different possibilities that the language offers and when to use them. However, Bourdieu advises us that the endeavor depends to a considerable extent on the receptors and the power to impose reception.

Of a similar interest here is Bourdieu & Passeron’s (1990) theorization regarding reproduction in education, society, and culture. In their work, the two authors analyze how education

serves the purpose of perpetuating the interests of the dominant power in society. The entire analysis is highly important for the understanding of the relationship between the educational, social, and cultural systems but the investigation of language carried out by the sociologists is particularly worth attention for the present work. In an attempt to describe how education systems have been committed to reproduce a certain linguistic style – the one spoken by the ruling class, Bourdieu & Passeron (1990: 118) make the following statement:

no one acquires a language without thereby acquiring a relation to language. In cultural matters the manner of acquiring perpetuates itself in what is acquired, in the form of a certain manner of using the acquirement, the mode of acquisition itself expressing the objective relations between the social characteristics of the acquirer and the social quality of what is acquired.

In the present study, my concerns do not have to do with the social quality of what is acquired in the *bourdeussian* manner - the symbolic meaning of being able to use certain rhetorical devices but with the symbolic meaning that being able to speak certain languages has. This is one of the central focuses of this thesis and it takes us to an extension of Bourdieu & Passeron's (1990) theorization on the role of language in education and social reproduction. This is not to say that style has lost its symbolic power in our society. It refers to the foresight that becoming a multilingual provides an amount of symbolic power that our world seems to value and reward. And the rewards are not a direct consequence of becoming multilingual *per se*. In his description of the dynamics of the linguistic fields, Bourdieu (1991: 61) affirms that “the linguistic competence measured by academic criteria depends, like the other dimensions of cultural capital, on the level of education (...) and on the social trajectory.” In the same way, I would argue that certain languages, whose symbolic power is acknowledged worldwide, can provide membership to desired privileged social categories. This assumption is one of the main forces that drive the participants in this study to take part in a sojourn abroad. However, it cannot be denied that their decisions are constructed under specific social, economic, and political discourses that give shape to both their present and their future sense of self.

In the second place, a glance at poststructuralism and most especially, at Weedon's work, is also relevant for the present project. Poststructuralist theories might differ regarding various issues but one thing they all agree about is that "the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness is *language*" (Weedon, 1987: 21).

Weedon (1987: 21) states that:

language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet, it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, *is constructed*.

This assumption is significantly relevant for the present study since it regards identity as socially constructed and by no means a fixed entity, but rather a changeable one. Consequently, there's a need to address the social, political, and economic discursive practices that shape the process of identity construction, always with the assumption that rather than unity and harmony, we might find many disunities and conflicting points. In Weedon's (1987: 26) words:

how we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent.

On a similar note, poststructuralism attempts to shed light on the ways in which power relations at an individual level, as well as in communities and groups, shape human experience. Subjectivity is seen as discursively constructed under the influence of social factors. Therefore, in this study, it is taken for granted that the identity of the participants, both the present and the future one, is shaped by specific forms of power. This is not to deny the right to agency of the young university students who participate in a sojourn abroad. The assumption here is that they do have the power to adopt or resist ongoing discourses coming from social institutions. At the same time, identity is seen as temporarily and spatially changing, since it is constructed always in connection

with dominant discourses which individuals might decide to incorporate or not. However, the degree of agency can vary depending on the temporal and spatial conditions of the participants.

Weedon (1987: 97), in her analysis of language and subjectivity, remarks that:

individuals can only identify their *own* interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses. Individuals are both the *site* and *subjects* of discursive struggle for their identity since the only way they can take decisions about the discourses they want to adopt is by becoming subjects of these discourses. Yet the interpellation of individuals as subjects within particular discourses is never final. It is always open to change.

Understanding the material conditions under which the participants in this study develop their identities is, therefore, a matter of concern for the present work. A brushstroke of the literature on the construction of the self will enable us to shed light on the ways identities are shaped.

1.2. Imagination and hybridity in the construction of the self

A glance at the most outstanding literature on language and identity in the last 30 decades clearly reflects a connection with poststructuralism. For instance, in his book *Second Language Identities* (2014) David Block emphasizes the importance of ‘ambivalence’ and ‘hybridity’, which are defined as an obvious and deep form of conflict that emerges with geographical and sociocultural border crossing. It appears that these situations trigger the perturbation of one’s sense of self, pushing the individual into a period of crisis, during which he/she needs to struggle in order to achieve a balance. Similarly, Esteban-Guitart (2008) defines identity as a problem, something that brings us unrest and needs to be solved. Block refers to the destabilization of the individual’s sense of self as a consequence of the time spans characterized by extended contact with an L2 and a new and different cultural setting, which he calls critical experiences.

Block (2014: 25), drawing on his one study (Block, 2002), claims that: “there is, in a sense, an element of before and after critical experiences as the individual’s sociohistorical, cultural, and linguistic environment, once well defined and delimited, becomes relatively ill defined and open-ended”.

This leads to what has been known as ‘hybrid’ and ‘third place’ identities (e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996; Papastergiadis, 2000; Nederveen Pieterse, 2004 in Block, 2014). On this note, Esteban-Guitart (2008) claims that we construct our personal identities through a narrative story which portrays our life project, including the people we want to be with, the job we want to do, and the place we want to live. Building upon Papastergiadis (2000: 170), Block (2014: 26) defines ‘hybridity’ as “‘the negotiation of difference’ in the presence of ‘fissures, gaps and contradictions’ during which the past and the present ‘encounter and transform each other’”. The result of the negotiation of difference is ‘ambivalence’, which the author (ibid: 26) defines as the state of human beings who “are forced by their individual life trajectories to make choices where choices are not easy to make”. On the same note, Esteban *et al.* (2007) describe languages and identities as a product of the contact between the sociocultural context, traditions, beliefs, and convictions of people which are always on the move.

Various scholars have adopted different poststructuralist perspectives for the study of identity. Among the most outstanding ones, there is ‘performativity’ (e.g. Butler 1999), ‘positioning’ (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1999), and ‘communities of practice’ (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Most recently and also drawing on poststructuralist theory, Norton & McKinney (2011: 73) advocate for an ‘identity approach to SLA’ that:

- (i) integrates the individual language learner and the larger social world
- (ii) addresses how relations of power in the social world affect learners’ access to the target language community
- (iii) highlights the multiple positions from which language learners can speak

Thus, the identity approach to SLA has at its core understanding issues of power and inequality, which have become even more noticeable in the face of globalization which will be approached later in this chapter.

Similarly, Pavlenko & Norton (2007) focus on the link between imagined communities, identity, and language learning in order to show the ways in which the imagination of citizens is shaped by nation-states, and how learning or resisting to learn English is shaped by present and future possible memberships to certain imagined communities. The authors plead for considering the imagined communities of language learners as a way to foster their learning trajectories. On the same token, Higgins (2014), building on Appadurai (1990, 1996, 2013) develops the concept of 'intersecting scapes' to refer to the crossing that happens between various life domains, such as home, work, and the marketplace, which results in a mixture of language varieties. The author refers to the fact that intersecting scapes, deeply related to the new millennium phase of globalization, are new identity zones, characterized by hybridity and cultural *mélange*. However, Higgins also highlights that the hybridities that seem to characterize the new millennium have to coexist with modernist visions of the world, transforming choices on teaching and learning in a challenging enterprise. In connection to the above, I believe there is a need to understand in what identities the participants in this study are eager to invest, what are the desires that shape their language choices and how and by whom these desires are constructed and promoted.

Connected to Higgins' concept of scales, Esteban *et al.* (2007) explore the role of language in the narrative construction of identity. From interviews with ten participants, five of them migrant residents in Catalonia, and the other five, students at the Universidad Internacional de Chiapas from different linguistic backgrounds, the authors draw the conclusion that language basically carries out three different functions depending on three different types of needs: "on one side there is 'the familiar, identifying or mother language'. On the other, 'the language of socio and labor communication' which enables for communication in the workplace or in the different sociocultural

sceneries, and, finally, ‘the language of global interconnection’, which currently is English, present on the internet and on the international scenarios” (Esteban *et al.*, 2007: 1)¹.

A considerable part of the studies on language and identity that were conducted from a poststructuralist point of view have been devoted to the theme of identity and language learning of migrants. One of these studies is Norton’s (2000) research with immigrant women in Canada that will be analyzed more in-depth in the following subsection. A similar study was conducted by Pavlenko (2004) who explored the narrative identities as constructed in American immigrant memoirs and one collection of essay-length immigrant autobiographies, written by or collected from immigrants who arrived in the US between 1870 and 1913 and published between 1901 and 1935, and which became well-known at that time. By applying a sociohistorical perspective to the analysis of these narratives, Pavlenko makes the case of the ways in which sociohistoric circumstances impact negotiation of identities, reminding us that “personal narratives of individuals are not simply individual performances but also complex stories” (p. 63) in whose writing the sociohistorical circumstances might have a deep impact.

Likewise, Darwin & Norton (2014) analyze the transnational identities of migrant language learners and the contribution of digital storytelling to language learning. The authors advocate for a need of language classrooms to create third spaces that give permission to the hybridity of language and culture in order to connect their transnational literacies to the literacies of the school. On the same note Norton (2016: 476) states that “(p)articularly important with regard to access to social networks and target language speakers is the intriguing way in which learners can reframe their relationship with others in order to claim more powerful identities from which to speak”. Consequently, she claims for a need of language and teachers to take advantage of the multiplicity of identity in order to reinforce language learning, and therefore, human possibility.

¹My own translation

Similarly, DeCosta (2016) conducted a critical ethnographic study with 5 design immigrant students at a secondary school in Singapore. His research, based on observation of and video- and audio-taped classroom interaction, as well as interviews, artifacts, and observation of interaction outside the classroom, shows how unequal relations of power between the students affected language learning possibilities. Furthermore, the author advocates for the need of an “expanded ideological framework to advance SLA” (p. 166) in which language learning outcomes should be considered in connection with general learning outcomes.

So far, some of the most outstanding literature on identity and the construction of the self have been examined. In the following lines, Norton’s (2013) concepts of “identity” and “investment”, as well as the concept of “employability” (Flubacher *et al.*, 2018), central to the present study, will be explored.

1.3. Investment, capital, and employability in language learning

The concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘investment’ are essential for understanding the processes at work in a sojourn abroad. Norton (2013:45) defines ‘identity’ as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future”. According to Joseph (2016: 19): “(i)dentities are manifested in language as, first, the categories and labels that people attach to themselves and others to signal their belonging; second, as the indexed ways of speaking and through which they perform their belonging; and third, as the interpretations that others make of those indices.” The construct of ‘investment’ is defined as the “complex relationship between language learner identity and language learner commitment” (Norton 2013: 3). With regard to the concepts of ‘imagined communities’ and ‘imagined identities’, Norton affirms that “the target language community may be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community

of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future” (Norton, 2013: 3). On the same note, “an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language can be understood within this context” (ibid:13).

The intersection of the concepts mentioned above is relevant for the present work and it can be fruitful when trying to understand how the language learners in this study understand their position in time and space, and how they foresee possibilities for the future. This will enable us to shed light on the ways they invest temporal and material resources in learning second languages.

Norton (2013: 49) affirms that:

natural language learning does not necessarily offer language learners the opportunity to learn a second language in an open and stimulating environment, in which learners are surrounded by fluent speakers of the target language, who generously ensure that the learner understands the communication directed at the learner, and who are prepared to negotiate meaning in an egalitarian and supportive atmosphere.

The idea of ‘negotiating meaning’ in the author’s research inevitably takes us back to Bourdieu’s notions of ‘legitimate language’ and the ‘right to impose reception’, since they inform us about, in Norton’s (2013: 150) words, how “natural language learning is frequently marked by inequitable relations of power in which language learners struggle for access to social networks that will give them the opportunities to practice their English in safe and supportive environments.”

Norton focused her study on five women (two from Poland, one from Vietnam, one from Czechoslovakia, and one from Peru), who were enrolled in an ESL course in Canada. With these participants, she conducted initial interviews. Afterwards, they participated in a diary study, which included weekly meetings for eight weeks. Finally, interviews were conducted and a questionnaire was administered. The results of her study indicate that despite being good language learners, all five women had to struggle for speaking in the target language due to conditions of marginalization. For this reason, Norton claims that relations of power in their daily interactions considerably reduced

their access to communication with local people. Furthermore, their symbolic resources were undermined in the Canadian context, since they did not manage to find work in their professions.

However, the author also provides data on how the women in her study made sense of their marginalization conditions. For instance, she reports on Eva's access to the social network in her workplace with the following extract:

Eva was marginalized, she could not take part in the language practices in the workplace and was subject to exploitation. Her lack of confidence and anxiety were not invariant personality traits but socially constructed in inequitable relations of power. It was only after a number of months that Eva gained access to the social network in the workplace, and with it the right and opportunity to speak. Such access was gained because Eva acted upon the workplace, refusing to be marginalized, and because the organization of activities for workers outside the workplace gave her the opportunity to distance herself from the identity of an unskilled immigrant.

(Norton, 2013: 110)

Eva's shift from being 'powerless' to becoming, in her own words, someone with the same possibilities as Canadians is a fascinating example of human agency at work, especially when Norton (2013: 111) states that: it is significant that Eva not only wanted to be accepted, she wanted her 'difference' to be respected". It is also interesting to see how there are also cases in which the process of accessing social networks, and therefore, opportunities for interaction, can also go in an inverted sense. This can be observed in the case of the Vietnamese participant in Norton's study, an experienced seamstress who was immediately given legitimacy based on her professional skills, but who had to face isolation shortly after due to the fact that her competence was seen as a threat by her co-workers. On this note, the author claims that: "The isolation that she felt had both symbolic and material consequences, as her access to both friendship and expertise was compromised" (Norton, 2013: 123)

Of special attention in Norton's study is the fact that she challenges, or in her own words, she 'revisits' second language acquisition theory, and most especially, Spolsky's (1989) description of "natural language learning". On this note, she claims that: "(w)hat the data of my study indicates

(...), is that target language speakers are frequently unwilling to engage in negotiation of meaning with language learners.” (Norton, 2013: 147). Similarly, the author points out to the fact that English was hardly spoken in the neighborhoods where the participants in her study lived, and that the major part of their exposure to the local language was by means of the radio and the TV. Furthermore, the only social networks of fluent English speakers they could access were at work, where they were regarded as inferior, which led to a passive attitude in which they would rather listen than speak. On a similar note, the women in the study were intimidated by strangers and they spoke mostly in situations that made them feel comfortable because they felt people had the patience to deal with their English.

Another aspect in Norton’s work that merits attention here is her treatment of the concept of “motivation”. With regard to this, the author states that: “a learner’s motivation to speak is mediated by other investments that may conflict with their desire to speak - investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learners’ identities and their desires for the future.”(Norton, 2012: 157). Similarly, Norton (2013: 161) states that her data “indicate very clearly that anxiety is not an inherent trait of a language learner, but one that is socially constructed within and by the lived experience of language learners”. In this sense, it is intriguing to see how language learning is about acquiring the code, as it is about socially constructing the ability to speak. Experiencing becomes, therefore, an essential part of the language learning process. Extending on this, Norton addresses the issue of “subjectivity”, which she defines as multiple, with a non-unitary nature, as a state of struggle, and changing over time. Using this framework, she reports on how the identities of the participants in her study are non-unitary and contradictory, and how certain identities offer better opportunities to navigate through social sites that enable them to interact in English. On this note, the author states that: “(i)t is partly for this reason (subjectivity being open to change) that I have critiqued the notions of a language learner’s attitudes and motivation in SLA theory. Not only are such characteristics socially constructed, but they change over historical time and social space.”

(Norton, 2013: 165). It is an intriguing exercise to see how the participants in the present study navigate through their different identities, and how they enable them to create opportunities for learning. For this aim, power relations will have to be addressed, since, as Norton (2013: 168) states: “the refusal to name and address power relations limits our ability to do justice to the complex experiences of language learners across historical time and space”.

More recently, Darvin & Norton (2015: 47) introduced a new model of investment in applied linguistics which draws on the previous ideas, but

extends the question, “To what extent are learners invested in the language and literacy practices of their classrooms and communities?” to include the following:

1. How invested are learners in their present and imagined identities? In what ways are they positioned by others, and how do they, in turn, position interlocutors in ways that grant or refuse power? How can learners gain from or resist these positions?
2. What do learners perceive as benefits of investment, and how can the capital they possess serve as affordances for learning?
3. What systemic patterns of control (policies, codes, institutions) make it difficult to invest and acquire certain capital? How have prevailing ideologies structured learners’ habitus and predisposed them to certain ways of thinking?

In this way, the authors aim at going beyond the dichotomy marginalized-resistant learner, by providing an understanding of learners who have the agency to “evaluate and negotiate the constraints and opportunities of their social location” (ibid, p. 47). Furthermore, the new model enables for understanding how “learners may paradoxically contribute to their own subjugation through the performance of hegemonic practices” (ibid, p. 47). Darvin & Norton (2015) seem to base their new model on the deterritorialization, dynamicity, and diversity of the spaces learners occupy, due to increased freedom of movement, which might “diffuse and even reconfigure power, allowing learners to choose not only to invest but also to purposefully divest from particular language and literary practices.” (Darvin & Norton, 2015:47).

Connected to the above, Flubacher *et al.* (2018) bring to the fore the concept of “employability”: According to the authors,

(t)he decision to invest (in language, in this case) is always made with the idea that it will pay off in the future and refigures the object of investment as something – or someone – with a certain potential. This is also central to human capital theory, according to which cost and benefit of investment is a fixed component in education policies (...). From this perspective, language competences become human capital per se, that is, “individual knowledge components or skills. (p. 4)

Language investment, therefore, becomes a concept that is (or should be) directly connected to the concept of employability. In fact, Flubacher *et al.* (2018:2), drawing on Duchêne (2016) affirm that: “(l)anguage learning and language competences are thus reconfigured in terms of “investment”, that is, individual, institutional, or societal investments in terms of financial resources, time, and energy for the development of language competences that (ideally) can be turned into economic profit”.

However, Flubacher *et al.* (2018) warn us about the fact that we need to look critically into the correlation between language, investment, employability, and professional success, always “in relation to the complex, social, political, and economic process through which languages become valued, recognized, or ignored” (p. 3).

In the following section, the complex social, political, and economic processes that have been brought by globalization and that affect identities, investment, and language learning will be addressed.

1.4. Globalization, language learning and the formation of transnational identities

Globalization has supposed a challenge to the social dimension of languages and language learning in our times. Defined by Blommaert (2010: 13) as: the “intensified flows of capital, goods,

people, images and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology, and resulting in new patterns of global activity, community organization and culture”, globalization has become a controversial phenomenon characterized by two divergent views. One of them sustains that globalization is just another step in history, and therefore, it claims for historical continuity. On the other hand, the opposite viewpoint sees it as a radical, clear-cut break with the past. As a response, some authors such as Pennycook (2006) have claimed that, in fact, both of them should be taken into account if we want to find solutions to the phenomenon, affirming that “on the one hand, if we lose sight of the historical precedents of the current state of globalization, we lose a crucial understanding of how current global conditions have come into being” and, “on the other, if we focus too much on continuity, we fail to see that the forces of globalization demand new ways of thinking new solutions to new problems” (p. 26).

Connected to globalization, there is the concept of ‘transnationalism’, which has been characterized by Duff (2015: 57) as “the crossing of cultural, ideological, linguistic, and geopolitical borders and boundaries of all types but especially those of nation states”. Similarly, Block (2014: 39) describes ‘transnational social spaces’ as “sites where groups, defined by ethnicity, religion, nationality or geographical region have settled in nation states, but have nevertheless retained and developed their cultural and economic links with their homelands, including in some cases their political loyalties and commitments”. Connecting study abroad students with transnationalism, Murphy-Lejeune (2004) claims that when transnational movements are approached through the study of a population which embodies the future in Europe, it turns the spotlight on the changes in contemporary migrations and it points up to a new category of Europeans, the ‘study travellers’. Similarly, Ong (2003) defines ‘transnationalism’ as “the cultural specificities of global processes, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of ‘culture’” and ‘transnationality’ as “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space - which has been intensified under

late capitalism” (p. 4). On the same token, Ong sustains that transnational mobility has given place to a new way to construct identity, one that cuts across political borders. By the same token, Vertovec (2001) states that transnationalism consists of different kinds of connections that can be global or across borders, which in many cases are based upon the “perception that they (transnational individuals) share some form of common identity, often based upon a place of origin and the cultural and linguistic traits associated with it” (p. 573).

Consequently, a transnational approach goes beyond a binary understanding of identities thought to be localized in a given space (either the home country or the host country), thus allowing for new ways of understanding mobility. Furthermore, the organization patterns of transnational communities often challenge the “prior assumptions that the nation-state functions as a kind of container of social, economic, and political processes” (Vertovec, 2001: 575). In fact, when referring to transnationalism and migration, Vertovec (2001) affirms that we should consider theorizing on types of ‘transnationalisms’ and the factors that influence their organization, and he cautions us about the two-folded way to understand the phenomena: as a form of resistance, on the one hand or as a way to align with the changes brought by global capitalism, on the other. Despite the fact that in many instances transnational movements have been examined in connection to migration and the duality in which increasingly more people live, the diversity of types of mobility call for a wider approach of transnationalism, which encompasses different types of mobile individuals.

On a similar note, Duff (2015) approaches the complexity of transnationalism and calls for a need to examine the mobility of children and youth, as well as virtual connectedness, and multigenerational experiences, taking into account the social actors, resources, institutions and networks (both formal and informal). The author emphasizes the fact that mobility as a complex phenomenon can lead to different outcomes, which might include the retention of primary languages or the expansion of linguistic repertoires with new languages or new varieties of already-known languages, language shift to new languages, and ‘cosmopolitan, multifaceted, and multilingual or

syncretic’ or more assimilated identities within society. For Duff (2015), applied linguistics should be concerned with the personal stories, trajectories, aspirations, mobility, and language use of immigrants, international sojourners, internal migrants in multiethnic or multilingual societies, asylum seekers, diaspora members, and other mobile users of language across geopolitical and ethnolinguistic borders, and across both real and imagined spaces and places. According to the author, the connection between transnationalism, multilingualism, and identity is a very clear one, since the latter is deeply affected by the way people see themselves, the way they relate to the social world, the way they are positioned by others and their sense of belonging. Language, in its turn, is a means to connect individuals to linguistic communities, which might give them a sense of belonging in the same way one might feel connected to an imagined nation (Anderson, 1991).

In an attempt to examine the relationship between transnationalism and identity, Hornberger (2007) introduces the concepts of ‘transnational spaces’ which are created and maintained by youth and adult individuals who move or have moved across national borders and maintain affinity ties in more than one place. These spaces can be pedagogical, social, or online spaces which “afford opportunities for the construction and narration of self and identity through transnational literacies” (p. 325). Hornberger highlights the fact that schools or adult education more often than not do not respond to the need to create educational spaces that encourage the development of transnational literacies.

In connection with transnationalism, Ong (1999) introduces the concept of ‘flexible citizenship’ to refer to “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 6). The author refers to the importance of flexibility, mobility, and repositioning with regard to markets, governments, and cultural regimes as features that are promoted by people living under capitalism while they also serve to regulate postmodern subjects.

Similarly, Blommaert & Varis (2015) bring in the notion of ‘superdiversity’, which emerges in Late Modernity, where identity is characterized by hybridity, fragmentation and polymorphism. Thus, people’s orientation can be very different depending on the different spaces in their lives. The authors make the distinction between macro- and micro-hegemonies, the former referring to solid hegemonies, characteristic of Modernity, and the latter to several hegemonies that are available in certain segments of people’s life, providing the ‘most logical’ solution or ‘the truth’ concerning those segments. Therefore, the individual life-project assumes the form of “dynamic (i.e. perpetually adjustable) complex within which subjects situate their practices and behavior.” (p. 5). Blommaert & Varis (2015) call this complex a ‘repertoire’ and they claim that these repertoires “are not chaotic, and people often are not at all ‘confused’ or ‘ambivalent’ about their choices, nor appear to be ‘caught between’ different cultures or ‘contradict themselves’ when speaking about different topics.” (p. 5). Furthermore, it is stated that these repertoires composed by micro-hegemonies invest people with order, even though this type of order does not resonate with older models since it is “composed of different niches of ordered behaviors and discourses about behavior.” (p.5). Finally, the way these ‘micro-hegemonized niches’ come together constitute our identities, which are “the key to what we can be or can perform – in social life.” (p. 14). At the same time, micro-hegemonies are permanently in a state of change so individuals need to adapt to their new forms in order to be acknowledged as authentic members in a given domain.

Study abroad, and most especially, study abroad in Europe, has been promoted as a successful way to adopt a transnational identity, characterized by an enhanced flexibility to adapt to different contexts and ways of living and a richer multilingual repertoire. In the following chapter, I will focus on the phenomena of study abroad and some of the results of the research in this domain, bringing to the fore firstly some of the most prominent studies related to study abroad in general, and secondly, focusing on those studies that have examined study abroad from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Chapter 2. Study abroad: linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects

Study abroad has been defined as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes” (Kinging 2009: 11). For the present project, study abroad refers to a period at a foreign university which can last for one or two semesters where the study of or studying through a second language(s) is implied, even though it might not always be the main purpose of the sojourn. Furthermore, study abroad is identified in the present study as an experience that challenges the identities of the participants, enabling them to reshape a sense of who they are by means of incorporating the experience of both learning and living in a second language. Therefore, my study is based on the assumption that the identity of the students will be affected by the sojourn abroad, in which functioning in a second language is necessary. In the first place, the students will be able to test their capacity to function as an individual in a context where a second language is required. Secondly, the participants in the study might experience a change from language learners to language users (Unamuno & Codó, 2007), since both the time of exposure to the second language, as the situations that will require using it will experiment a drastic change. Therefore, my understanding of study abroad is that of a holistic experience whose outcomes are both linguistic and of other kinds, and therefore, the aim of this study is to understand them as a whole. I am aware, though, of the fact that it is very difficult to untangle the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of the experience. To what extent the identity changes that study abroad participants experience are due to being “forced” to communicate in a second language (s) and to what extent they are a result of the fact that a sojourn abroad, by itself, even when it does not imply struggling to use a second language, is already an experience that creates turmoil? Is it actually possible to separate linguistic and personal outcomes?

In the following lines, firstly I will introduce two factors that have been reported to affect language learning: the host context and program variables. Afterwards, I will expose what I consider

to be the most relevant results of the research on language-related outcomes of study abroad, on the one hand, and research on sociolinguistic aspects, on the other.

2.1. Key factors in study abroad

2.1.1. Program variables

As mentioned before, the characteristics of the SA programs have been regarded as crucial in the participants' acquisition of a second language. Therefore, the research has focused, on the one hand, on the effects of program length, and on the other, on the characteristics of the programs and their impact on the language learning process. With regard to the former, it is generally acknowledged that longer stays are more beneficial, even though there are no conclusive results about the most beneficial length. For example, Brecht *et al.* (1993) conducted a study with a sample of 658 US college and graduate students who were enrolled in a four-month program abroad in the former Soviet Union in 1984. The study concluded that "at least one semester of study in-country is required if any sizable percentage of students studying Russian are to reach at least a functional level of competence in speaking" (p. 17) and that some characteristics of the students are predictive of language gains abroad; for instance gender, previous learning of other foreign languages, and the command of grammar and reading skills.

In another study, Llanes *et al.* (2011) compared the effect of length of stay on the written and oral development of two groups of Spanish-speaking students learning English in the UK through the Erasmus program, concluding that there were no significant differences between those students who spent two months abroad and those who spent three.

Other program characteristics that have been reported as relevant in different studies are housing, the characteristics of the lessons, and the amount of time spent travelling. Since there is a

considerable variety of programs, and they also interact with individual variables, it has been rather complex to establish general trends. However, the results warn about the possibility for program arrangements to actually unwillingly restrict opportunities to interact with local people, by housing students together. Housing arrangements are also a delicate topic, since they are highly dependent on the dynamics of the host families or the arrangements in the dormitories.

2.1.2. The role of the host context

The research on the host context has mainly focused on how the host culture, together with the program characteristics can shape opportunities for language learning. Kinginger (2009) identifies three major settings in which students are believed to have variable access to communicative interaction: (1) educational institutions and classrooms; (2) place of residence; (3) service encounters and other informal contact with native speakers. Taken as a whole, the results show rather negative experiences arising from cultural differences, with a pronounced orientation towards gender, where females have to face challenging cultural practices which limit their opportunities to interact with native speakers (e.g. Hoffman-Hicks, 1999). Elsewhere, Kinginger (2011) states that study abroad is not a magic formula for language learning *per se* and recommends programs that foster observation, participation, and reflection by the students about the sociolinguistic context.

DuFon & Churchill (2006) affirm that feelings of being rejected by the host culture or a certain degree of superficiality in the relationship with the host members can lead to withdrawal and reduce success in second language acquisition. However, the same authors put the finger on the fact that the positions that the learners adopt when encountering sociocultural and linguistic differences may also play a role in restricting or facilitating their access to the target communities. In the present

study, three different European settings for study abroad are considered, since examining the influence of the host context is one of its aims.

2.2. Language-related outcomes

From the nature of the studies that were published from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s, and the ones that came to light afterwards, research on language learning in study abroad (SA) can be divided into two periods. The first one was concerned, in general lines, with assessing linguistic gains in SA (for instance: Carroll, 1967; Willis *et al.*, 1977; Magnan, 1986; Dyson, 1988). The 1990s seem to be the moment when the area of language learning in study abroad experiences a change of direction towards a more socioculturally oriented framework. Many of these studies were conducted in the American context, with language students who spent a period of time abroad (with a significant variety in length), in a country where the target language was spoken.

Barbara Freed's (1995) edited volume can be regarded as the starting point of the second period in the history of SLA in study abroad. Apart from synthesizing the research in this area of study until that moment, Freed tried to approach unaddressed issues, for instance, the need to compare the different effects of the study abroad (SA) and the *at home* (AH) settings, as well as the acquisition of pragmatic competence. In the following lines, I will refer to some of the most prominent studies on study abroad and language-related outcomes.

2.2.1. Speaking abilities: fluency, complexity, accuracy, and pronunciation

In the first place, there is an abundance of studies concerned with analyzing the acquisition of the different speaking abilities. Initially, these studies examine language gains by means of

administering a test at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad, but with time they become more and more interested in comparing the SA with the at home contexts. In this group, most of the studies were concerned with the different domains of oral proficiency (for example: Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Torres, 2003; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Freed *et al.*, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Llanes & Serrano, 2011; Kang, 2014; Juan-Garau, 2014). Fluency seems to be by far the recipient of the highest number of gains (Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). However, individual differences have showed to be of considerable importance here. Segalowitz & Freed (2004) state that not all the participants in their study show significant gains in fluency. Furthermore, their results point towards the essential importance of input and interaction as directly related to linguistic gains. Therefore, the assessment of the conditions under which the learners acquire the target language is crucial, as they become predictors of actual language gains. This is an aspect that the present study aims to explore.

With regard to speech complexity there are studies that point towards opposite directions. On the one hand, some conclude that significant gains are rather scarce (e.g. Mora & Valls-Ferrer, 2012), while other studies (e.g. Llanes & Muñoz, 2013), show substantial improvement in speaking complexity for the SA participants in comparison to the AH group.

Similarly, accuracy appears to be a domain where not too many linguistic gains are perceived when comparing SA and AH groups (Lopez Ortega, 2003; Serrano *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, some studies even indicate a period abroad as short as three weeks as having a significant impact on the oral accuracy rates of the participants (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009). The striking differences regarding this aspect have been attributed to the complex task of understanding grammar development.

Finally, with regard to pronunciation, many studies were conducted with English speakers who were learning Spanish (e.g. Simões, 1996; Díaz-Campos, 2004) and pointed towards some significant differences between SA and AH groups. However, there are discrepancies between the

findings which can be attributed to individual differences, differences between pre-program training and proficiency, and again, the importance of the context.

2.2.2. Listening abilities

In comparison to the research on speaking abilities, the amount of investigation on listening abilities has been rather modest. However, there are some studies that claim SA contexts to be beneficial for improvements in this area (e.g. Kinginger & Whithworth, 2005). Similarly, Cubillos *et al.* (2008) examined the impact of a short-term study abroad program (5 weeks) on 48 participants in an intermediate Spanish course with regard to their listening skills. The groups were also compared with 92 students enrolled in a similar course in an AH setting. The authors point out that:

While both on-campus and study abroad groups experienced similar gains in listening comprehension, there were significant differences in the ways learners approached listening tasks: The study abroad group applied primarily top-down and social listening strategies, while the on-campus students favored bottom-up processing. Higher-proficiency students in the study abroad groups had significantly higher comprehension gains, and the study abroad groups achieved higher levels of confidence and self-perceived ability after the treatment.

(Cubillos *et al.*, 2008: 157)

Cubillos *et al.* (2008) also point to a pre-program significant difference between the two groups: students who chose to enroll in the SA course already made use of more sophisticated listening comprehension strategies, something which seems to characterize more successful language learners. This is, therefore, a factor that ought to be taken into account when comparing AH and SA students, since those who decide to go abroad could initially have better language learning and/or motivational strategies.

2.2.3. Literacy abilities

Similarly, research on the effects of SA on reading and literacy skills has been rather scarce. Among the few studies concerned with this topic, we can find Dewey's study (2004) with American speakers learning Japanese, who showed significant gains in the recognition of words and the comprehension of texts, as well as a general increase in reading skills. Furthermore, Davie (1996) found that students perceived their vocabulary to improve significantly as a result of the year abroad. Milton & Meara (1995) conducted a study with incoming Erasmus and LINGUA students in Britain with results that signal significant gains in vocabulary. Once more, pre-program individual differences such as the proficiency level seem to account for discrepancies between participants. However, Ife *et al.* (2000) examined two successive cohorts of Spanish learners from a British university who spent either one or two semesters in Spain, concluding that: "both proficiency groups (intermediate and advanced) are making significant lexical progress during the period of study abroad" and "intermediate learners progressed considerably, as expected, but somewhat unexpectedly, advanced learners also made progress both in relation to the number of lexical items gained and in relation to organization of the lexicon, as represented by associated vocabulary knowledge." (p. 15). The same authors also emphasize that "extended periods may be even more beneficial for advanced learners when they are at the point of developing the associative networks typical of native language use" (p. 17).

Regarding writing skills, Sasaki (2007) compared the changes in English writing behavior of 7 Japanese university students abroad and 6 students majoring in British and American studies in Japan, over a period of 4 to 9 months. The results of the study conclude that after a one year period of observation, both groups significantly improved their English proficiency but just the ones in the SA abroad group showed improvements in the SL writing ability and fluency. Furthermore, it appears that only the SA group was more motivated to write compositions in the L2. Therefore, the

results indicate significant improvement in the L2 writing quality and fluency of the SA group. Nevertheless, the author signals that the students' perception was that the improvement was a result of high amounts of time spent writing due to the nature of the SA program they were enrolled in. Again, the importance of program characteristics arises.

2.2.4. Grammatical abilities

Research in this domain has been characterized by a wide array of methodologies for data collection. As a whole, there has been a series of studies conducted without a control group (e.g. Guntermann, 1992; Isabelli-Garcia, 2004; López Ortega, 2003) and another series which compared SA with AH contexts (e.g. DeKeyser, 1990; Torres, 2003). The former type found significant gains in the grammatical abilities of the participants. However, the latter have found results that go in the opposite direction, with the AH groups performing equally or better than the SA groups. On a similar note, Collentine (2004) examined the grammatical and lexical abilities in oral conversation of two groups (46 students) before and after studying Spanish as an L2 for approximately one semester: a SA group in Alacant (Spain) and a formal-classroom AH group at an American university. The author affirmed that: "in response to the question of whether the SA context yields better overall grammatical and lexical abilities than the AH context, the answer is a qualified no." Collentine (2004) further claimed that "we see the influence of external institutional and social variables differentiating between the two learning contexts." (p. 244). The results of the study suggest that:

the AH learning context was more advantageous to the acquisition of grammatical phenomena than the Spanish curriculum is widely known to emphasize – namely, verbs and subordinate conjunctions. Second, the SA group demonstrated that it could produce more instances of 'narrative behaviors' and more semantically dense lexical types in a given frame than the AH group.

(Collentine, 2004: 245)

Collentine concluded that: “it may be that day-to-day interactions with the target culture permit SA learners to practice retelling their daily or weekend adventures to friends and host-family members, and so they learn to produce numerous narrative behaviors within a given turn.” (p. 245).

However, Isabelli & Nishida’s (2005) study found that when compared to the AH students, SA participants showed a better command of the Spanish subjunctive. Nevertheless, both their initial proficiency level (advanced) and the length of their stay (9 months) differ from the tradition in this type of studies which tend to examine intermediate students participating in shorter programs, thus signaling again the possibility of a threshold level of grammatical abilities that ensures more benefits from SA experiences. Yet, one must be cautious when analyzing the development of grammar due to its enormous complexity.

2.3. Sociolinguistic outcomes

2.3.1. Pragmatic abilities

The research conducted in this area has been traditionally concerned with examining the acquisition of routines (Hassall, 2004), register (Siegal, 1995, 1996); terms of address (Siegal, 1995; Kinginger & Farrell-Withworth, 2004), and speech acts (DuFon, 2000). A wide array of research methods have been employed for the analysis of pragmatic gains, from diary studies for the analysis of routines to recorded data for the register, and questionnaires for examining speech acts.

DuFon & Churchill (2006) claim that the findings, although showing that contact with native speakers is beneficial for the acquisition of pragmatic abilities, are nevertheless difficult to interpret. This is due to the fact that they are very much embedded into both sociocultural and individual aspects. For instance, even when learners display native-speaker behaviors, they are at risk of having

their intentions misunderstood. In general lines, it appears that SA students outperform their AH counterparts in the acquisition of pragmatic abilities, especially in the productive ones, and to a minor extent, in the receptive ones.

After examining the research to the moment, Kinginger (2009) comes to conclude, that in general lines, when language-related outcomes are measured, study abroad seems to be a productive environment for language learning, at least on the surface. In fact, research concerned with all modalities of language use shows that each of them seems to benefit from sojourns abroad. Nevertheless, Kinginger laments the fact that regardless of numerous calls for a model of competence based on multilingualism and dialogic models of intercultural communication, the research to the moment has often taken the native speaker as a model, thus relying on a monologic frame. Furthermore, individual differences appear to have a considerable impact on the outcomes of the experience, due to the fact that language learning is part of a much complex lived experience of the individuals that participate in sojourns abroad, and therefore, they cannot be easily disentangled. Consequently, investigating language learning in study abroad can be an ambitious endeavor, since there are many factors to take into account, such as the identities, motives, or desires of the learners, as well as the opportunities to learn and the ways they position themselves under these circumstances. On this note, Kinginger recommends that researchers focus on students from a variety of backgrounds and origins in order to make reasonable claims on the actual impact of study abroad on language learning, where the interpretation of the participants in the language learning experience should be considered. In her own words: “future research should attempt to address these gaps, representing the experiences of a broader range of students, questioning students’ motives for particular language-related choices, and attending aspects of identity that are of clear relevance but have remained unexamined” (Kinging, 2013: 354).

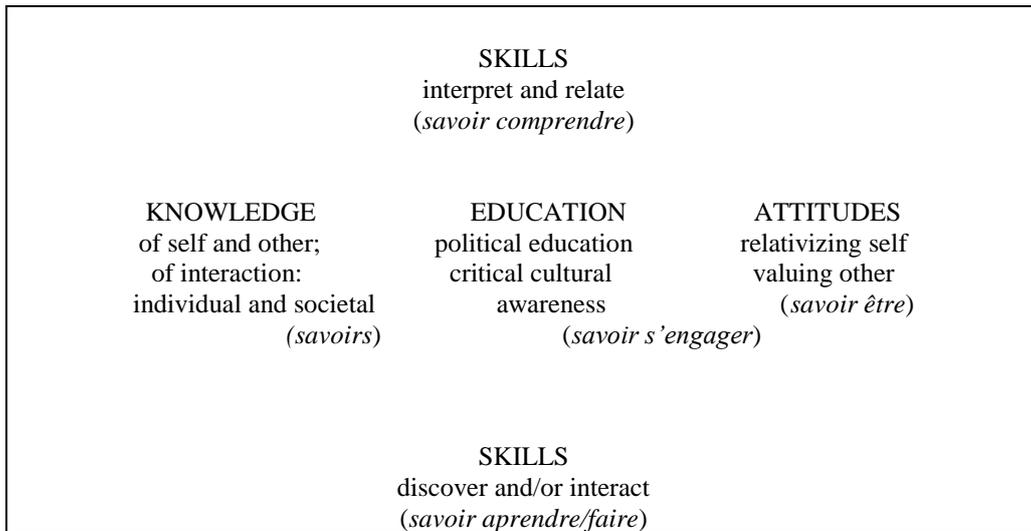
2.3.2. Intercultural outcomes

Another important focus of research on the outcomes of study abroad has been on the expansion of “intercultural skills”. However, before delving into this area of research, we need to develop the concept of “intercultural competence” (IC). A simple though straight definition of intercultural competence is the one provided by Hammer (2004: 2): “the capacity to generate perceptions and adapt behavior to cultural context”. On this note, Byram (1997) in Byram (2008: 69) states that “being intercultural is an activity”, and describes the issues involved as follows:

- (a) *Attitudes*: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own (*savoir être*).
- (b) *Knowledge*: of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction (*savoirs*).
- (c) *Skills of interpreting and relating*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own (*savoir comprendre*).
- (d) *Skills of discovery and interaction*: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*).
- (e) *Critical cultural awareness/political education*: ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries (*savoir s’engager*).

Byram (2008) summarizes the factors enumerated above as can be observed in Figure 1.1 (on the next page).

Figure 1. 1: Factors in intercultural communication. Adapted from Byram (2008)



Intercultural development in study abroad has been a prolific area of research. More often than not, intercultural competence and pragmatic competence have been studied together. In many of these cases, however, it was not intercultural competence what was explored, but rather sociolinguistic competence (e.g. DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Kinginger & Farrell-Withworth, 2004), usually in relation to a single foreign language. In Byram’s terms, we would be talking therefore about ‘bicultural’ competence. Many studies have showed significant gains in IC as a result of a SA sojourn. For instance, Engle & Engle (2004) used the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a measurement instrument created by Hammer (2009) and found out that more than fifty per cent of the study abroad participants in the study showed improvements in intercultural gains. Using the same instrument, Jackson (2008) also found that her participants significantly improved in this domain. Similarly, Watson *et al.* (2013) conducted a study with 498 third and fourth year students from an American university who participated in a semester long immersion programs in 14 different countries and found out that the students “significantly increased their cross-cultural competence during the study abroad experience” (p. 68). In a similar way, Marx & Moss (2011) examined the intercultural development of a preservice teacher from the US who was enrolled in a semester abroad

in London, England. The results of their case study are consistent with the previous ones, reflecting that “participation in the program positively influenced intercultural development” (p. 35). Finally, it is important to mention that many of these studies have been conducted with US students doing a SA experience in Europe, whereas the intercultural outcomes of intra-European mobility have not been significantly examined.

The present study aims at examining the acquisition of intercultural competence of intra-European students, participants in the Erasmus exchange program, with the hypothesis that despite the low degree of difference between some European countries (though some others can exhibit clear differential aspects), participating in a sojourn abroad without leaving one’s own continent can be an experience which might enable the individuals to enact identities that will give them the possibility to easily commute between different cultures, inside and outside Europe. With this study, the impact of intra-European experiences will be further examined, thus contributing to gaining empirical knowledge about the effects of the Erasmus program.

2.3.3. Identity-related outcomes

I identify study abroad as an experience that challenges the identities of the participants, enabling them to reshape a sense of who they are by means of incorporating the experience of both learning and living in a second language. Finally, and in connection with the two assumptions that I have already mentioned, I believe that aspects related to the perception of the students’ competence to function in a second language will affect their perceptions about their personal competence, at a more general level, and therefore, their conception about who they are and who they want to be, through the improvement of their self-confidence in their own capabilities. Therefore, my understanding of study abroad is that of a holistic experience whose outcomes are both linguistic and of other kinds, and therefore, the aim of this study is to understand them as a whole. I am aware,

though, of the fact that it is very difficult to untangle the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of the experience. Benson *et al.* (2013) for instance, claim that study abroad is already an experience that challenges imagined identities for it requires students to negotiate them under new cultural circumstances. If we add a second language to it, then, according to the authors, the challenge to identity is in fact magnified, and the development of second language identities and language skills are interconnected.

In fact, improvement in sociopragmatic competence, which implies managing the sociolinguistic norms of a given community, is directly connected to the ability to negotiate one's identity in an unfamiliar context and using a second language. Therefore, more often than not, encountering situations where problems need to be solved in a second language requires some identity work. At the same time, having to solve problems, establishing relationships, expressing desires, etc. in a second language will ultimately lead to readjustments in the participants' 'linguistic self', "which refers more to students' affiliations to the languages they know and their conceptions of their capacities as they are articulated in, for example, self-assessments of proficiency, goals, self-efficacy, motivation and beliefs" (Benson *et al.* 2013). Norton (2000), Block (2014) and Riley (2007), for instance have referred to the complex, often impossible to dissect, intersection between identities and second languages as 'second language identities'. The term refers, in its essence, to all those aspects of an individual's identity which are connected to a second language they might be proficient at (to different extents) and/or they might use.

Research relative to study abroad and identity has focused on three contexts: the North American (e.g. Kinginger, 2009; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005), the European (e.g. Coleman, 2005; Murphy-Lejeune, 2004; Ambrosi, 2013; Gallego-Balsà, 2014, Kalocsái, 2014; Cots *et al.*, 2016; Llurda *et al.*, 2016; VanMol, 2013, 2018,), and the Asia-Pacific one (e.g. Benson *et a.*, 2013; Jackson, 2008). Later in this chapter I will extensively deal with four studies, namely Pellegrino

Aveni (2005), Murphy-Lejeune (2004), Kalocsái (2014), and Jackson (2008), for their relative connection to my own study.

With regard to study abroad and identity, research to the moment seems to point to a sojourn abroad as an opportunity for students to encounter and face difference. As mentioned before, difference and conflict are at the core of identity construction. Therefore, we can claim that study abroad is a context that offers challenges both to the language skills as to the identity of the participants.

Benson *et al.* (2013: 34), in an attempt to establish connections between study abroad, migration, and tourism, identify three key features of study abroad as relevant to second language identity development:

- (1) study abroad is usually a part of a longer term educational process
- (2) it is temporary in the sense that the student intends, or is expected to, return home when it is over
- (3) formal study is one, but often not the only, purpose.

With the aim to collect the research on language learning and study abroad, Kinginger (2009) emphasizes the diversity of the research in the domain, reflecting an extended array of scholarly as well as sociopolitical agenda and educational ambitions. Also, she assumes there is considerable variety between what study abroad means for the participants and therefore she claims a direct relationship between study abroad and linguistic immersion is unrealistic.

An author that seems to be rather skeptical about any dramatic language learning occurring in SA is Block (e.g. 2014). In fact, he claims that research has not yet demonstrated the effectiveness of study abroad for language learning. On the contrary, similarly to Kinginger, he points to the importance of individual and contextual diversity which might lead to less remarkable outcomes than expected. Block (2014) delves into the research conducted in the European context, mostly concerned with the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

ERASMUS) program. After mentioning a number of studies (e.g. Maiworm *et al.*, 1991; Coleman, 1998), Block (2014) comes to the conclusion that their reliance on data converted to statistics leaves away the understanding of the actual lived experience from the participants' point of view. Similarly, he criticizes the little mention of identity in these studies or the analysis of it based on questionnaire items related to stereotyped national characteristics and measurement of cultural gains.

Another body of literature concerned with the SA experience in Europe (Byram & Alred, 1993; Parker & Rouxville, 1995; Byram, 1997), which combined questionnaires with diaries, field notes and interviews is classified by Block into two thematic areas of concern, namely, the development of communicative competence, and the creation of spaces within which students can develop their intercultural competence.

Another topic that seems to emerge from the research on SA is an enhanced national identity (e.g. Billig, 1995; Smith, 2004). According to Block (2014: 8), research in the domain seems to point to an enhancement of national identity during the SA experience, "while study abroad contexts seem to hold great potential for the emergence of intercultural competence and even TL-mediated subject positions, they often become the site of intense comparisons of the home culture with the host culture that often lead individuals to a heightened and reinforced sense of national identity". For instance, in a study by Jackson (2008), Niki, a Chinese born female living in Hong Kong, who participated in a short-term SA experience, highlights the need to value some elements of the Chinese culture:

I do question the general attitude of most of the new generation in Hong Kong nowadays: In trying to pursue Western ways, how much values of Chinese culture do they put into ruthless disregard? If one does not treasure the laudable values of one's own culture, it is indeed a disgrace to one's nation and oneself, even more so than the despicable gesture of the girl. I have learnt that I will become less vulnerable to racial discrimination if I treasure the valuable things of my own culture. Of course, I should also face the darker sides of my own culture. The better outcome is a hybrid of the best of the Oriental as well as the Occidental.

(Jackson, 2008: 187)

Similarly, Jackson (2008:163) gives an account on how another participant in her study, Elsa, comes to appreciate her home culture in a few weeks during her sojourn abroad:

Third week:

I don't want to go back to Hong Kong. I don't think I'll be able to accept the fact that I have to go back and live there

Back to reality.

Back to a world of haste and burden.

Back to the concrete high-rise buildings, and

Leave this little village of naturalness and peace-

A land simple enough to be framed as a picture

With vivid life and cheerful colors of harmony,

Which is just like a dream.” (p. 158)

Fifth week:

Amazingly, I now learn to treasure my Hong Kong Chinese identity far more than before. At the beginning, I was very one-sided, only adore everything of the western culture. One factor may be that I realize that I am 'stuck to' my inborn identity, and I have to accept it, and make the best of it. But also, living for quite a long time here, I start to miss my home culture, and I can discover valuable points in the oriental culture.

Finally, Block (2014) advocates for an opening of SA studies, taking on board a range of subject positions in order to examine identity. In fact, he states that “most crucially, there simply need to be more studies, and more involving different nationality combinations as regards sending and receiving countries” (p. 223). This study goes in this direction by considering a wide array of nationalities as well as a combination of three different contexts across Europe.

2.4. Sociolinguistic approaches to study abroad

In the following lines, I will introduce four different sociolinguistics studies within sociolinguistics which approach study abroad from different perspectives. The first one (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005) delves into the construction of the self in study abroad, while the second (Kalocsái,

2014) examines the formation of communities of practice of Erasmus students where English as a lingua franca is employed as the means of communication. The third study (Murphy-Lejeune, 2004) looks into the idea of students abroad as a conceptualization of the new strangers, while the last one (Jackson, 2008) takes a sociocultural lens to look at study abroad. Each of the four studies has been chosen because of its connection to the present study.

2.4.1. Study abroad and the construction of the self

One of the studies that inspired my own project is Pellegrino Aveni's (2005) research of a group of 76 participants from the US who were enrolled in a study abroad program in Russia, managed by the American Council of Teachers of Russian. It is important to mention that even though all 76 students agreed to participate in Pellegrino Aveni's study, the author ended focusing on six primary case studies which at some points she complemented with accounts given by eleven other students. In an attempt to shed light on the impact of language use in SA on the construction of the self, Pellegrino Aveni (2005: 11) gathers data coming from narrative journals, interviews, and questionnaires, which she examined by means of grounded theory. This study is unique because it explores how the self, which might be defined as "the mental representation of an individual's own personal qualities and characteristics" is constructed in a second language and how the construction of the self actually affects SL use in SA. Of special interest for the present study is the theorization of the self that Pellegrino Aveni produces drawing on studies from clinical, developmental and social psychology, as well as sociology. According to the author, the self shows the following features:

- i) it cannot be objective or factual, since self-knowledge is processed through the subjective eyes of the individual and his or her interlocutors.
- ii) it consists of perceptions alone (both the ones of the owner and the ones of his/her beholders)
- iii) it is neither monolithic, nor static – it undergoes constant growth and change, adapting and bending with new experiences.

iv) the self is preserved by memory through the recording of events, which serve to build a system of knowledge and perceptions held by the individual about the self, a unit known as the 'self-concept' (which allows the individual a sense of security in his or her personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as a feeling of predictability about the self's future capabilities)

v) its nature is highly personal, and only its owner can be privy to its multiple facets and secret depths

vi) it is impossible to define in isolation from its environment (since it is inextricably linked to the interpersonal relationships, society, and culture by which it is formed).

Pellegrino Aveni (2004: 11)

Therefore, the individual is seen as someone who is constantly performing, thus trying to create an ideal image of him or herself according to his/her desire by means of both verbal and non-verbal signs and behaviors. However, language seems to be the strongest social means by which one displays his or her self, a fact that becomes even more visible in the case of people who can manage more than one language. Needless to say, this is connected both to Kramsch's (2009) theorization on the multilingual subject, where multilingual individuals are endowed with multiple identities from which to speak in a given situation. Furthermore, it relates to Norton's (2013) theory of language and identity, particularly to the importance of the imagination in the identity construction. In fact, I would dare to say that Norton's concept of 'imagined identity' and Pellegrino Aveni's 'ideal/desirable self' refer almost to the same thing, where probably the most important difference is the accentuated importance given to the idea of capital in the case of the former. Likewise, this study also recalls Block's (2014) conceptualization of SL identities, by referring specifically to the fact that the self suffers an alteration when it is exposed to a new culture and a new language, something that Block characterized as a crisis of identity. In both cases, the alteration of the self and the identity crisis seem to lead to a reevaluation and restructuring of one's identity. However, Pellegrino Aveni (2004) and Block (2014) do not seem to agree on the fact that study abroad constitutes an experience that can lead to the reformulation of the self, with the latter being more skeptical than the former.

In fact, Pellegrino Aveni states that SA gives rise to a ‘deprivation and/or alteration’ of the self because of the use of a SL, and therefore “(t)he learner’s self becomes trapped behind the communication barrier that results, and only an altered picture of the self, one filtered through this new, incomplete language, is projected by the learner” (ibid, p. 14). As a consequence, when an individual uses a given language, he or she needs to make sure that their self is “enhanced, or at least, protected” (ibid, p. 16). However, SLs and different cultures lessen the amount of control learners have on self-presentation. For this reason, if a SL learner perceives that the security of their self is menaced (i.e. it is very different from the one they imagine), they might experience anxiety and opt to keep silent in an attempt to preserve their self-esteem. Thus, a conflict is created between the wish to communicate in the L2 and the need to protect one’s self.

This conflict might be resolved in different ways. One of them is encountering situations in which they perceive that their intellectual and linguistic abilities are given legitimacy. Naturally, autonomy and control are achieved through experiencing situations in which the worth of the SL speaker is validated and their efforts are appreciated by the interlocutors or, conversely, by experimenting with frightening situations that seem to menace the self to a certain extent and finally end up being better than expected. It seems to be, in fact, a matter of empowerment, where one’s self-confidence is improved through exposure to diverse SL situations. However, according to the author, an important role here is played by the attitudes and beliefs that the learner holds with regard to him or herself and others, the foreign language and the foreign culture as well as their own language and the language learning process.

In any case, it follows that, in effect, the belief in one’s ability to perform successfully in a SL (‘self-efficacy’) and the assumption that one is worthy as an individual endowed with status and intelligence (‘self-esteem’), lead to a decreased need to protect one’s self, and thus, to more exposure to communicative situations in a SL.

Another relevant idea for the present study is the one of ‘familiarity’, which seems to be at “the basis of trust between individuals, helping students to relax, lower inhibitions, and take risks in the language to test new linguistic features in their speaking” (Pellegrino Aveni, 2004: 99). However, once more, the participants in Pellegrino Aveni’s (ibid) study are different from the ones in the present project, who do build familiarity but seldom with native speakers. In spite of this fact, the same benefits of comfort and confidence are reported as outcomes of the stay abroad, even though it is not gained through interaction with NSs of English but with other speakers of the language. In fact, they very rarely give an account of encounters with NSs of English, and even those with NS of the local languages are rather scarce in some cases.

A different story, though, is that of the contact with a different culture, where an increased awareness of the environment and its customs builds on familiarity, and therefore, more confidence that one will not put in jeopardy his or her self. Related to the previous is Pellegrino Aveni’s concept of ‘commonality’ – “the establishment of a bond between two individuals based upon a common feature, such as an experience or attitude” (ibid, p. 103). It appears that discovering some common elements between a speaker and his or her interlocutor can lead to an increased sense of security, since one might feel more ready to predict the behavior of the other.

In a nutshell, learners’ presentation of the self and their resulting language use is affected both by the environment, including interlocutors, and their own clues which affects their interpretations of the situations they encounter. Furthermore, the learner’s presentation of the self, their resulting language use, and the environment are related to each other in a mutual relationship. Therefore, study abroad seems to be an opportunity to grow, both in a personal and in a linguistic way. More exposure to the language leads to heightened proficiency, and consequently, to increased self-confidence and positive attitudes towards oneself, as well as to decreased fear of exposing one’s imagined self to menacing situations.

2.4.2. Study abroad, communities of practice, and English as a lingua franca

The second study that I would like to mention is Kalocsái's (2014) ethnographic analysis of a group of 6 Erasmus students in the Hungarian city of Szeged. The main objective of this study is understanding the functioning of the communities of practice that were formed by the Erasmus students, as well as the linguistic practices of this community, most especially, the role of English as a lingua franca (henceforth, ELF). In her study, Kalocsái (2014) captures the ways in which social meanings are construed through ELF by a group of Erasmus students in Hungary, while getting inside the intricacies that using English as a common language of communication among speakers coming from different countries can imply, providing an extensive and rich study of a group of Erasmus students sharing a few months of their lives at the University of Szeged. Kalocsái's aim is "to illuminate the ways in which Erasmus exchange students, as purposeful active agents, exploit the resources of ELF (in combination with other languages) to construct local social meanings" (p. 1).

The author concludes that Erasmus exchange students settle in a "third space" (Duff, 2007) and calls for a reconsideration of the goals of the European Commission regarding the Erasmus exchange, towards facilitating students' integration in the local social networks. With regard to ELF, it is used on a daily basis and socializing practices into the linguistic code are employed when some students do not adapt to the rule. The author emphasizes that the democratic choice concerning the use of ELF "was not a threat to linguistic diversity: it helped the participants gain access to the multilingual setting, and once in there, it opened up the way for using other languages" (p. 135). The study shows how, by constructing meaning collaboratively, the Erasmus students in Szeged brought their community together. As a conclusion, the author states that the Erasmus students aimed to and achieved the goal of creating an Erasmus family, based on having fun and developing self-confidence. This common aspiration was attained both by social and linguistic means and always in a cooperative and supportive manner. As for the last ones, the use of ELF seems to be mandatory,

especially at the very beginning of the stay. In spite of that, “Hungarian came to be another language which to a certain degree they all shared” (p. 208). The study opens up new directions for further investigations into the role of ELF in the communities of international students, as well as more in-depth research on the multiple effects that an Erasmus experience may have on students. On this note, Mocanu (2016: 210) pleads “for more accurate insights and descriptions of the multiplicity of identities of these subjects, as well as of the cultural significance of the international experience”. In the following chapter, devoted to the topic of ELF and European identity, I will come back to this study for a deeper analysis of its implications for the research on ELF.

2.4.3. Narrative and the philosophy of the stranger

Murphy-Lejeune (2004) connects student mobility in Europe to the idea of the stranger and questions the meaning of migration and foreignness in the European context. For this aim, the author relies on three case studies with international students participating in three European mobility programs, namely Erasmus university exchanges, bilateral language assistant programs, and a French *grande école* -the Ecole Européene des Affaires de Paris – EAP international program. This study identifies study abroad as a rather ambiguous enterprise in university education, whose impacts and outcomes are complex and not easy to assess. Thus, mobility students become an undefined minority, about whom we know very little. Murphy-Lejeune questions the impact of the experiences of these young sojourners in their overall biographical and learning trajectories and claims for a more appropriate knowledge of the experience, as well as of the factors that push individuals outside their national borders. Furthermore, she claims that since migration and mobility are two faces of the same phenomena, and given the changes of the forms of migration that came with globalization, new migrant profiles have arisen, among which there is the highly skilled worker, whose migration might be only temporary, and who is in search of professional added value or moves for study reasons. The

European mobile student seems to prepare the way for this new type of migrant, for whom migration, rather than a single process, becomes a continuous one.

Furthermore, Murphy-Lejeune (2004) makes the case that the development of the EU has brought to the fore a redefinition of the political status of ‘foreigner’, since the EU citizenship situates people somewhere in-between nationals and foreigners, with the right to live freely in other member states. In her study, the author wonders about the social, cultural, and symbolic status of Europeans who reside in another member state for a limited period of time, as well as about the ambiguous condition between strangers and a new, yet to define, way of being in Europe that European mobile students have. From Murphy-Lejeune’s study, we can draw the conclusion that a sojourn abroad as a form of international contact has an effect on the students’ lives. What remain unclear are the domains where it impacts as well as the intensity of its effects, and the factors affecting the outcomes.

By assigning international students the category of new migrants, this study highlights the similarities between the experience of migration and that of student mobility: deciding to leave, arriving to a new space, getting acquainted with the linguistic and cultural conditions of the place, adopting new professional roles, participating in social relations, and the identity adjustments required for a successful adaptation. Furthermore, Murphy-Lejeune considers the initial experiences of adapting and integrating as common to all ‘strangers’. However, the change in migration patterns has brought to the fore a group of new migrants who, contrary to what the migrants of the past used to do (fading into the masses), claim their visibility and have fewer problems when it comes to moving. Because of the differences between the contemporary mobile individual and the traditional migrant, the term ‘traveler’ is used to name the new type of migrant, since it evokes the idea of someone who comes and goes, the shift from transition to migration. Furthermore, ‘mobility’ is preferred to migration when it comes to describe the experience of international students, where mobility emphasizes the capacity to move and adapt to different places, which implies a brief kind of

integration that might lead to more discrete personal transformations than in the case of migrants. Interestingly enough, Murphy-Lejeune also makes the connection between mobile students and travelers from the international elite, whose return home is already scheduled and for whom language and culture are left to their choice. Yet, she argues there is an important difference between the two categories due to the greater flexibility of youth (the case of Erasmus students) which impacts on integration, making it easier and faster. This connects to Conradson & Latham's (2005) idea of 'middling transmigrants': "individuals with near or total control over their movements, who go somewhere to live with one particular or general purpose in mind" and "do not subject themselves to poor living conditions, awaiting a better future for their children, as labour migrants often do" and "making the most of their stay in the host country" (cited in Block, 2014: 81).

Another result of Murphy-Lejeune's (2004) study is the observation of a common characteristic of the Erasmus students, namely their previous mobility and their desire to travel, which in some cases is called 'the travel bug'. Furthermore, it appears that the participants are comfortable with and enjoy being 'strangers' and using a SL in their new contexts.

This study brings to the fore the fact that despite the advances of European programs that promote mobility as a way to construct Europe, the research aiming at assessing the impact of student mobility on either institutions or individuals has been very little. Furthermore, the author urges Europe to assess the role of the more than 90 per cent non-mobile students in the construction of Europe. On this note, I would add the need to reassess the hypothesis that these students actually embrace a pan-European identity in a social, political, and economical sense. Rather, I would say that a greater awareness brings to the fore the good and the bad, and where students are physically confronted with realities which are not as good as they imagined, chances are they become more critical with unifying discourses on European identity.

2.4.4. Study abroad from a sociocultural point of view

In an attempt to examine study abroad from a sociocultural point of view, Jackson (2008) conducted an ethnographic study with 15 Chinese students born in Hong Kong who were majoring in English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. At the time of the study, the participants were enrolled in a short-term study and residence abroad program in the UK, called the Special English Stream (SES). Jackson relies on different data sources which include interviews, journal entries, surveys, observations, visual recordings, group discussions and fieldnotes. However, the author decides to focus on four female case studies in order to “better illustrate the connections between language, culture, identity, and context, and not lose sight of the personal dimension” (p. 69). The study reflects an enormous diversity and complexity of the individual journeys of each of the four women. Their personal stories, together with the social, political, historical, and linguistic realities of both Hong Kong and China seem to account as possible factors in their construction of self. Furthermore, their identities are shaped in relationship to the people they meet and the events in which they participate. In fact, straight from the beginning, they display identities that are by no means fixed and static, in which globalization, together with the use of English, play an important role. A common element that is found is that being able to manage English seems to be a tool to access the global world. Consequently, the imagined identities of the participants in Jackson’s study seem to determine their motivation and investment in learning the language. Therefore, the fact that the students envisioned themselves as possible members of an imagined global community might have contributed to nurturing their knowledge of English.

An interesting element that arises from this study is the importance of expectations. It appears that unrealistic expectations diminish the outcomes of the stay abroad, whereas realistic ones contribute to the enhancement of the outcomes. Jackson suggests expectations could have contributed to the reactions of the students regarding the culture shock they had to undergo, to which

they respond in different ways. Their decision to resist or accept the target language and culture might have had an impact on the actual outcomes of the experience. In fact, two of the participants, who showed a considerable degree of willingness to improve their knowledge of the target language and culture and to become a member of the community that hosted them, show a higher degree of change at the end of the SA. On this note, Jackson states she believes that “their willingness to experiment with novel forms of expression was directly linked to their desire to make social connections across cultures, a deeper level of investment in enhancing their social English and intercultural communication skills, a growing self-confidence, and a more open mindset” (p. 210). Therefore, we are cautioned not to take for granted that the mere exposure to a given language and a given culture by itself will enhance the participants’ language and culture learning. According to the author, ongoing support throughout the sojourn is recommended in order to enhance the learners’ involvement in the host environment, which is affected by the dispositions, motives, attitudes, and actions of the participants.

Similarly, the awareness and appreciation of their own as well as of their host culture shows different evolving patterns. On the one hand, two of the participants display a sense of fear because they feel that “their cultural identity and value system would be compromised if they drew closer to the host culture and language” (Jackson, 2008: 212).

Consequently, they respond with aversion to new identities and they restrain their contact with the members of the host culture. In an opposed way, the other two women decide to deepen their connections to the host culture and “open themselves up to new ideas and worldviews, and experiment with novel forms of expressions and behaviors, as long as they did not conflict with their core values” (p. 213). These participants are actually the ones who report on enhanced sociopragmatic awareness, a deeper connection to English, and closer ties across cultures, as well as more satisfaction with the progress. Interestingly, they also agree on being interviewed in English after their sojourn abroad. However, and despite the resistance shown by two of the participants, the

four of them report on having gained “enhanced personal growth, self-confidence, and maturity; a higher degree of independence; a broader worldview; more awareness and acceptance of cultural differences; enhanced intercultural communication/social skills; and a greater appreciation of their own culture and identity” (p. 214). In this sense, Jackson’s study is relevant for this thesis since it looks at outcomes of a personal kind that are mediated through a second language.

However, Jackson recalls Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) by bringing to the fore the fact that the construction of new subjectivities might not be relevant for some individuals, and therefore, they might choose to resist new ways of being in the world. However, it seems that despite the complexity, in general, the participants in Jackson’s study see the SA experience as ‘valuable’ and ‘life-changing’, and as a fact that opened new opportunities for them. Furthermore, the author makes a claim for further studies where both short-term and long-term SA students are investigated, and where both quantitative and qualitative methods are combined in order to shed light on the sociocultural, individual, and other factors that might influence the sojourns abroad. The present study falls into this category.

Chapter 3. The Erasmus+ program, European identity and English as a lingua franca

In this chapter, the connection between the Erasmus program and the forging of European identity on the one hand, and the notion of English as a lingua franca, on the other, is explored. Firstly, I introduce the Erasmus+ Program by initially focusing on its general characteristics and afterwards diving into the core features of its first Key Action, concerned with the learning mobility of individuals. In the second part, I analyze the idea of European identity as viewed by a number of scholars, and as it is construed in the recent institutional discourse of the EU. Finally, the construct of English as a lingua franca is introduced, and its role at the level of European policy and practice is briefly analyzed. At the final point, the concept of European identity will be connected to the increasing use of English as a lingua franca in Europe.

3.1. The Erasmus+ Program

The Erasmus+ program is defined as “the EU Programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport for the period 2014-2020” (European Commission, 2017c: 7). It is based on the idea that education, training of the youth, and sport can significantly contribute to tackling the socio-economic changes that Europe is supposed to encounter until the end of the decade and therefore it is expected to support the application of the European policy agenda concerning growth, jobs, equity, and social inclusion. Among the objectives of the Erasmus+ program, the following seem to be the most outstanding:

- Fighting high levels of unemployment - particularly among young people.
- Ensuring the best use of technologies.
- Promoting EU businesses competitiveness through talent and innovation.
- Encouraging the cohesion and inclusion of societies which allow citizens to play an active role in democratic life.

- Promoting common European values, foster social integration, enhance intercultural understanding and a sense of belonging to a community, and preventing violent radicalisation.
- Promoting the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants.
- Sustaining the development of social capital among young people.
- Empowering young people and their ability to participate actively in society.
- Providing youth organisations and youth workers with training and cooperation opportunities, to develop their professionalism and the European dimension of youth work.
- Encouraging the development of well-performing education and training systems and youth policies which can provide people with the skills required by the labour market and the economy, while allowing them to play an active role in society and achieve personal fulfilment.
- Reforming education, training and youth in order to strengthen progress towards the above mentioned goals, on the basis of a shared vision between policy makers and stakeholders, sound evidence and cooperation across different fields and levels.
- Supporting Program Countries' efforts to efficiently use the potential of Europe' talent and social assets in a lifelong learning perspective, linking support to formal, non-formal and informal learning throughout the education, training and youth fields.
- Enhancing the opportunities for cooperation and mobility with Partner Countries, notably in the fields of higher education and youth.
- Supporting activities aiming at developing the European dimension in sport, by promoting cooperation between bodies responsible for sports.
- Promoting the creation and development of European networks, providing opportunities for cooperation among stakeholders and the exchange and transfer of knowledge and know-how in different areas relating to sport and physical activity.

(European Commission, 2017c: 7)

All these objectives are expected to “benefit individuals, institutions, organizations and society as a whole by contributing to growth and ensuring equity, prosperity and social inclusion in Europe and beyond” (European Commission, 2017c: 7). Furthermore, in order to achieve its aims, the Erasmus+ Program is investing in ensuring the recognition and understanding of skills and qualifications both within and across national borders, aiming at responding to new phenomena as for example the internationalization of education and the increasing use of digital learning and looking forward to a future where learners and workers can move freely for learning or working. Similarly, considerable importance is given to the dissemination and exploitation of project results, as well as to the open access to educational materials, research, and data. Also, the program shows a strong international orientation especially concerning higher education and youth. In the same document, multilingualism is defined as “one of the cornerstones of the European project and a

powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity” (p. 11). Therefore, the knowledge of foreign languages is given an outstanding role as one of the skills that will enable individuals to get access to better employment opportunities. In this respect, “the EU has set the goal that every citizen should have the opportunity to acquire at least two foreign languages, from an early age” (p. 11) since the lack of language competences is seen as an important barrier to participation in European education, training, and youth programs. It seems clear, therefore, that the EU establishes a direct connection between the promotion of the Erasmus+ project and the acquisition of foreign language skills.

The program is structured in 4 different parts. The first part, Key Action 1 is related to the mobility of individuals and therefore it supports the mobility of learners and staff, including students, trainees, young people, volunteers, professors, teachers, trainers, youth workers, staff of education institutions and civil society organizations, who are encouraged to participate in a learning or working experience in another country. Key Action 1 also awards full degree scholarships to the best master degree students worldwide in order to participate in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees which are high-level international study programs delivered by different education institutions. Finally, Key Action 1 is also concerned with offering master loans to students who would like to participate in a master degree abroad.

The second part, Key Action 2, supports the cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices aiming at promoting innovation, exchange of experience, and know-how between different types of organizations involved in education, training, youth, or in other related fields. It also supports knowledge alliances between higher education institutions and enterprises in order to encourage innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, employability, etc. Furthermore, it is also concerned with supporting joint vocational training curricula, programs, and teaching and training methodologies and it supports the modernization and internationalization processes of institutions and organizations. Finally, Key Action 2 backs up several IT support platforms which offer virtual

collaboration spaces, databases of opportunities, communities of practice and other online services for teachers, trainers, and practitioners especially in the field of adult education but also for young people, volunteers and youth workers both from within and outside Europe.

Key Action 3 is concerned with support for policy reform and it aims at promoting knowledge in the fields of education, training and youth in order to build on and monitor policy based on evidence. Similarly, it promotes policy innovation and support to European policy tools in order to promote transparency and recognition of skills, qualifications, and transfer of credits. Key Action 3 also promotes cooperation with international organizations with highly recognized expertise and analytical capacity as well as the dialogue between stakeholders, policy, and program promotion with the aim of raising awareness about the European policy agendas.

Finally, the fourth action, named Jane Monnet Activities supports academic modules, chairs, and centers of excellence with the aim of improving teaching in European integration studies and to conduct, monitor, and supervise research on EU content. It also encourages policy debate related to highly relevant EU subjects within the academic world, while offering support to associations for carrying on activities related to EU studies and issues and publicizing EU facts among a wider public in order to enhance active European citizenship.

Sports are included in the last action which is concerned with promoting collaborative partnership in order to encourage social inclusion, equal opportunities in sport, while promoting European traditional sports and games, supporting the mobility of sports-related people, and encouraging integrity in sports. It also includes actions aimed at organizing not-for-profit European sports events while also encouraging policy making in the field of sports.

3.1.1. Key Action 1 - learning mobility of individuals

The present study has been conducted with participants in the Erasmus+ program under Key Action 1, concerning the learning mobility of individuals. As already mentioned above, this Key Action supports mobility projects in the field of education, training and youth, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, and Erasmus+ Master Loans. The European Commission (2017c: 30) expects the following positive and durable effects on the participants and participating organizations involved, as well as on the policy systems in which these activities are framed:

- improved learning performance;
- enhanced employability and improved career prospects;
- increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- increased self-empowerment and self-esteem;
- improved foreign language competences;
- enhanced intercultural awareness;
- more active participation in society;
- better awareness of the European project and the EU values;
- increased motivation for taking part in future (formal/non-formal) education or training after the mobility period abroad.

In order to support participation in the activities organized under this Key Action, grant support is provided for the mobility of students. The amounts are defined by National Agencies which have to agree with National Authorities and/or the higher education institutions. The exact amounts therefore are subjected to these institutions. However, the European Commission provides approximate numbers in relation to the sending and the receiving countries. Since the present study is concerned with three settings and the participants come from the group of Program Countries (mostly composed by countries which are either EU members and/or situated on the European continent), I will just focus on the grants offered in the three groups that concern Program Countries. In Group 1 we find program countries with higher living costs: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, United Kingdom, Liechtenstein, and Norway. Group 2 comprises program countries with medium living costs: Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Netherlands, Malta, and Portugal. Finally, group three includes those countries with lower

living costs: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey. Therefore, if students go to a country with similar living costs, they receive the medium range EU grant (between 220 and 470 EUR per month). If the mobility is towards a country with higher living costs, the participants receive the higher EU grant (between 270 and 570 EUR per month). Finally, if the period abroad is in a country with lower living costs, students receive the lower EU grant (between 170 and 420 EUR per month). As stated above, these grants depend on the decision of each sending country's National Agency, so two criteria are taken into account in order to allocate the grants: the availability and level of other sources of co-financing (from private or public bodies at local, regional, or national level) and the general level of demand for the stay abroad (i.e. the number of students applying for the grant). Students with special needs can apply for extra support. Furthermore, students from disadvantaged backgrounds (including refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants) might receive extra financing (between 100 and 200 EUR per month) but this is always subjected to the decision of National Agencies. Furthermore, if students are completing a traineeship they might receive an extra 100-200 euros, again depending on their National Agencies. Finally, students coming from Cyprus, Iceland, Malta, and overseas countries and territories receive a higher amount of financial support, as well as a special grant for covering traveling expenses.

Linguistic support is also provided to participants in mobility activities in the form of linguistic preparation. For this aim, the European Commission is expected to gradually implement online linguistic support (OLS) in the course of the program, and regarding all mobility activities between Program countries which last for 2 months and longer. This support will be offered to selected students in order to assess their competence in the language they will use during their stay abroad. In case of necessity, some of the participants might be offered support for improving the language before and/or during the mobility period. Finally, those students with a minimum of a B2 level in the main language of the receiving institution have the choice to follow an OLS course in the

language of the receiving country, if there is any OLS course of the specific language available in this format. It is important to mention that, in fact, the provision of linguistic support relies on mutual trust between sending and receiving institutions and recommended levels of language competences are agreed by sending and receiving institutions as well as by the participants. OLS is offered following these steps (European Commission, 2017c: 269):

- National Agencies allocate online licenses to higher education institutions according to general criteria specified by the European Commission;
- once selected by their higher education institution all students (except native speakers and in duly justified cases)
- benefiting from the online service must carry out an online test to assess their competences in the main language they will use for studying or doing the traineeship abroad. This is a prerequisite before leaving on mobility. The results of this test will be communicated to the student and to the sending HEI. This will allow the sending HEI to quantify the number of students that will potentially need an online language course;
- based on the number of online licenses available for language courses, HEIs will distribute licenses according to student needs. The students will assume the responsibility of following the online course, as described and agreed in the grant agreement; at the end of the mobility period, the student will carry out a second assessment to measure the progress made in the language. The results will be communicated to the student and to the sending HEI.

Therefore, the European Commission (2017c: 269) states that:

sending HEIs commit themselves to ensure that their outgoing students have the requested language level, and such mutual agreement should be sufficient. Sending higher education institutions are responsible for providing their students with the most appropriate linguistic support, be it through OLS or any other approach that can be funded through the organizational support, to ensure that their students get the recommended level agreed with the receiving institution by the start of the mobility. Therefore, sending HEIs are not required to send the results of the OLS language assessment to the receiving institutions. It is up to the students to decide whether they agree to disclose the results of their OLS language assessment to the receiving institution or not.

From the lines above, it can be deduced that in fact, the European Commission gives the entire responsibility of ensuring a sufficient knowledge of the language of the receiving institution to the sending institution and the students themselves, while offering them exclusively the possibility to rely on the OLS. Receiving institutions do not seem to have much to say with regard to this issue, and it is ultimately the students themselves who have to decide if they want to share their results with the receiving institutions or not.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will focus on two of the main objectives of the Erasmus+ program: the promotion of European identity (section 3.2 and 3.3), and the development of foreign language skills (section 3.4).

3.2. Towards a European identity?

Gaining awareness of the European project and EU values, as well as enhancing cultural awareness and more active participation in the society are among the most outstanding objectives of the Key 1 Action of the Erasmus+ program. However, it is difficult to find a straightforward description of what the European project is and its values are.

With regard to the European identity, one of the most important difficulties arises from the controversy concerning what values and rights Europe is founded on, if there are, in fact, any common foundations that will resound to all European citizens. Similarly, as it has already been signaled (e.g. Llurda *et al.*, 2016), another difficulty stems from the “tension between the concepts of identity and citizenship” (p. 324). According to the authors, there is both a clear connection and difference between the two. As in Norton’s (2013) definition of identity, Llurda *et al.* (2016) emphasize the fact that identity is related “to the individual and their positioning towards a culture or group of people” while citizenship is related to “formally established bonds linking an individual to a given national society, by means of some kind of mutual allegiance that might involve feelings of identity but will also emphasize the rights and obligations of citizens with regards to their national state” (p. 324).

Even the discourse of the European Commission regarding the concepts of European identity and European citizenship, respectively seems to be contradictory. For instance, the most recent Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2017a), under the title “European citizenship”, presented the results to the question:

“Please tell me how attached you feel to...

- Your city/ town/ village
- Our country
- The European Union
- Europe” (p.37)

These point to the fact that more than half of Europeans feel attached to the European Union (54%) including 14% who feel very attached (54% ,+ 3), the highest score of the index of attachment to the EU ever since the question has been asked (from autumn 2002). In a similar way, 64% of respondents declared they are attached to Europe. At the same time, the sense of attachment to the city, town, or village of European citizens is 89%. The same trend is perceived when it comes to their countries, with a 92% of the respondents answering positively to this question. Finally, with regard to feeling a citizen of the EU, 68% of Europeans reported to feel they are citizens of the EU. This was, again, the highest level in the history of the indicator.

From these results, we can infer that EU citizens increasingly identify with Europe with regard to both their personal attachment and their sense of citizenship. The fact that the number of individuals who feel attached to the EU and Europe is growing might mean that the European identity is both factual and emerging. Furthermore, the fact that a considerable percentage of the respondents report on a feeling of attachment to their countries, town, cities, and villages, and that this trend has been maintained while their attachment to the EU has been increasing, points to the existence of multiple identities and most especially, to the fact that European, national, and local identities can actually co-exist within the same individuals. Similarly, the fact that there is a percentage of 14% of Europeans who reported feeling very attached to Europe might indicate there is

a group of Europeans, probably the ‘elites’ that many scholars have referred to, who strongly believe in, and probably lead the European project (e.g. Bakke, 1995).

However, the percentage of 54% of respondents who feel attached to the EU also indicates that the European identity has had an impact that has surpassed the European elites and has permeated into not so elitist groups of Europeans, who are also taking on board this identity. What is interesting to observe, too, is the fact that the attachment to Europe is higher than the attachment to the European Union. The percentages reported in the most recent Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2017a) showing different results with regard to attachment to the EU and Europe can be a proof of the fact that in the imaginary of people, Europe and the EU are not synonyms, and therefore, we cannot say that “forty years of European integration” have led to “the remarkable achievement of identifying Europe with the EU” (Risse: 2003).

In fact, quite oppositely, these results showing individuals who in fact do feel European but prefer not to identify with the European Union might suggest there is something about the European Union that provokes lack of enthusiasm in Europeans. However, it is difficult to disentangle the puzzle of what identifying with the EU and identifying with Europe might mean, especially when dealing with individuals with different trajectories and probably visions of the world that have been shaped to a certain extent by their national contexts and histories, all of them rather different.

3.2.2. From national to European identity

Anthony Smith (1992), Elisabeth Bakke (1995), Zygmunt Bauman (1998), and Thomas Risse (2003) have analyzed the idea of European unity with its ‘partners’ and ‘opponents’. Smith (1992) focuses on the relation between national identity and the idea of European unity. For this author, the problems for a European identity arise from the fact that in their essence, established cultures tend to be opposed to the development of a cosmopolitan culture such as the European one. Smith adopts a historical approach to state that the cultural history of humanity has been “a successive differentiation (but also enlargement) of processes of identification” (Smith, 1992: 58) whose number and scale were relatively limited in the simplest and earliest societies. Therefore, the increment of the stratification of these societies, classes, and status groups “also took on vital roles as focuses of identification in many societies” (ibid, p. 58). It follows that the number and scale of possible cultural identities has seen another increase with the arrival of capitalism. In this new era, people feel attached to their national identities besides other possible identifications.

However, and in spite of the power of the nation, individuals seem to possess multiple identities which “may reinforce national identities or cross-cut them” (ibid, p. 59). According to Smith, it is usual that people live with a multiplicity of allegiances, shifting among them depending on the situation but at some points identity conflicts might arise.

In order to understand the reason behind these frictions, Smith introduces the notions of ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ identifications. It appears that for many individuals their identity depends on the context, it is ‘situational’, and therefore, people identify themselves and are identified in various ways according to the situation. On the other hand, collective identities are “pervasive and persistent (...), less subject to rapid changes and tend to be more intense and durable, even when quite large numbers of individuals no longer feel their power” (Smith, 1992: 59), a fact that seems to characterize national identities in our times.

National identities, which arose in Western Europe and America at the end of the eighteenth century, were based on the idea of a nationhood which displays “a common historical territory, common memories and myths related to its origin, a mass, standardized public culture, a common economy and territorial mobility, and common-legal rights and duties for all members of the collectivity” (ibid, p. 60). However, and in spite of the fact that the definition above could describe any nation, Smith cautions us about the differences between two models of nations that characterized different historical moments, which he categorized as the Western and the Eastern model (these models are also described in Bakke, 1998 under the names of ‘civic’ and ‘cultural’ nations, respectively). In the Western part, importance is given to the national territory, its laws and institutions, the equality of its citizens with regard to the law and the mass civic culture which serves as a nexus of union. On the other hand, the Eastern model has at its centre ethnic descent and cultural connections. Various nationalisms across Western and Eastern Europe have borrowed elements from both models. This relates to the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘state’, where the first is related to law and institutions whereas the second is based on cultural and political ties grounded on myths, symbols, and traditions.

Since many of our contemporary states are composed by a multiplicity of ethnicities and not all of them can claim to be ‘nation states’, they can at least aspire to become ‘national states’ based on the will for unity of a population constituted by different ethnicities but with a will for unity “in terms of public culture and political community, as well as popular sovereignty” (ibid, p. 62). However, when it comes to Europe as a whole, identification seems to be a rather complex endeavor, since Europe cannot recall a “‘prehistory’ which can provide it with emotional sustenance and historical depth” (ibid, p. 62).

However, Smith emphasizes the ethnic revival that has been happening in Europe at the same time with a globalizing culture that has brought economic, political and cultural processes which surpass national boundaries and unite people even though it is still a mystery whether these

ties have actually transcended a superficial level or not. Therefore, it can be stated that we are witnessing both the birth of a new, globalizing culture, whose effect is still to be known, and a revival of ethnic identities. This is where Smith locates the European project: “between national revival and global cultural aspirations”, which is, in fact, its biggest paradox. So the project of European unity requires some characteristics that would define it, besides the mere sum of the populations that constitute it.

Some of these could be found in linguistic characteristics but the fact that certain European languages do not even belong to the European Indo-European is already a big limitation. Cultural geography and the symbolism of the territory might be another place to look for commonalities. However, it is rather difficult to define the limits of the European territory without focusing on historical reasons.

Another debated aspect is the idea of Christianity. However, the division between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox religions poses some barriers to seeing Christianity as an identifying trait of European people everywhere, not to mention the fact that an increasing number of Europeans do not identify with any religion at all. Smith also refers to the creation of an ‘out-group’ formed by non-Europeans, but this also depends, in the first place, on the degree of unity among the Europeans when it comes to political action, which, again does not seem to be very reassuring. History seems to be a place where Europeans might expect to find “shared memories, traditions, myths, symbols and values” (ibid, p. 70). However, this appears as a dangerous place since they might “possess subtly different meanings and significance for different communities in the area conventionally designated as Europe” (Smith, 1992: 70).

Finally, the author concludes that there might never be satisfactory answers to the things that are common to all Europeans. However, there seem to be certain “shared traditions, legal and political, and shared heritages, religious and cultural” (ibid, p.70). These are not shared by all

Europeans in their totality, but at least to a limited degree, all Europe's communities have participated in at least some of them, as for example: "Roman law, political democracy, parliamentary institutions, Judeo-Christian ethics, and cultural heritages like Renaissance humanism, rationalism, empiricism, and romanticism, and classicism" which constitute a "family of cultures" (p. 70) by the means of which "over several generations some loose, over-arching political identity and community might gradually be forged" (p. 74).

In a similar vein, Bakke (1998) refers to the nation forming process in order to shed light on the development of a European identity. According to the author, there are two steps in the process of nation formation. The first one is the work of "nation-forming elites" who "formulate what it means to be a member of the nation, by defining the features that the nation-to-be (at least allegedly) share" (p. 3). The second step consists in "spreading this new national identity (...) from the elites to all layers of the population of a nation-to-be" (ibid, p.3). It is important to mention that the elites do not seem to choose any of the features that would form the nation, but these already exist in the nation that is being formed. In some cases, this is an easy job for the elites and in some others the degree of complexity is higher.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the fact that identities are formed both in relation to what we share with others and in relation to what separates us from the rest. Finally, the author emphasizes the fact that national identities are more of a progressive process than a finished one; therefore, national identities can be reframed in order to adapt to new realities, even though this flexibility has its own limits. Similarly to Smith (whose work Bakke actually incorporates in her analysis), the author reiterates that the multiplicity of our identities and their difference in strength, durability, and complexity is an argument for believing a European identity could "provide an extra identity layer rather than replace national our local identities" (p.4).

The issue of a shared language which seems to be essential for the formation of national identities appears to deserve individual attention but “if an all-pervading European identity depends on that, it is not very conceivable in any foreseeable future” (p. 10). However, Bakke (1998) also makes the point of the distinction between the role language might play for EU citizens: if it is seen as something that makes us “proud of what is ours” (p. 10), then it becomes a barrier in the formation process of European identity. On the contrary, if the function of language is to facilitate communication, then the problem is more related to practicality than to anything else, and therefore, it may be more easily solved. As a solution, the author proposes the agreement of the member countries on one language that would work as a *lingua franca*, “probably a minimum prerequisite for a European identity to form” (p. 11), which might contribute to making all European citizens and territories at least bilingual in one or two generations. As for the time being, English seems to be the chosen language, at least among the European elites. However, Bakke (1998) emphasizes the fact that choosing a single language as *lingua franca* at the European level means that some speakers are automatically benefited and some others are not. It follows that the adoption of English as the *lingua franca* might prompt the establishment of policies aiming at the protection and ‘survival’ of national languages.

Another aspect mentioned by Bakke (1998) is the fact that even that the citizens of the EU have freedom to move in theory, at a practical level, just a small part of the EU population are mobile. The author highlights a need to make education in one country valid in all countries. She refers to the unification of education curricula, a fact which has already been achieved at tertiary education level by the Bologna process, even though it has had different consequences for different actors.

With regard to the development of an imagined community of Europeans, it seems that newspapers and broadcasting could act as means of union among the community. However, the presence of European newspapers does not appear to be very encouraging and many newspapers still

have the national state as their main focus of attention. In relation to broadcasting media, the situation is very similar, with a vast majority of channels operating on a national level. In both cases, the lack of language abilities is another challenge to the creation of a public European space.

A better future is portrayed with respect to the elites. It seems that a community of middle-aged Europeans already exists and it is composed by people representing the EU in places like Brussels and Strasbourg, who have in common their social background, the fact that they work with people from other nationalities, as well as their command of several languages and knowledge of several cultures, their location in a place that is more or less distant from home and the fact that they look for company in each other. According to Bakke (1998: 17), these individuals are “proud of their tolerance, their open-mindedness, their cultural level and ability to communicate, and hold this up against those no-bodies at home, their narrow-mindedness, and their lack of culture, their inability to speak languages and go places”.

A much more encouraging prospect is anticipated by Risse (2003) in his analysis of how European institutions have influenced people’s identities and how these identities relate to other identifications. Again, Risse seems to agree with Smith (1992) and Bakke (1998) concerning the idea of multiple identities coexisting in the same individual but she affirms that under some circumstances, the European and national identities might get in conflict.

In order to explain how multiple identities go together and correlate, the author introduces the difference between ‘nested’, ‘cross-cutting’, and ‘separate’ identities. Nested identities refer to a model that can be imagined in the form of a Russian Matryoshka doll, with one identity inside the following one. On the other hand, the cross-cutting model refers to situations in which some of the members of a given identity group are also members of another identity group. Finally, separate identities refer to situations where there are no identity overlaps. Apparently, Risse (2003) finds

evidence for sustaining that the relationship between the European and other identities can mainly be grouped in the two first categories, while separation is seldom found.

A short look at the results of the most recent Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2017a) show its results also seem to support this idea. To continue, Risse (2003) makes the point that “EU membership leads to an identity change which impacts upon the previous national identity” (p. 6), leading to different outcomes that could be contradictory. This membership, which could be placed under the umbrella term of “citizenship” mentioned in Llorca *et al.* (2016), appears to be described as ‘identification to Europe’, “in the sense that ‘Europe’ increasingly denotes the political and social space occupied by the EU” (p. 9) thus showing that the terms “Europe” and “EU” might be used interchangeably. In relation to this, I would reiterate that the results of the 2017 Eurobarometer reported previously in this chapter do not appear as very promising, showing different results between identification with the EU on one side and with Europe on the other. Of special interest is Risse’s (2003) account of the distinction between ‘cultural’ and ‘civic’ identities, where the former comprises issues related to history, ethnicity, civilization, heritage, and the latter refers to political structures and institutions.

In any case, when it comes to the actual impact of the EU institutions on collective identities, Risse (2003) expresses that “our knowledge about the effects of the EU on collective identity only allows for tentative conclusions” (p. 17). However, the author also claims that the consequences of these effects are very palpable when it comes to the individuals that are involved in the EU institutions, whereas the impact among the European citizens does not seem to be that clear.

All in all, Risse’s (2003) work seems quite promising when it comes to the progress in people’s sense of belonging to Europe, “while exclusive loyalties to the nation-state are in decline” (p. 26). Again, the results of the most recent Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2017a) presented before appear to contradict this last statement.

Finally, Baumann (1998) takes the idea of European identity to the terrain of ‘liquid identities’ and makes the point that the changes in our societies brought by capitalism have led to a situation where “(t)he things most important for the well-being and life-prospects of its citizens are largely beyond the government’s control” (p. 5); this is because of the enormous power of the market. Therefore, no identity seems to be safe in the hand of national governments, since they have lost their earlier power.

Another effect of globalization has been the increased lack of differentiation between groups and a sense of unpredictability and lack of clarity of the daily experience, letting the responsibility of coping with this unclear world and building their identities to the individuals themselves. In this situation, “(n)ational identities no longer feel secure, while European identity is nowhere near offering the standards of security once set by the nation-states” (p. 6). In a nutshell, the ‘identity problem’ that is being experimented has got two sides: a collective and an individual one, which according to Baumann (1998) do not need to be necessarily tied, even though, more often than not, they do intermesh. As a consequence, many people look for the solution of their individual problems in the security of collective identities, since the root of their individual securities (i.e. the global financial markets) are not as near and palpable as some of the threats to collective identities, such as massive migration. And here is where the state, which has already lost most of its power in the advantage of the market, can still act at a local level by relieving at least a part of the anxiety of the citizens by adopting measures that would keep ‘strangers’ outside borders. It follows that human beings are somehow condemned to be set apart by the hardships that we have to overcome, which “divide and isolate: they set us apart, they tear up the delicate tissue of human solidarities” (ibid, p. 14). This is the main problem that Europe will have to overcome in order for its people to feel unified.

However, Bauman (1998) affirms that Europe will still be defined by increasing cultural diversity, and therefore, “(w)hatever road to integration is chosen, it starts from diversity, leads through diversity and is unlikely to reach beyond it, at least not in a foreseeable future” (p. 16).

It is an interesting exercise to compare how the theorizations by the scholars mentioned above have been materialized, or not, in the present discursive construction of the EU. For this aim, a glance at *The White Paper on the Future of Nations* produced by the European Commission (2017b) could shed light on what the values that the EU bases its immediate future are.

3.2.3. European identity in the EU’s discourse

In *The White Paper on the Future of Nations* (European Commission, 2017b), the EU is defined as “a unique project in which domestic priorities have been combined and sovereignty voluntarily pooled to better serve national and collective interests” (p. 26). To begin with, it is interesting to see that on one of the first pages, there is an allusion to two political prisoners who were “locked up by a fascist regime on the isle of Ventotene during the Second World War” and wrote a manifesto entitled “For a Free and United Europe”, which “painted a picture of a place in which allies and adversaries would come together to ensure that the ‘old absurdities’ of Europe would never return” (p. 6). This might be an indicator of the fact that currently, the EU is positioning itself against an enemy that is totalitarianism, in this case in the form of fascism. It follows that peace and economic freedom have characterized EU citizens for seven decades, and therefore, peace and stability are core features of a Europe that has almost doubled its size in the last twenty-five years. The paper also alludes to human dignity, freedom, and democracy earned by our ancestors and which still binds us together. Furthermore, it appears that the EU has become a place characterized by “a unique diversity of culture, ideas, and traditions in a Union covering four million square kilometers” (p. 6). In this place Europeans “have forged life-long bonds with other Europeans and can travel,

study, and work across national borders without changing currency” (p. 6). This is a direct allusion to the policy of open borders and the possibility to travel, study, and work in the EU zone while still using a common European currency.

It is also very interesting to see that the European Commission refers to life-long bonds between European people, something which seems to have been already forged. There is also an allusion to rule of law as opposed to violence and to a continuous fight for equality.

However, in spite of all of the above, the European Commission (2017b) acknowledges that “many Europeans consider the Union as either too distant or too interfering in their day-to-day lives” and “question its added-value and ask how Europe improves their standard of living” (p. 6).

Another element recalled by the European Commission is the idea of the market. Europe is characterized as the ‘world’s largest single market’ which possesses the second most used currency. Furthermore, it has the largest trade power and it is the biggest humanitarian aid donor. Therefore, the EU is positioned as a positive global force which needs to “speak with one voice and to act with the collective weight of its individual parts” (ibid, p .8) in a world where new economies are emerging at a fast pace. We can see here how the discourse of unity is constructed around the idea of the need to stay together in the face of a future in which the European economy has to compete with other emerging economies.

Security is also emphasized in the document: “(E)urope cannot be naïve and has to take care of its own security” (ibid, p. 8). This seems to be connected to the recent terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis which have brought to the fore the need to reopen the discussion about the border policy. Another important thing is European social welfare, characterized as “the world’s most advanced systems of welfare state that can provide solutions to societal challenges around the world” (ibid, p. 10).

Furthermore, the document also brings disunity to the fore and stresses the fact that even though the EU might have a positive role in the lives of many people, this role is seldom visible since the story is not told locally due to the fact that “the tools and powers remain in the hands of national, regional and local authorities” (European Commission, 2017b: 13). Therefore, the EU seems to compromise with the restoration of trust, building consensus, and the creation of a sense of belonging in our times, where “information has never been so plentiful, so accessible, yet so difficult to grasp” (ibid, p. 13).

To sum up, from the discourse of the European Commission, the following elements appear as common characteristics that bind Europeans together. In the first place, there is allusion to historical events happening on EU territory, such as the defeat of totalitarianism. In connection with this, there is the idea of the value of peace. Furthermore, freedom (of speaking, of press), tolerance, solidarity, democracy, diversity and equality are also defined as core values of the European Union. Finally, the necessity to stay together is emphasized by stressing the need for unity in a world where new economies might threaten markets that are not big enough and where the need for security seems to be more real than ever before.

3.3. The European identity in the Erasmus+ program

With regard to the outcomes of the Erasmus program in promoting the sense of belonging to Europe, the results of research are rather mixed, leading to conclusions that may sometimes appear contradictory. In fact, the number of studies that have examined this potential effect of the Erasmus program has been rather limited. In many instances, the results come from studies which do not have as their main research goal understanding how the European identity might be enhanced by means of the Erasmus program, such as for example studies focusing on how internationalisation policies affect Erasmus students (e.g. Papatsiba, 2006; Gallego-Balsà, 2014) or, as in Kalocsái (2009), on

how Erasmus students build confidence in English as a lingua franca. Many of these studies have been conducted with a reduced number of participants (e.g. Mas-Alcolea, 2017) and/or with participants with the same nationality (e.g. Llurda *et al.*, 2016; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2013).

The variety of contexts in which the stay abroad took place has also been rather limited, mostly focusing on a single context (e.g. Kalocsái, 2009; Gallego-Balsà, 2014). Another limitation that has accompanied research in this domain has been the fact that participants in an Erasmus program are considered together with participants in other mobility programs, such as traineeships for teachers (e.g. Murphy-Lejeune, 2004), leading to difficulties when it comes to understanding the actual impact of the program. Some other studies have focused on analyzing the possible development of a European identity as an outcome of the Erasmus program using data that do not come from the participants themselves, but from other sources, such as for example, websites where the students share their experiences (e.g. Mutlu, 2011). Finally, very few studies have combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies in their design.

One of the studies concerned with European identity (even if not explicitly stating it) and study abroad is Osler's (1998) study with student teachers from various European countries who participated in a period of study abroad in another European country. The research was carried out at two colleges (one in Denmark and the other in England), both of them specialized in teacher education, with a total of 37 participants from seven countries. All the participants, who were taking part in exchange programs of between three and nine months, completed a questionnaire on their experiences of studying abroad and on their understandings of European citizenship. Their ideas were further explored by means of interviews or class discussions. Osler (1998) reports that most students who chose to study in another European country were highly motivated to improve their foreign language skills in English, French, or German. This is especially true for the group who had the UK as their destination. Another major motivation was gaining understanding of another country's culture or education system. Personal development was also frequently mentioned. In their

accounts on their experiences, some students remarked dealing with isolation as foreigners, with over a third of the UK group reporting on difficulties to integrate with British students. Stereotypes also appeared to be confirmed, sometimes leading to the affirmation that the stay abroad had served as a way to learn how different another European culture can be from one's own. Furthermore, three participants referred to a wish to take distance from their legal or formal citizenship, like for example a French female participant of Algerian descent for whom her Muslim identity was more important than her French citizenship. Two other students (a Catalan woman and a Breton man) emphasized an identity other than the one of the European state where they lived. An emotional attachment to their country is reported by a majority of students, who "defined national citizenship in terms of personal identity, a shared culture, and belonging rather than a legal status" (p. 84).

Also, some students linked citizenship to a shared language. It appears that the stay abroad allows the participants to observe another culture, thus encouraging some of them to adopt a critical stance towards their own values and ways of thought. However, in some cases, it has the opposite effect, giving the individuals a new feeling of pride in their national identity. A number of 28 students identified themselves as European citizens, even though some of them highlighted the fact that such identification depends on the situation. Furthermore, some of the students related their European citizenship with the ability to move freely around Europe even though for some students being European did not provoke any emotional response in the same way their national identities might do. Additionally, some participants from Finland, Norway, and Sweden reported feeling more identified with Scandinavia than with Europe and the four Swedish participants preferred to define themselves as "world citizens" rather than European citizens, since they believed that European citizenship was related to Western European policy of closing borders against foreigners. Two of the Finnish participants also mentioned that European citizenship had little importance for them and that they didn't understand very well what economic benefits Finland might get from belonging to the

EU. Other students claimed that a distinctive European identity only emerged through contact with non-Europeans.

Moreover, while for some students European citizenship was identified as a feeling of shared experience that could be exploited with positive outcomes, for some others, European unity was defined as more of an ideal than a reality. Finally, when it came to European values, half of the participants mentioned democracy and/or human rights and some of them suggested that education in Europe had considerable importance. Some other students reported different values between north and south, on the one hand, and eastern and western Europe, on the other. Moreover, two participants pointed out to a shared history while others just considered it a geographical location void of any other meaning. Almost a quarter of the participants were unable to identify any shared European value or they declared they did not exist.

To conclude, the author suggests that even though for some students the experience abroad led to a critical examination of their national identities, for some others it meant an enhanced sense of national identity. However, this is regarded as an important experience since it means that the stay abroad led students to a clear sense of self-identity which is a previous step for accepting others. However, Osler's (1998) results are not highly encouraging from a Pan-European perspective, since they show that "while a number of students are made aware of the multicultural nature of Europe through a period of study abroad, most fail to acknowledge the pluralistic nature of their own societies and many retain a monolithic understanding of national cultures in general" (p. 94). Furthermore, even though it seems that the participants in this study were in the process of re-evaluating what it meant to be a European citizen, many of them were unable to agree on any shared European values.

On the same token, Mutlu (2011) conducted a study on the development of European consciousness among Erasmus students. The research is a content analysis based on 502 Erasmus

students' experiences published on the website www.20Erasmus.eu. The participants came from a variety of nationalities and the receiving countries were also diverse across Europe. The study shows that "the students are happy about discovering a new 'me', a new place, new culture and new tastes and making new friends and living the European spirit" (p. 100). Furthermore, the participants seldom mention the problems they might have encountered during their stay abroad, and therefore, the author concludes that experiencing the exciting part of the experience may be more important for them, than its more problematic part. In general lines, the students talk highly positively about their Erasmus experience and they tend to focus more on their individual development than on their academic development, which might indicate that in fact the experience contributes more to the individual enhancement of the participants than to outcomes related to their academic improvement.

The author also claims that the fact that there are no conflicting views and the participants do not show prejudices in their discourse shows the "fruitfulness of the experience" (ibid, p. 101). Finally, it is stated that the students might have developed a new identity and that "this individual development in the students helps the construction of a consciousness that is European" (ibid, p. 101). On this note, I would say the results of this study are significantly different from the results of the previous one (Mutlu, 2011). In the first place, it seems that there are no conflicting views in Mutlu's study, a fact that is rather surprising, since identities are seldom as straightforward and consistent as reported there. Furthermore, the outcomes of the experience seem to be highly positive for the majority of the students, while negative experiences are not reported at all.

Therefore, all together, these results are very encouraging, but I am afraid there are many key aspects in Mutlu (2011) that are not sufficiently described and explained. For instance, there is no information about the time of data collection, an aspect that could be relevant for our understanding of the results obtained in the study. Furthermore, we do not know what reasons brought the students to contribute to the website with their experiences. In fact, this could be an important element, since if contributions were actually a choice of the students, it might well be that just those who felt

positive and motivated posted their experience. Finally, a considerable limitation of this study is the fact that there is no information about the participants' views with regard to European citizenship before their stay abroad, and therefore, one might consider they may have already been oriented towards a European identity before their participation in the Erasmus program.

The results of the study conducted by Llorca *et al.* (2016) also contrast with those in Mutlu (2011). The data of the former comes from 46 Erasmus students Catalan students who participated in an Erasmus program in different European countries. In 2013-2014, a survey was administered both at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad and separate focus groups discussions with students who stayed in the UK, Denmark and Italy were also conducted before and after the experience. The results of the study indicated that some of the students “became more skeptical about the European project” (p. 341) after their stay abroad and some others reported a strong sense of belonging to their home area and to their receiving nation in some instances, while none of them reported greater identification with Europe as a whole. It appears that the only occasion when a sense of European identity came out was when the participants “positioned themselves in contrast with other supranational entities, such as Asia or countries seen to be outside the ‘Western bloc’” (p. 342), leading to the conclusion that one of the outcomes of the Erasmus experience on the participants in this study was an enhanced identity as a ‘Westerner’ rather than as a European. Their views were significantly influenced by languages, and in particular, by the importance of English.

In fact, it appears that one of the effects of the Erasmus experience that might relate to the construction of a European identity is the fact that the participants in the study reported an enhanced sense of confidence in functioning in a foreign language and a reinforced motivation to keep learning it. In this respect, the authors state that “English emerged as a bridge and an indispensable element in establishing a ‘comfort zone’ abroad where students could move without experiencing too much difference” (p. 341). However, they seemed to be also aware of the fact that due to the high degree of diversity in Europe, English was not enough. Less encouraging than Mutlu’s (2011), the results of

this study point to the fact that excepting an increased awareness of the democratic values associated with the European project and the importance of English as a means to communicate across European countries, “the simple fact of spending some time abroad is not enough to change deeply rooted attitudes and views relating to identity and culture” (p. 342).

Slightly different results have been reported in Jacobone & Moro’s (2014) study concerned with investigating the impact of the Erasmus program on cultural, personal, and linguistic skills as well as on European identity. The research is based on data coming from PRE and POST surveys conducted with 352 participants (190 Erasmus and 162 non-Erasmus) enrolled during the academic year 2011-2012 at an Italian university. The participants in this study report enhanced skills necessary on the European labor market, as well as a sense of an improved international understanding, European consciousness and identity. Consequently, it appears that the feeling of belonging to Europe is increased, since mobility “allows young people to acquire consciousness and trust in having improved their personal skills and employability and it offers opportunities to broaden their experience and enhance their skills” (p. 325). Furthermore, the Erasmus program is portrayed as a satisfying experience which is highly valued by the participants, especially with regard to competence in foreign languages and intercultural relationships.

Therefore, the authors affirm that “a student mobility program is confirmed as a powerful tool in developing the personalities of the students” (ibid, p. 325), since “(w)hen engaging in academic study in a foreign culture, the individual is fully immersed within that society and, therefore, encouraged to function as other citizens” (ibid, p. 326). A negative aspect emphasized by the participants in Jacobone & Moro’s (2014) study is the scarcity of information and support from their home institutions. However, the results of the study point to the fact that mobility programs foster European identity and confers European dimension to its users and it contributes to forming professionals “more capable of responding to the increasing challenges of internationalization and globalization” (ibid, p. 326), leading to a benefit for the society in general.

3.4. Languages in Europe

Another aim of the Erasmus+ program regarding individual learning mobility, as stated by the European Commission (2017c), is increasing foreign language competence. The language learning goal in study abroad programs appears frequently in all the studies mentioned above, either as a motivation, a practice, an outcome, or a plan for the future. Interestingly, more often than not, the foreign language the participants in the above mentioned studies refer to is English. Therefore, we can infer that rather than learning the local languages of the communities they access, Erasmus students may try to improve their English language level. As stated in Gubbel (2002: 49): “young Europeans financed under Erasmus and Lingua remained unmoved by efforts to promote less widely used languages”.

Certainly, the power of English in higher education nowadays is an undeniable fact. This is due to the fact that universities are urged by a need to respond to the requirements of globalization, and therefore, they have to compete at a global level. For instance, Graddol (2006: 74) refers to the fact that English becomes a *sine qua non* condition: “if an institution wishes to become a centre of international excellence, it needs both to attract teachers and researchers from around the world, and to encourage international students to enroll on its courses”. Traditionally, the vast majority of international students in the world were attracted by universities located in English speaking countries. However, this trend has changed in recent times, partly due to the fact that an increasing number of universities in Asia and Europe offer courses taught entirely in English. However, the “Englishization” of European higher education has not arrived without criticism. Many of the controversies surrounding the process are related to language conflicts at a macro scale (concerning the whole European Union) that have been transported to the higher education system. A glance at the language policies and practices in Europe may shed some light on this issue.

The case of the paradox of the EU unification embedded in the attempt to unify Europe and simultaneously preserve its diversity has already been pointed out in the previous lines. Language policies and practices are one of the aspects where the tension between national and European identities is easily observed, and probably this is the reason why European institutions seem to be rather reluctant when it comes to addressing language policy, as emphasized by Gubbel (2002: 47): “(t)he link between language and nationality and, by extension, nationalism, accounts at least partially for the reluctance of the European institutional hierarchy to address language policy”. For now, and despite the fact that “‘English only’ is expected to inevitably transcend the borders of internal institutions and further limit the function of the remaining widely-spoken languages, especially as a lingua franca and in foreign language teaching” (Ammon, 2006: 319), the EU has solely stated its objective of linguistic equality. Furthermore, the European Commission (2012: 2) states the following in their working staff document on language competences for employability, mobility and growth:

English is becoming *de facto* the first foreign language. It is the most taught foreign language, both in Europe and globally, and it plays a key role in daily life - but: **it is proficiency in more than one foreign language that will make a decisive difference in the future.** This calls for language policies and strategies inspired by a clear vision of the value of language skills for mobility and employability.

For the time being, the EU contemplates all its official languages as EU institutional working languages. In order to become an official language, and therefore, a working language, the state has to require that a given language spoken within its territory is assigned official status. This is a right stated in the EU language charter (Council Regulation 1). This fact, by itself, can create inequality between languages in the EU. However, in spite of the fact that, in principle, all the languages that pass the filter of their national states are in theory regarded as official and working languages of the EU, in practice, most EU institutions use a very limited number of languages (English, French, German, and to a lesser extent, Spanish and Italian) for its procedures. This is due, mostly, to an economic reason: translation and interpretation are expensive and the number of official languages in

the EU has been increasing with each expansion of the EU. However, English is still the predominant language both inside and outside EU institutions. (e.g. Ammon, 2006).

Surely, this has not come without controversy, not as much from small language communities as from large language communities in Europe, concerned by the possibility of a loss of function and/or prestige of their own languages due to the establishment of English as a lingua franca, as has happened for instance in Germany where “language requirements for the programs (university) were modified” and “foreigners are once again expected to learn the German language before or during their studies” (Ammon, 2006: 327). Finally, various scholars have come with different solutions. For instance, Gubbel (2002: 48) affirms that “perhaps the European Union should abandon its stated objective of linguistic equality, and honestly and openly embrace English as an institutional lingua franca.” On a different note, Ammon (2006) proposes compensation for the excluded languages, stability through monitored regulations, and agreement among member states instead of continuing debate and mistrust. In the following lines, the concept of English as a lingua franca and its possible implications for creating a bond between European citizens will be examined.

3.4.1. The construct of English as a lingua franca

English as a lingua franca, as defined by Jenkins (2017: 1), is “English used in intercultural communication chiefly, if not exclusively, among its non-native speakers from different first languages, and often in ways that differ substantially from native English”. Elsewhere, Norton & DeCosta (2016: 592) argue that: “(d)espite continuing disagreement on ELF in the field, the explosive growth of contexts where English and other major languages, such as Spanish, Arabic and Chinese, are used as a lingua franca points to the scope for researchers in applied linguistics to explore identities within these contexts.”

In order to represent the role of English in the world nowadays, Llorca (2015) uses the illustrative metaphor of a boat. According to the author, languages have sometimes functioned as barriers for communication and as bridges in some other instances which enabled individuals to communicate with each other. English, for instance, is a language that may act as a bridge, connecting people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, Llorca (2015) affirms that the metaphor of the bridge is not representative of what being able to communicate in English actually means nowadays. This is due to the fact that bridges are rigid structures that connect one shore to another, so there is just one single community that is approached through that bridge. Oppositely, English as a lingua franca users can approach other English as a lingua franca users with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, English as a lingua franca is comparable to a boat that can take people from one shore to another, connecting them with people from many origins. Furthermore, Llorca (2015) emphasizes the fact that just like boats can be very different in form and function (big, spacious, for fishing, for towing, etc.), so can ELF users and their language skills be different, as well as the communicative functions of ELF can be of various types. Finally, similarly to the accidents and troubles boats might have when navigating, the use of ELF in conversations “may also suffer accidents and instances of miscommunication” (p. 20), which fortunately are very unlikely to happen since both boats’ and ELF interactions are flexible enough to keep on going even under the vicissitudes of fortune. Consequently, since the boat imagined by Llorca (2015) is intended to reach different shores, one of the core features of ELF has to be intelligibility, which would allow that mutual understanding and communication are ensured. Formal accuracy based on native-speaker language use is not as much a priority as if the language in use were equated to a rigid bridge connecting speakers to a single local community, instead of the global community of ELF users. Therefore, ELF emphasizes the importance of pragmatic strategies that pave the way for intercultural communication. Accordingly, the ideal speaker of ELF “is not a native speaker but a fluent bilingual

speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker” (Graddol, 2006: 87). Previously, in this chapter, I mentioned the current role of English in Europe, with equal importance to other languages in theory and with a very different status in practice, where it works as the lingua franca of communication both in a variety of professional domains, as on “all levels of society in practically all walks of life” (Seidlhofer *et al.*, 2006).

However, and despite the fact that English is the *de facto* lingua franca in Europe, its meanings across Europe can significantly differ. According to the authors, this is because of the fact that “the uses of the language as a wider means of communication are various and coexist with other languages with their own cultural and political claims” (p. 8). With certainty, the need of a common means of communication and the promotion of multilingualism can trigger conflict, which is probably why the EU holds back when it comes to language policies stating the actual role of English in Europe.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the potential conflict between English and other European languages originates at the identity level; it is in fact, a matter of feeling that one’s national identity, where language plays a pivotal role, is threatened. This idea is explored for instance by Phillipson (2003: 4), who argues that “English might be seen as a kind of linguistic cuckoo, taking over where other breeds of languages have historically nested and acquitted territorial rights, and obliging non-native speakers of English to acquire the behavioral habits and linguistic forms of English”. Furthermore, the same author (p. 7) claims that “(t)he pressure of globalization and europeanization might be strengthening English at the expense of all the other languages of Europe”. On this note, I would say that if we focus on English as a lingua franca, which is a language that can be described as not carrying any national identity, and be endowed with the already existing identity traits of its speakers, including their linguistic repertoires, the potentiality of conflict between English and other languages might not totally disappear but could significantly decrease.

Claiming that ELF does not belong to any particular group of speakers does not imply that it is a language void of any meaning for the identities of its speakers, but at the very least, it might be easier to incorporate ELF in a model of circular identities. In this respect, English as a lingua franca could be considered an inter-language related to a supranational reality, at the realm between local and global communication, pretty much in the same way as the European identity could be considered a supranational identity, at the realm between local and global identification forms. However, we have to be aware of the fact that, probably, just as the European identity project seems to be very much work in progress, the amount of use of English in the EU also shows striking differences between southern and northern European countries (Llurda, 2015). However, and no matter the disparities between proficiency levels among Europeans of different nationalities, English as a lingua franca has at its core a hybrid and multilingual community identity (Canagarajah, 2007). Moreover, as argued by Jenkins (2017: 3), “ELF is by definition a multilingual phenomenon, and would not exist at all if it were not”.

Furthermore, I believe that the high degree of negotiation of ELF at the level of interaction, where the users can decide on the communicative strategies they might employ in a given communicative situation, is transferable to the field of identity where the participants can negotiate which identity traits they might want to bring to the fore in a given communicative situation. This is because, as stated by Jenkins (2017: 5), “while English, by default, is in the ‘ELF mix’, whether actually used or potentially available, it is the interlocutors’ multilingualism, not their English, that is primary”. Hence, ELF poses questions to the idea of a language system by being indeterminate, open, and fluid (Canagarajah, 2007) just as the European identity questions the idea of national identities by having the same characteristics. Furthermore, the paradox of the European identity which has at its core the harmonious diversity that it seeks to overcome is parallel to the paradox of ELF trying to convey harmonious communication by means of a system with non-established rules and incorporating a variety of linguistic and cultural codes in multilingual communicative situations.

I believe that, in both cases, what finally matters is not homogeneity but flexibility and the capacity to align in order to meet the requirements of a given situation. Finally, ELF and European identities might have similar core features such as unpredictability, openness, flexibility, and at a more humane level, patience and good empathizing skills. Therefore, just as it is meaningless to measure the distance of ELF speakers from the language of native English speakers (Canagarajah, 2007), it is meaningless to measure the distance between European identity and a national or local identity. As each ELF communicative situation is unique, each possible identity is also exceptional, and therefore, a great deal of adaptability and a different type of negotiation will be required in each particular case.

Therefore, what really matters in ELF communication, that is, language awareness, strategic competence, and pragmatic competence (Canagarajah, 2007), is also needed in the negotiation of European identity. Study abroad might be a good place to develop all the above both with regard to ELF and European identity, an aspect that the research to the moment has not been able to show. However, the problem might rely on the fact that we are looking for the acquisition of a product in both cases while what in fact might be acquired is the acquisition of the skills required by open, flexible, negotiable, and ongoing processes of identification and communication. It might be found out, then, that just as multilingual speakers can manage better than monolingual ones at communicating in a foreign language without the need to feel deep emotional connections to the different codes in their linguistic repertoires, European people might manage better at understanding what being European means if they have previously had some contact with diversity.

PART II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 4. Methodology

In Chapter 4, I will present, in the first place, the general and specific objectives of the study, and secondly, I will introduce mixed methods as the research paradigm in which the study is embedded, presenting its main characteristics and relating them to its design. Finally, the design and the analytical procedures will be described in detail.

4.1. Objectives of the study

The general objective of this study is to explore the impact of the Erasmus study abroad program on the identities, investment, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as reported by international university students at a Northern, Eastern, and Southern European universities.

The above mentioned objective encompasses the following five specific aims:

- 1) Understanding the expectations of the participants, their forms of investment, and their imagined identities at the beginning of the stay.
- 2) Exploring the ways Erasmus students relate and adapt to the languages present in the Erasmus community in the three analyzed contexts.
- 3) Examining the identity and employability-related outcomes of the experience as reported by the students at the end of the stay.
- 4) Establishing the changes experienced in identities (with a focus on European identity) and in attitudes among university students after a stay abroad.

5) Comparing the expectations and outcomes in three different European settings and establishing different profiles of students according to their chosen destination.

Therefore, connected to the above mentioned objectives, the present project aims at answering the following research question:

What is the impact of the participation in the Erasmus study abroad program on the identities, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as reported by international university students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia?

However, in order to structure the investigation, the main research question has been divided into the following sub-questions:

1) What are the expectations of the participants, their forms of investment, and their imagined identities at the beginning of the stay?

2) In what ways Erasmus students relate and adapt to the languages present in the Erasmus community in the three analyzed contexts?

3) What are the identity and employability-related outcomes of the experience as reported by the students at the end of the stay?

4) What changes in identities (with a focus on European identity) and in attitudes are experienced among university students as a result of a stay abroad?

5) How expectations and outcomes in three different European settings are different and what profiles of students can be established according to their chosen destination.

4.2. Research framework: mixed methods

In order to accomplish the above mentioned objectives, this study uses a mixed methods longitudinal design. Mixed methods research, which has also been called the “third research paradigm” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 15) and “third methodological movement” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003: 5), has been defined by Johnson *et al.* (2007) as:

the type of research in which a researcher or a team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

And a more extended definition was offered by Creswell & Plano Clark (2007: 5):

Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study and series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.

Creswell & Plano Clark (2011: 5) also developed what they considered to be core characteristics of mixed methods research:

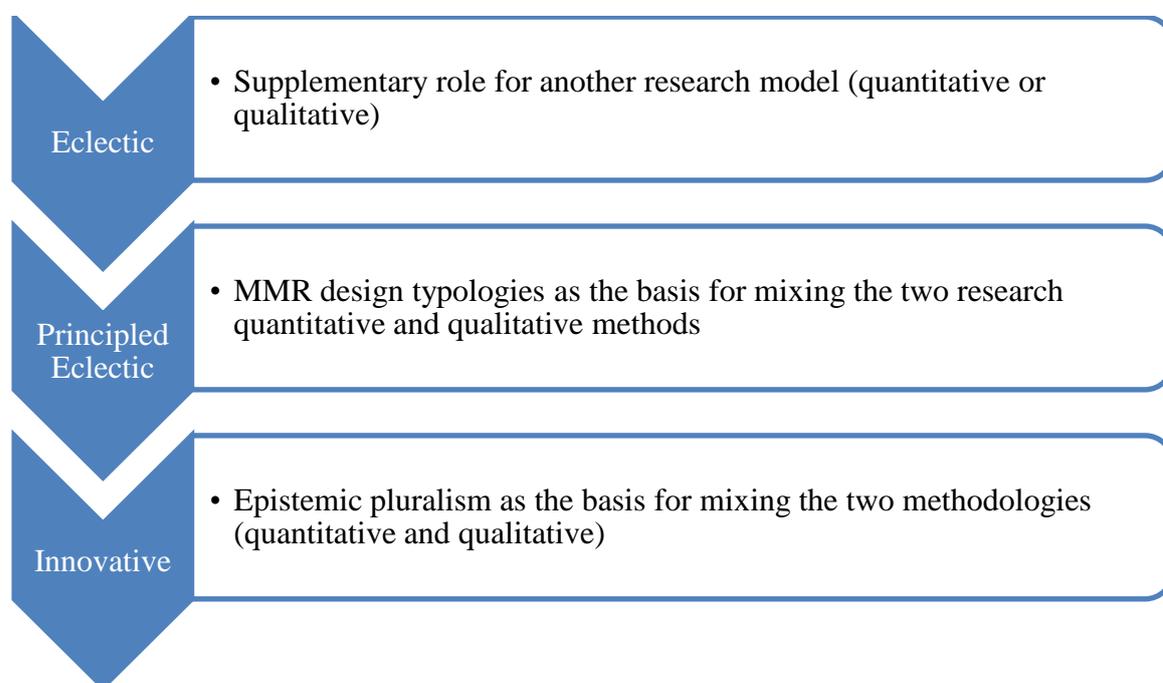
- collects and analyzes persuasively and rigorously both qualitative and quantitative data (based on research questions);
- mixes (or integrates or links) the two forms of data concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build on the other, or embedding one within the other;
- gives priority to one or both forms of data (in terms of what the research emphasizes);
- use these procedures in a single study or in multiple phases of a program of study;
- frames these procedures within philosophical worldviews and theoretical lenses; and
- combines the procedures into specific research designs that direct the plan for conducting the study.

Noteworthy are also the six mixed methods research designs identified by Creswell & Plano Clark (2011): the convergent parallel design, the explanatory sequential design, the exploratory sequential design, the embedded design, the transformative design, and the multiphase design. The

differences between the first four designs rely on the sequence of methods and on the purpose of the design, while the transformative and the multiphase design combine different sequences of the previous mentioned four ones. This project follows a convergent parallel design which gives the same emphasis to both types of data and where quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses were conducted at the same time, after which the two data sets were merged, and finally further analysis and comparisons were performed. This design was used with the aim “to triangulate the methods by directly comparing and contrasting quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings for corroboration and validation purposes” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011: 77).

A different model is presented by Riazi & Candlin (2014), where three categories of mixed methods research are included, as can be observed in Figure 2.1. :

Figure 2. 1: Visual adaptation of Riazi & Cadlin’s (2014) three categories of mixed methods studies



According to Riazi (2016), the first category, *eclectic*, “applies to those studies where researchers aim at expanding the scope of their study by adding some breadth or depth to a predominantly qualitative or quantitative study without necessarily mixing the two methods in principle” (p. 34). On the other hand, the *principled eclectic* category “represents a step forward compared with ‘eclectic’ in terms of consistency and design rigor and the use of principles underlying mixing methods from a pragmatic perspective” (Riazi, 2014: 38). Finally, *innovative* mixed methods research studies have a clear purpose and logic for mixing methods from quantitative and qualitative approaches, and “they are also able to show how this mixture of the methods is done genuinely and in response to the need of interweaving the different types of knowledge related to different aspects or dimensions of the research problem. MMR (Mixed Methods Research) studies in this category therefore attend to different aspects of the research problem as they pertain to an integrated whole”. (ibid, p. 38).

Fetters (2016) affirms that despite the fact that mixed methods appears to be an emerging methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methodology is nothing new. However, the novelty remains in its systematic way to approach research. Hashemi (2012: 206) states that even though “over the past two decades, mixed methods research has attracted particular attention in social and behavioral research and a good number of studies have addressed theoretical and methodological aspects of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods”, the integration of the two methods has seldom been approached by applied linguistics research. However, the author sees great potential in using mixed methods research in applied linguistics. According to Hashemi (2012), it allows for the exploration of complex systems, since a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study can be achieved by qualitatively exploring processes and quantitatively measuring outcomes. In a similar vein, Dörnyei (2011), drawing on Mertens (2005) states that “mixed methods have particular value when we want to examine an issue that is embedded in a complex educational or social context” (p. 164). Similarly, Riazi & Candlin (2014: 168) claim that “(t)he systematic use

of MMR to investigate language-related issues can enhance knowledge in our field, but only if we can create a research space in which this can happen”. On this note, Dörnyei (2011:175) affirms that “on the basis of the rate of its growing popularity it is safe to conclude that the full emancipation of the approach is not too far away”. Furthermore, Riazi (2016: 34) makes the point that:

In applied linguistics, when language-related problems are conceptualized to have different layers derived from different theoretical perspectives, it should be possible to use and mix quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate those different layers and produce more integrative inferences. Such mixing of methods therefore is closely related to the conceptualization stage and mirrors innovations in the way the research problem is conceptualized and would therefore be perfectly consistent with a paradigmatic orientation.

Despite the great potential of mixed methods frameworks in applied linguistics, Riazi & Candlin (2014) affirm that “conceptualising the object of a research study from an MMR perspective will continue to be challenging for language teaching and learning researchers, given the complexity involved” (p. 168).

The present study makes use of mixed methods research by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods at every stage of the study. In the first place, it responds to research questions that could not be answered in a more complete way by using purely qualitative or quantitative research. Secondly, it uses two types of sampling, with a high number of participants who answered the questionnaire, and a reduced sample of telling cases included in the interviews. Mixed methods are also used at the two stages of data collection and also in the analysis which includes both statistical procedures and thematic analysis. Finally, interpretations are made, and conclusions are drawn based on results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative data and through the combination of both methods.

The main reason why this project uses mixed methods is because I believe in what McKim (2017) has called “the perceived value of mixed methods studies”, defined as “a methodology’s ability to make sense of the world, help readers better understand the study, increase confidence in

findings, improve accuracy and completeness, and inform and contribute to overall validity” (p. 203). This is in line with Blommaert & van de Vijver (2013), in which each author is committed to a qualitative and a quantitative framework, respectively, and both advocate for overcoming the non-compatibility between frameworks (in this case surveys and ethnography):

It is the shared nature of the object (of study) that should make us realize that the views of that object from within our disciplines are necessarily partial. Different views represent different sides and features of the object, *but it is the same object*. And an object as complex as humans in society and culture surely tolerates multiple and different views, which, together, might perhaps bring us closer to a comprehensive culture”. (p. 2)

On a similar note, Cots *et al.* (2008) advocate for combining surveys and discourse analysis to examine linguistic ideologies of language teachers in secondary school, by affirming that: “discourse analysis and surveys represent two ways to understand research in social sciences: the *positivist* one, which aims at establishing connections between variables, and the *interpretative* one, more concerned with observing and describing phenomena (p. 63).² Furthermore, Cots & Llorca (2010: 63) combined questionnaires and discourse analysis of seminars with teachers in order to explore the construct of interculturality in education with the assumption that there is a need “to work hand in hand with all the resources that are provided by different research traditions”.

Connected to the above, in the case of the present project, a mixed methods framework was chosen because I believed that a single data source was not enough to tell the whole story. Furthermore, I was interested in shedding light not only on the similarities between two types of data, but also on the paradoxes and contradictions that might arise from combining surveys and interviews. Certainly, this is not to say I had no confidence in the validity of purely quantitative or qualitative results. However, my purpose was to achieve the most detailed picture of the phenomena, one that would lead to understanding the impact of study abroad and the processes that conduct to the outcomes, for which I believed mixed methods would be the best approach. Finally, mixed

² My own translation.

methods were chosen for the present study because I am an advocate and practitioner of pragmatism and practicality before anything else. Furthermore, I believe that using any means that would lead to better approaching a given problem is legitimate and even necessary. In Creswell & Plano Clark's (2011: 13) words:

It (mixed methods) is also “practical” because individuals tend to solve problems using both numbers and words, combine inductive and deductive thinking, and employ skills in observing people as well as recording behavior. It is natural, then, for individuals to employ mixed methods research as a preferred mode for understanding the world.

However, employing mixed methods for the present study has not come without challenges. It required getting acquainted with both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques, which also included managing data processing and analyzing software which ultimately led to a considerable investment of time and material resources. Furthermore, another difficulty stemmed from the fact that it was sometimes difficult to position the present study in the field, since it appears that the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative studies still rules in scientific conferences in applied linguistics. On this note, Riazi & Candlin (2014: 168) seem to foresee an increase in the number of articles employing mixed methods despite the need to continue discussing the paradigm: “while we envisage that there will be increasing numbers of studies with an MMR orientation in language teaching and learning journals, nonetheless, more theoretical discussion of the paradigm and its constituents remains very much on the agenda”. However, recent publications employing mixed methods research, such as for example Cots *et al.* (2016) and Llorca *et al.*'s (2016) study of the impact of academic mobility on intercultural competence and European identity have been encouraging in this respect.

4.3. Research design

The following subsection describes the research design, starting with the locations, continuing with the participants, the timing of the research, the research instruments, and the procedure, to finally end with the data analysis.

4.3.1. Location

The three settings of this study were chosen according, firstly, to the fact that the design of the study aimed at examining three contexts in Europe believed to be different at the cultural, social, economic, and linguistic level. Secondly, convenience also contributed to the final choice. On the one hand, Lleida is my own university, located in a place where familiar languages are used. On the other hand, Bucharest is the capital city of my country of origin, and Romanian is my first language. Furthermore, personal contacts made by my supervisor with two professors, one at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and another one at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences respectively, were useful as they made it easier to present the project and get practical help and directions on how to proceed and who to talk to in order to gain access to the students and the best moment for the data collection.

With regard to the first reason, namely differences between the contexts, despite such differences being rather well-established in the collective imaginary, they are far from being empirically founded. Nevertheless, I contend that they exist and operate at many levels. For instance, at a mere geographical level, the United Nations Statistics Division³ separates the European continent into Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern Europe. Each of the three chosen contexts

³<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/> (Access 9th January 2019)

belongs to a different area: Romania is situated in Eastern Europe, Finland in Northern Europe, and finally, Catalonia belongs to Southern Europe.

Furthermore, at the cultural and the linguistic level, the three countries are also different. For example, Catalonia and Romania were at some point part of the Roman empire, while Finland was never part of it. This fact affected the three countries both from a cultural and a linguistic point of view. While Finland's first official language is Finnish (a language totally unrelated to the Latin family of languages), Romanian, Catalan, and Spanish belong to the Latin family of languages and therefore, the mutual intelligibility between them is significantly high, especially between Spanish and Catalan, and to a lower extent between Spanish and Romanian and Catalan and Romanian. However, despite the fact the three are Roman languages, they also belong to three different linguistic subdivisions. While Spanish is included in the Ibero-Romance category, Catalan is included in the Occitano-Romance group, and Romanian belongs to the more distant category of Eastern-Romance languages. On the other hand, Finnish does not belong to the Indo-European language family, but to the Finnic group (which includes Estonian and a few minority languages surrounding the Baltic Sea) belonging to the Ural family of languages (which includes, for instance, Hungarian). Therefore, Finnish is a language with almost no similarities with the vast majority of European languages. Romanian, on the other side, is a language that many of the international students in Bucharest could contemplate as familiar if they come from a country where a Romance language is used (e.g. France, Italy or Spain, which is frequently the case). However, when compared to the other Romance languages, the international projection and prestige of Romanian is far from the one that French or Spanish have. Finally, while Spanish and Catalan are similar, the colossal dimension of the former, both at the national and international level, significantly overcomes the dimension of the latter, which is a minority language within Spain.

Other elements that account for differences between the three countries could be rooted in religion. While Finland is mainly Protestant, Romania is included in the Eastern-Orthodox group of countries, while Spain has traditionally been a Catholic country.

Finally, from an economic and political point of view, the three countries belong to the European Union. However, while Spain accessed the EU in 1986, Finland was admitted in 1995, and Romania did not enter the EU until 2007. Furthermore, while Finland and Catalonia's currency is the euro and both belong to the Schengen area, Romania is not yet in the Eurozone, neither it belongs to the Schengen zone. In the following lines, each of the three contexts will be briefly presented.

4.3.1.1. Oulu, Finland

According to the official webpage of the city hall of Oulu⁴, this city of 200,000 inhabitants is known as the capital of Northern Finland, and is characterized by the presence of hi-tech industry. Furthermore, the English language is very present in daily life, and most of the population of the city are able to understand and speak English besides Finnish and Swedish (both of them compulsory in the education system). The universities in the city of Oulu where the research for the present project was conducted are two: the University of Oulu, with approximately 13,500 students and 8 faculties covering all areas of knowledge and Oulu University of Applied Sciences, with approximately 9,000 students, offering degrees and masters in the areas of culture, natural resources, business and information, health and social care, and engineering.

⁴<https://www.ouka.fi/oulu/english> (Access: 10th October 2018)

University of Oulu

The University of Oulu had 13,500 students in 2018, according to its official website⁵, which also defined it as “an international science university which creates innovation for the future, well-being, and knowledge through multidisciplinary research and education”. According to the same webpage, the university receives over 600 exchange students from all over the world every year. This is fostered by the fact that all faculties offer courses in English for incoming exchange students. Furthermore, since each faculty has an international coordinator, students are encouraged to contact the department’s exchange officer and ask if they have any concerns regarding courses in English. Finally, the University of Oulu claims on its webpage that there is no need to know Finnish, since exchange students attend classes in English, but it also affirms there is the possibility to take Finnish language courses. By 2018, a minimum of a B2 level of English was required in order to be able to apply. However, in 2015, the level required in English was a B1.

Oulu University of Applied Sciences (OAMK)

The Oulu University of Applied Sciences, which combines theoretical studies with professional skills, has over 9,000 students. In the academic year 2015-2016, it received 323 international students, 209 of which as part of the Erasmus+ program. The University offers two full degree programs in English: *International Business* and *Information Technology*; and one Master’s degree program: *Education Entrepreneurship*. Besides, all degrees and master programs offer some courses in English.

⁵<http://www.oulu.fi/university/node/34711> (Access: 14th October 2018)

4.3.1.2. Bucharest, Romania

Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, is situated in the South-Eastern part of the country. According to the United Nations Statistics Division⁶, the population of Bucharest in 2016 was 1,836,000 inhabitants. With a vibrant cultural life, the city is a dynamic enclosure in Eastern-Europe, where European standards can be found in affordable goods and services. The vast majority of the population in Bucharest speak Romanian as a first language. However, English is extensively spoken, especially among the university community.

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies(ASE București)

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies defines itself as “one of the most important universities in Romania and South-Eastern Europe”⁷. With almost 22,000 students enrolled in 12 faculties, the university offers 8 Bachelor programs in English (*Business Administration; Management; Marketing; Finance and Banking; Accounting and Management Information Systems; Economic Informatics; Business Administration in Trade, Tourism, Services and Quality Management; International Economics and Business*), 1 in French (*Business Administration*) and 1 in German (*Business Administration*). Furthermore, it also offers 11 master programs in English, 1 in French and 1 in German, as well as 3 international MBA programs, with double degrees, accredited internationally: 2 taught in English (Romanian-Canadian MBA and Romanian-French MBA), and 1 in German. On the webpage of the university, it is stated that each year approximately 600 degree-seeking foreign students, coming from non-EU countries, and approximately 100 incoming students on mobility programs are welcomed by the institution.

⁶<http://data.un.org/Default.aspx> (Access: 14th October 2018)

⁷<http://international.ase.ro/admission/about/> (Access: 14th October 2018)

Bucharest University

With a total number of 31,444 students, out of which 873 were international in 2016, Bucharest University claims to be considered “the most important institution for learning, research, and culture in Romania”⁸. It offers a total of 93 Bachelor programs, from which 5 are taught in English (*Business Administration, Physics, International Relations and European Studies, Pedagogy, and Political Science*), and 218 Master’s programs, out of which 26 are in English and 5 in French.

2.3.1.3. Lleida, Catalonia

Lleida is a city in the autonomous community of Catalonia, situated in the North-Eastern corner of Spain. The city is at approximately 160 kilometers from Barcelona. According to the National Catalan Institute of Statistics (IDESCAT, 2017), in 2017 it had a population of 137,327 inhabitants. The city and the area where it is situated are characterized linguistically by a cohabitation of Catalan and Spanish. According to IDESCAT (2013) 94% of the population in Catalonia could understand Catalan and therefore a rather insignificant proportion of 4% of inhabitants were not able to understand the language, whereas 80% were able to speak it, although the percentage of those who actually use it in their everyday interactions is undetermined. Furthermore, according to the same institution, in 2013, 36% of the population in Catalonia identified with Catalan and used Catalan on a daily basis, while 48% identified with Spanish and 51% regularly used it. Finally, 7% of the population identified and habitually used both languages. The rest of the population identified and used other languages, such as Arabic or Romanian. This situation offers a sharp contrast with the idea of a standard Spanish city where Spanish is the dominant language that inspires many Erasmus students prior to their coming to Lleida. The

⁸<https://www.unibuc.ro/despre-ub/ub-astazi/scurta-prezentare/> (Access: 19th November 2018)

bilingual environment of the city has a deep influence on the linguistic ecology at the university. Finally, the knowledge of English among the population in Lleida, despite having increased in recent years, is still limited, especially outside the university context.

University of Lleida (Universitat de Lleida)

With a total of 12,538 students, the University of Lleida offers 31 Bachelor programs and 54 master's programs. In the academic year 2015-2016, the institution received 306 mobility students, from which 130 were participants in the Erasmus+ program.⁹

As for the linguistic situation at the university, the information offered on the official website has undergone certain modifications in the last years, related mainly to its understanding and description of the linguistic situation at the university. For instance, as the following extract shows, at the beginning of November 2018, the section on the official website devoted to tuition languages presented a rather relaxed situation, in which the relationship between Catalan and Spanish at the university appeared to be rather harmonious:

The two official Languages in Catalonia are Catalan and Spanish (also known as Castilian). The latter is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Catalan belongs to the same language family as Spanish, Italian, French and Portuguese. In Catalonia, Catalan is widely spoken in public life, the mass media, trade, and business. Most Catalan people can speak both Catalan and Spanish. Both official languages are respected at the universities in Catalonia.

Teaching staff and students have the right to express themselves in the official language that they prefer. Lectures are taught in Catalan or in Spanish, depending on the lecturer, and students have the right to use the language they prefer. (...)

In general, someone who speaks Spanish will not take long to understand Catalan. Therefore, students who spend several months in Lleida can improve their Spanish and at the same time, if they wish to do so, learn another European language such as Catalan.

However, more recently than November 2018, increased importance has been given to the role of languages at the university, with a progression towards making more explicit the fact that

⁹<http://www.udl.cat/ca/organs/secretaria/memoria/> (Access: 10th January 2019)

Catalan is the most commonly used language and that the instructors might not want to change the language “once the course has already started”. Finally, it is clearly stated that the university “helps students with their linguistic integration into the university community”, and students are encouraged to take a Catalan language course at one of the 150 foreign universities that offer Catalan courses all over the world.

As for the courses in English, it is only stated that the different faculties offer some courses taught in English, which should be consulted on the links of each faculty or with the international coordinator in each faculty.

4.3.2. Participants

Since the number of participants required for the quantitative and the qualitative data collection is different, this section will be divided into two sub-sections: the first describes the students who answered the questionnaire, while the second focuses on those who had answered the questionnaire and also took part in the interviews.

4.3.2.1. Quantitative data

The quantitative part of the study relies on a sample of 155 participants: 80 in Oulu, 35 in Lleida, and 40 in Bucharest. However, the initial sample contained 456 subjects: 246 in Oulu, 107 in Bucharest, and 103 in Lleida. From these, 338 were Erasmus students. The fact that the final number of participants is much smaller than the initial one is due to different factors: (1) just residents from countries on the European continent were considered for the final sample since the initial sample included a wide diversity of nationalities and in the case of Lleida, many of the non-European international students came from countries in Latin America where Spanish was the first language;

(2) several students who had taken part in the data collection at the beginning of the stay could not be contacted after the stay abroad was over, and so they were not available for answering the online questionnaire at the end of the sojourn; (3) just Bachelor and Master's degree students enrolled for one or two semesters at the respective universities were considered for the final sample, whereas the initial one had included doctoral students as well; (4) particular cases were eliminated because their answers were incomplete.

Eventually, the final sample is composed by 155 European BA and MA students, divided by gender in 87 males and 68 females. The mean age of the participants is 22.2 years old. The participants declared to have 26 different nationalities. The highest number of students comes from Italy (30), followed by Germany (27), France (18), Spain (18), the Czech Republic (10) and the Netherlands (10). The other 42 students represent Poland (7), Belgium (5), Austria (4), Slovakia (4), Bulgaria (2), Finland (2), Greece (2), Hungary (2), Sweden (2), Turkey (2), Bosnia (1), Lithuania (1), Moldova (1), Norway (1), Portugal (1), Romania (1), Slovenia (1), and Switzerland (1). Finally, 2 students have nationalities of countries outside the EU, namely Cameroonian and Kazak. The reason why these participants were included in the sample is that, in fact, they came from European countries where they were either living or pursuing a university degree, and so they were enrolled in their stay abroad through the Erasmus program.

With regard to students' knowledge of foreign languages, the sample appears to be characterized by a considerable degree of multilingualism, with a mean of 3.3 languages. Regarding their education level, 114 participants were enrolled in a Bachelor degree, and 41 were enrolled in a Master's degree. In relation to the length of their stay abroad, 116 participants were enrolled in one semester abroad, and 39 participants spent two semesters abroad. With respect to previous experiences of mobility, 75 participants declared having spent abroad at least one period longer than three weeks, whereas 80 participants declared not having any previous mobility experience for more than three weeks.

Table 2.1: General information about the participants

Gender	Female: 68	Male: 87			
Education	Bachelor: 114	Master's: 41			
Length of stay (semesters)	One: 116	Two: 39			
Previous mobility	Yes: 75	No: 80			
Social class	High: 3	Middle-high: 97	Low-middle: 52	Low: 1	N/a: 2
Parents' education	Primary: 3	Secondary/ Vocational: 64	Bachelor/ PhD: 84	Master/ N/a: 4	

With reference to the social class of the participants, 97 declared belonging to the middle-high class, followed by the low-middle class, with 52 students. Finally, 3 participants reported they belonged to the high class, 1 participant to the low class, and 2 other participants did not respond to this question. Consequently, we can say that the majority of students participating in the Erasmus program declare to belong to the middle-high class. No significant differences have been encountered between the three contexts in this respect.

Regarding the level of education of their parents, the initial 6 categories in the questionnaire (Primary, Secondary, Vocational, Bachelor, Master's, and PhD) were conflated into 3: Primary; Secondary or Vocational; and Bachelor, Master's or PhD. Therefore, 84 participants reported coming from families where at least one of their parents had completed a university degree, 64 participants declared at least one of their parents had completed either Secondary or Vocational training, whereas 3 participants reported none of their parents had studied further than Primary Education and 4 did not answer this question. Consequently, it can be stated that more than half of the students come from families where at least one of the parents have completed some degree of university education. Some correlation can be established between these results and the ones coming from the question on social class. It makes sense to assume that a majority of students participating in mobility programs came from families with a rather high socio-educational level, as is indicated by both their parents' educational level and their self-perceived social class.

4.3.2.2. Qualitative data

The participants selected for the semi-structured interviews were chosen among those in the quantitative sample. In total, 120 students were interviewed at the beginning of their stay: 64 in Lleida, 17 in Oulu, and 39 in Bucharest. The disparity between the number of students for each context in the quantitative sample and the interviewed students is due to the fact that Oulu was the first context where data were collected and the interviews were conducted after the welcome day at the university. In Lleida and Bucharest, some participants were already contacted before the welcome day through the Facebook groups created by and for international students. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted individually with each participant. However, a few students were interviewed in pairs or as a group at the beginning of their stay abroad. At the end of the stay, a total of 58 participants were interviewed through Skype (2 of them: Jennifer and Claudia were interviewed together): 29 of those who had done their stay in Lleida, 12 in Oulu, and 17 in Bucharest. These constitute almost half of the participants who did the interviews at the beginning. The drop off in number is due to the fact that at the onset of their stay abroad, the students were interviewed personally while at the end of the stay, Skype was used, and therefore, the process required more preparation and a better scheduling. Finally, 16 participants were chosen for the analysis in the qualitative part of the present study (5 in Lleida, 5 in Bucharest, and 6 in Oulu). The selection was made according to the following criteria: (1) balanced gender; (2) balanced geographical distribution; (3) balanced field of studies. Consequently, the PRE and POST interviews with the participants in Table 2.2 (whose names were modified to preserve anonymity) were transcribed and analyzed. Important to mention is the fact that some of the participants were interviewed in groups with other students (Federica, Kalina, Federico, and Petronela) and some others in pairs at the beginning of their stay: Jennifer and Claudia, and Sami and Jussi, and two of them (Jennifer and Claudia) were also interviewed together at the end of the experience.

Table 2.2: Participants in the qualitative data collection

Location	Name	Nationality	Gender	Age	Degree
Oulu	Jennifer C. (JC)	Spanish	female	21	Nursing
Oulu	Diego D. (DD)	Spanish	male	23	Construction Engineering
Oulu	Meyer L. (ML)	German	male	21	Business Administration
Oulu	Mila J. (MJ)	Bulgaria	female	22	English Studies
Oulu	Claudia Q.(CQ)	Spain	female	22	Nursing
Oulu	Stefaan M. (SM)	Dutch	male	22	Computer Science
Bucharest	Federica H. (FH)	Italian	female	21	Business
Bucharest	Sami M. (SM)	Finnish	male	24	Construction Engineering
Bucharest	Jussi N. (JN)	Finnish	male	24	Construction Engineering
Bucharest	Jesús O. (JO)	Spanish	male	22	Physics
Bucharest	Kalina N. (KN)	Bulgarian	female	22	Political Science
Lleida	Federico B. (FB)	Italian	male	21	Law
Lleida	Mildri L. (ML)	Norwegian	female	25	Medicine
Lleida	Petronela S. (PS)	Polish	female	21	Agricultural Engineering
Lleida	Radka T. (RT)	Czech	Female	23	Sports and Biology Education
Lleida	Mădălina S. (MS)	Moldovan	Female	20	Journalism

4.3.3. Instruments

For gathering the data, two different instruments were used: a questionnaire, mainly composed by Likert-scale questions and a semi-structured interview. An additional instrument was used to collect data on the English proficiency of participants but these data were discarded for the present study and reserved for future use. PRE and POST versions of all the research instruments were used for collecting data, at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad.

4.3.3.1. *The questionnaire*

For eliciting the quantitative data for the present project, a questionnaire was designed (see Appendix 1). Brown (2001: 6) has defined questionnaires as “any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out

their answers or selecting among existing answers”. The popularity of questionnaires, according to Dörnyei (2003: 1) “is due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable”. For the questions, Likert-scales questionnaires (1 to 5 scales) were employed, a method that is “simple, versatile, and reliable” (Dörnyei, 2003: 36). According to Dörnyei (2003), the completion limit of a questionnaire should not exceed 30 minutes, and consequently the questionnaire was designed to be completed in approximately 25 minutes. It consisted of a section with demographic information followed by 56 questions (in the version used at the beginning of the stay) and 68 questions (in the POST version). All the questions, with the exception of three (1, 11, and 19) were statements to which the participants had to express their agreement or disagreement by selecting a number that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Question 1 asked the students to write 5 words about the Erasmus program, question 11 had to be answered choosing YES or NO, and question 19 required the participants to choose between 2 items.

The items of the questionnaire were created drawing on different sources. First of all, I focused on a proposal for the HORIZON 2020 program *Youth mobility: opportunities, impacts, policies*, led by Prof. David Block and written by different members of the research group I am a member of, together with academics from other European Universities, among which the Oulu University of Applied Sciences and the Bucharest Economic Studies University. The project aimed at understanding the socioeconomic stratification in European societies and the impact of mobility in education, employment, and non-institutional settings. Unfortunately, the application was not successful. However, as I previously mentioned, I could come out with ideas for the questionnaire items by reading the proposal.

Secondly, another source of inspiration was a previous questionnaire employed by Cots *et al.* (2016) and by Llurda *et al.* (2016) in order to examine the impact of Erasmus mobility on the

linguistic and intercultural outcomes of Erasmus students from Catalonia who were spending a stay abroad in different European settings.

Finally, besides the literature discussed above, I also drew on previous questionnaires, such as those employed by Hammer *et al.* (2003) in a project on intercultural sensitivity, and Huguet & Llurda (2001) in a project on language attitudes of school children in a Spanish/Catalan bilingual context.

The questionnaire contained items dealing with the following topics, directly linked to the specific objectives of the study:

1. Imagined identities and European citizenship: questions 2 to 17 and questions 22 to 32.
2. Multilingualism, language learning and attitudes to languages: questions 18 to 21 and questions 46 to 56.
3. Investment, expectations and perceived outcomes of the stay at personal/academic/professional level: questions 33 to 45
4. Language use, linguistic practices, and perceived language-related outcomes (added in the POST-version): questions 56 to 68.

Therefore, the only differences between the PRE and the POST versions of the questionnaire were in the different verbal tenses used to express aspects related to their expected experiences (future in the PRE version and past in the POST version), and the addition of 13 questions in the POST questionnaire, in which the participants were asked to reflect about their past experience. The questionnaire was distributed in English in the three contexts, but the participants in the Lleida group were given the option to answer the questionnaire in English or Spanish, according to their preference. Questionnaires given to participants in the three different contexts also differed in the specific mentioning of the local context or the local language, which in the case of Lleida included

references to both local languages: Catalan and Spanish, which made this particular version a bit longer than the others, since some items dealing with the local language were duplicated to include both, Catalan and Spanish. At the beginning of the stay abroad the questionnaire was distributed in paper, while at the end it was distributed online through *Google forms*. Students were contacted by email or Facebook Messenger and they were sent the following link that allowed them access to the online questionnaire: <https://goo.gl/forms/uwfpzGTX6LjwzxYC2>.

4.3.3.2. *The interview*

The second research instrument that was used was a semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2). According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009:1), “(t)he qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations.” Through interviews, “(w)e as researchers ask participants to be selective in (1) their telling, (2) their interpretation of experience, (3) their representation of themselves, and (4) the assumptions that they make about who that self is (during the telling)” (Mazzei, 2013: 735). Consequently, (w)hat emanates from such centering is a supposedly coherent narrative that represents truth about the person and their lived experiences” (ibid., p. 735). As mentioned above, the type of interview that was employed is semi-structured, in which “(a)lthough there is a set of pre-pared guiding questions and prompts, the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner” (Dörnyei, 2011: 136).

According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009), research interview knowledge has the following seven features:

- It is produced – the interview is a site where knowledge is produced through interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, and it continues with the transcription, analysis, and reporting of the data.
- It is relational –it is produced in between (inter) the interviewer and the interviewee; it is therefore inter-relational.
- It is conversational – meaning is negotiated through discourse.
- It is contextual – it is situational and not necessarily transferable to another context. This applies also when the interviews are transferred to contexts where the researcher discusses the validity of the knowledge produced with other researchers and when the knowledge produced becomes of public use.
- It is linguistic – it is produced through linguistic interaction
- It is narrative – “research interviews give access to the manifold local narratives embodied in storytelling and they might themselves be reported in a narrative form.” (ibid., p. 55)
- It is pragmatic – it is meant to provide knowledge that is useful for understanding the world.

Considering the above, it could be stated that research interviews produce a substantially different type of knowledge when compared to surveys. In fact, except the last characteristic, the previous six are actually differences between the two. For instance, Dörnyei (2003: 129) makes the point that “although questionnaires offer a versatile and highly effective means of data collection, the kinds of insight they can generate are limited by several factors (...) in that they offer little scope for explorative, in-depth analyses of complex relationships or for doing justice to the subjective variety of individual life”. It seems to me the nature of interviews might overcome exactly these limitations.

However, there are also disadvantages of using interviews for collecting data. For instance, Dörnyei (2011: 143) makes the point that interviews are “time-consuming to set up and conduct” and they “require good communication skills on the part of the interviewer, which not all of us have naturally”.

The interview was designed following the same themes as in the questionnaire. The main aim was to further explore some of its questions. The interview was given shape with the aim to expand on those questions that could not be expanded in the questionnaire. The idea was to enquire about the “why”, “how” and “what for” and to give participants space to explain their reasons, practices, expectations, hopes, and perceived outcomes, as well as the ways the imagined themselves, and what

the contribution of the stay would be in the construction of the type of individuals they wanted to become.

The PRE interview consisted of 18 questions. However, since the design was semi-structured, the order of the questions was slightly altered and the participants were invited to expand on their answers and add any further idea they had. This interview was conducted in person, often individually and occasionally in pairs or groups of three and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.

The POST-interview had 46 questions (see Appendix 3), many more than the initial version, since many questions related to the stay and to the future perspectives of the participants. At the end of the stay, the interviews were conducted through Skype and audio-recorded using SkypeRecorderLite. They lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

4.3.4. Procedure

For the design of the questionnaire, firstly, an extensive reading of the literature on language learning in study abroad, identity, European citizenship, nationalism, and transnationalism was done. Based on these readings, some questions could be developed. Afterwards, some former study abroad participants with whom I was acquainted to were invited to answer a few questions about their experience, which were answered in written form. This questionnaire was answered by 26 people.

After the first version of the questionnaire intended to be used to collect data for the present project was designed, it was piloted with 31 people: 25 who were sent the document through email or Facebook Messenger and asked to take notes of any comment, concern, or idea they might have and 6 who followed the same process in person. All the volunteers who agreed to participate in the pilot study were acquaintances I had who I knew had had previous mobility experiences, even though they were different in length and nature. One of the volunteers who participated in the pilot study also

answered the questionnaire addressed to former Erasmus students. The main aim of the pilot study was to examine if the items were understandable or not. Furthermore, the volunteers were invited to contribute by adding questions they might have found were necessary in the questionnaire. Also, the length of the questionnaire was checked at this stage. Many modifications and improvements were made in the questionnaire after the piloting stage. Therefore, ambiguous words and sentences were reformulated, instructions were made clearer, and the overall appearance of the questionnaire was improved.

The research was conducted during the academic year 2015/2016. Since this is a two-phase longitudinal study, the data were collected at two different moments: the first being the beginning of the stay abroad (between one and three weeks from the arrival of the students) and the second at the end of the stay abroad (between one and four weeks from the return of the students to their home countries). In the first phase, the data were collected *in situ*, meaning in Oulu, Bucharest, and Lleida. In Oulu and Bucharest, the questionnaire data were mostly collected on the international student welcome day organized by the university, or by the university together with the ESN (Erasmus Student Network). In Lleida, most of the questionnaire data were collected at the end of a two-week introductory Catalan course. At the end of the stay abroad, the data were collected while each of the participants was in his/ home country or on holidays, since it coincided with holiday periods.

The International Office of each of the five universities was contacted a few months before the start of the academic year, and in all cases the answers were positive. However, not all of them seemed willing to cooperate to the same extent and not all of them required undergoing the same process. The two universities in Oulu demanded a research plan and copies of the questionnaire. Previous meetings with the International Relations Officers at Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Lleida University were conducted before the data collection. Finally, it was agreed that I was going to be allocated 30 minutes during the welcome day at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Oulu University, and Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In Lleida, I was allocated

the same time but after the exam at the conclusion of an introductory Catalan language and culture course. At Bucharest University, I was not allocated any time for the questionnaires so the few students from this university who participated in the study answered the questionnaire on the same day with the interviews, usually in my apartment. Fortunately, the academic year started on different dates at each of the three universities, so I could spend at least three weeks in each setting, collecting the data, and cohabiting with the students during their first days at their host universities. At the moment of collection of quantitative data (the questionnaire), firstly, the participants were informed about the study and they were invited to formulate any questions they had. Afterwards, they were notified about the length of the questionnaire, and the consent form (see Appendix 4), and were requested to consider volunteering for being interviewed by affirmatively answering the last question. The second phase involved contacting the volunteers for the interview through email or telephone in order to agree on a date and time. The initial interviews were conducted either at the university (I had a temporary office at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences and my office at the University of Lleida) or at the apartment I rented in Bucharest. However, the process was slightly different in the case of participants who were invited through an Erasmus Student Facebook group to participate. I discovered this Facebook group upon my arrival in Bucharest and since the official day for the data collection at the university was scheduled upon the end of my stay in Bucharest, I decided to explain the Erasmus students in this group the research I was conducting and I invited them to participate. This is the case of all the students at the University of Bucharest, who unlike those in all the other four institutions were not given any specific time for the questionnaire and were all contacted through this Facebook group.

Once all the data from the PRE test were obtained, they were introduced in an SPSS datasheet for statistical analysis. In the middle of the semester, those students who were interviewed received a “Thank you” card and a notebook as a sign of gratitude.

The following step consisted in transforming the paper-based questionnaire in an online questionnaire in order for the students to be able to respond to it upon their return to their home countries. Therefore, at the end of their stay abroad, the participants received a link through email or *Facebook Messenger*, which gave them access to a *Google Forms* questionnaire. Once more, for the Lleida group, there was the possibility to receive the Spanish version of the questionnaire if they preferred so. The answers were collected in an Excel data sheet, and then transferred to the SPSS file that already contained the responses obtained at the beginning of the stay abroad. Some of the students were also interviewed through Skype and the interviews were audio-recorded with the tool *SkypeRecorderLite*.

At the same time, since the number of Erasmus students in Lleida was quite reduced, international European students arriving at the university during the second semester were contacted and invited to participate in the study upon their arrival. Therefore, this phase consisted of collecting two sets of data. On the one hand, the students who had already spent one semester abroad were sent a link through which they could access and respond the POST online questionnaire, and some of them participated in the POST interviews performed through Skype. On the other hand, international students arriving at Lleida University for the second semester were invited to answer the PRE questionnaire and participate in the PRE interview. Through the three previous stages, some of the data were continuously processed concurrently with the other steps.

The last step was contacting the participants who spent the whole year abroad (or the second semester in the case of Lleida students) upon their return and inviting them to answer the online questionnaire and participating in the POST interviews. This took place during the summer of 2016.

4.3.5. Data Analysis

As indicated above, only European participants who had completed both questionnaires were included in the analysis. In the first place, descriptive statistics were employed to examine the demographic data. Secondly, a Shapiro-Wilk test was run for all the items in order to see if the distribution of the data was normal or not. The results indicated that the data violated the assumption of normality. Consequently, the responses have been analyzed by means of non-parametric tests. In the first place, a Mann Whitney U test was run to see whether there were any significant differences between the responses of female and male participants. Secondly, a Kruskal-Wallis test was used in order to examine if there were any differences between the three contexts firstly in the PRE and secondly in the POST test. In those cases where significant differences were detected, Pair-wise tests were employed in order to determine between what particular contexts the differences are significant. Finally, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine the evolution between the PRE and the POST test. This test was run firstly, for the combined sample, and in some cases, each group was considered separately.

For the interviews, since the aim was to deal with narratives voiced at the beginning and at the end of a mobility process, thematic analysis was employed. Thematic analysis has been identified by Block (2010) as one of three distinct ways to deal with narratives, together with structural analysis, and dialogic/performative analysis. The same author defined thematic analysis as “primarily a focus on the content of what is said, leaving to the side other aspects of narrative, such as how it is produced” (Block, 2010: 340). Since the main aim was to interpret meaning from text data, all the selected interviews were transcribed using basic transcription conventions. Initially, orthographic transcription appeared as the most feasible technique due to time limitations and the important volume of data to be processed and analyzed. However, after realizing that an orthographic transcription would situate the event of the interview and the text at considerable distance, I decided

to adopt a few transcription conventions, which do not detail the nuances of the narratives but captures their essence in a better way than the orthographic transcription.

Due to the fact that the questionnaire was designed before the interview and since the latter was meant to corroborate, validate, or show contradictions with the former, first of all, information related to the different themes around which the questionnaire was built was searched for in the interviews. After this step, the transcripts were analyzed again in order to see if other relevant themes emerged. If this was the case, new themes were added to those of the questionnaire. Finally, the results of the quantitative and the qualitative analysis were combined and compared.

Part III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part III includes two chapters of analysis and a chapter of discussion. Before explaining the content of each of the three chapters in this section, though, it is important to mention one more time that the present study intends to answer the following research question:

What is the impact of the participation in the Erasmus study abroad program on the identities, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as reported by international university students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia?

In order to structure the investigation, the main research question has been divided into the following sub-questions:

- 1) What are the expectations of the participants, their forms of investment, and their imagined identities at the beginning of the stay?
- 2) In what ways Erasmus students relate and adapt to the languages present in the Erasmus community in the three analyzed contexts?
- 3) What are the identity and employability-related outcomes of the experience as reported by the students at the end of the stay?
- 4) What changes in identities (with a focus on European identity) and in attitudes are experienced among university students as a result of a stay abroad?
- 5) How expectations and outcomes in three different European settings are different and what profiles of students can be established according to their chosen destination.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaires that were administered at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. The chapter contains two sections, following the internal structure of the questionnaire, which includes questions related to two broad topics. The first one is identity, which embraces aspects related to sense of belonging, capacity to adapt to other cultures, as well as representations of Europe and European identity, with a special focus on the role languages plays in the processes of identification. The second topic is investment and expectations, where again, the emphasis will be on the role languages and language learning play along the sojourn abroad, which starts with the initial expectations, continues with the actual investment as reported by the students, and ends with the outcomes of the experience and their expected impact on the imagined futures of the participants. In this section, the connection between the stay abroad, language learning, and the concept of "employability" will also be explored with the aim to understand how language competences are ultimately transformed into human capital and what purposes this capital is expected to serve.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of selected semi-structured interviews conducted at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad with a total of sixteen participants. This chapter, which will follow a similar structure to the one in Chapter 5, is intended to explore in a deeper way than the previous one the evolution of the participants in terms of firstly, identification, sense of belonging, capacity to adapt to other cultures and representations of Europe and European identity; and secondly, their expectations from the stay, the type of investment they are ready to make, and the one they actually report to have made, the linguistic and other types of capital they report to gain, and the imagined impact of this capital on their future.

Finally, Chapter 7 synthesizes and contrasts the most outstanding results of Chapters 5 and 6. Therefore, this chapter serves as a means to bring together and jointly discuss the quantitative and the qualitative results, as well as to compare and contrast the results of the present project with other findings from the literature on the same topic.

Chapter 5. Quantitative results

This chapter analyses in the first place how the participants construct their identity and sense of belonging at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. Moreover, it explores the degree of knowledge and the capacity to adapt to other cultures, as deployed by the participants in the PRE and the POST test. Further, Chapter 5 examines the representations of Europe and European identity as reported by the participants both at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn.

In the second place, this chapter analyzes, on the one hand, the expectations of the Erasmus students and those practices in which the participants wish to invest during their Erasmus stay, as well as what they expect to receive in return. On the other hand, it explores the actual outcomes of the experience as reported by the participants at the end of their sojourn, in order to shed light on what sort of capital is perceived to have been gained and what is the imagined impact of this capital on the future of the participants. All in all, this chapter will try to shed light on the role of language(s) and language learning in study abroad, as perceived by the participants at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn, and always in reference to the broader social and material meaning of the experience.

As mentioned above, Chapter 5 explores and contrasts the quantitative results from the PRE and the POST test. Therefore, the data comes from Likert-scale questions (1 to 5). In order to check if the data followed a normal distribution, a Shapiro-Wilk test was run for all the items. The results indicated that the data violated the assumption of normality. Therefore, the responses have been analyzed by means of non-parametric tests. In the first place, a Kruskal-Wallis test was used in order to examine if there were any differences between the three contexts both in the PRE and in the POST test. Secondly, in those cases where significant differences were detected, Pair-wise tests were employed with the aim to reveal between what particular contexts the differences are significant.

Finally, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine the evolution between the PRE and the POST test. This test was run firstly, for the whole group, and in some cases, each group was considered separately. However, caution should be paid in this respect because the number of participants in each group is different.

Despite the fact that the data violated the assumption of normality, the parametric tests (one way ANOVA, Paired t-test, and Tukey post-hoc test) equivalent to the non-parametric tests mentioned above were also applied in order to see if the results were the same or not. This is done so because after having consulted with an expert statistician, I was advised to resort to non-parametric tests, but I was also informed that it is rather common and not considered inappropriate to run parametric tests without checking for normality, even when Likert scales are used. In the vast majority of cases, the results were the same or very similar. In a few other cases, the parametric tests showed some significant differences where the non-parametric ones just indicated a tendency which was strong but not significant. In these specific cases, the results of the parametric tests will also be mentioned.

Since the order of the items that are presented does not follow the order in which they are deployed in the questionnaire, the exact questions have been introduced in a table which also includes the mean scores for each item, as well as an indication of significant differences, if any.

5.1. Identity, sense of belonging, and capacity to adapt to other cultures

This subsection examines the responses to different questions related to the identity and sense of belonging of the participants as well as to their knowledge and capacity to adapt to different cultures, and their representations of Europe and European identity, as reported at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. The results in this section will be analyzed from two different

perspectives: 1) cross-sectional (comparing responses of the three settings at the same moment in time) and 2) longitudinal (comparing the results at the two moments of the data collection).

Regarding the way in which the participants perceive their identities, as can be observed in Table 5.1 1, the three groups appear to be quite homogeneous, showing no significant differences with regard to any of the five items, both at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn.

Table 5.1: Identity and sense of belonging

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
I know well who I am and to which geographical space I belong to.	3.8	3.6	4.1	3.9	4	3.9	3.9	3.8
My identity is complex and sometimes contradictory with regard to the places where I live, my cultures and my languages.	3.1	3.4	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.4	3.1*	3.4*
We acquire our identity from our parents and environment; we have no choice.	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.9	2.4	2.4	2.5	2.6
We have the choice to decide on how to develop our own identity.	4.2	4.1	4.1	4	4	4.3	4.2	4.1
I have the feeling that I need to negotiate my role in society constantly.	2.9	2.8	2.9	3.1	2.9	3.1	2.9	2.9

* $p < .05$

On the whole, it seems that the students feel to a considerable extent that they have the choice to decide on how to develop their identities. In a similar way, they report knowing well who they are and to which geographical space they belong, with no differences in their identities, and a general feeling that their identities are well-established, that is, they do not need to be constantly negotiated in society. However, it seems that the experience might have affected the overall perceptions of the participants with regard to their identity and sense of belonging. The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed significant differences in relation to the second item “My identity is complex and sometimes contradictory with regard to the places where I live, my cultures and my languages” ($Z = -2.471$, $p < .05$). The results signal an overall evolution towards a perception of a more highly complex and contradictory identity as a result of the stay abroad, where the distinction between places,

cultures, and languages might become more pluralistic, probably suggesting a more hybrid, multi-faceted identity as a result of the Erasmus experience.

Likewise, as depicted in Table 5. 2, when it comes to the perceived effect of the stay abroad on their sense of belonging after they had completed their period abroad, the total score the participants allocate to the first item: “I belong to more than one space” is considerably high, indicating a noteworthy affiliation to more than one space as a possible result of the Erasmus experience.

Table 5. 2: Sense of belonging after the stay abroad

This mobility stay made me feel that:				
	Oulu	Lleida	Bucharest	Total
I belong to more than one space.	4*	4.2	4.5*	4.1
I belong to my country.	2.8	3.2	3.2	3

* p<.05

This result reinforces the previous one which shows an increase in identity complexity, and sense of belonging to more than one place as a result of the experience. Concerning this item, there were significant differences between the three groups ($\chi^2(2)=7.527$, $p<.05$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons signaled significant differences between the Oulu and the Bucharest groups ($p=.03$). This points out to a perception that the stay abroad has triggered a significantly more accentuated sense of belonging to multiple spaces in those students who were enrolled in a sojourn abroad in Bucharest than in those who chose Oulu as a destination.

On a similar token, as can be observed in Table 5. 3, when it comes to their own experience with cultural differences, the participants give the impression to allocate high importance to the fact that their decision-making skills are expanded by having multiple cultural viewpoints. Furthermore, it appears that the students identify themselves as people who can maintain their values and behave

in culturally appropriate ways in any context to quite a substantial extent. In the PRE test, no significant differences have been encountered between the three contexts with regard to any item, indicating the participants across the three settings have a similar profile at the beginning of the stay abroad respecting this aspect.

Table 5. 3: Self-perception with regard to cultural differences

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
My life experience enables me to be successful in any cultural context.	3.6	3.7	3.3	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.4*	3.7*
When I get to know other cultures, I realize how much better my culture is (INVERTED RESULTS).	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.9	3.5	3.8	3.6
I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways in any context.	3.9	4.2	3.8	4	4	4.3	3.9*	4.2*
I can look at any situation from a variety of cultural points of view.	3.5	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.7	4	3.6*	3.9*
My decision-making skills are expanded by having multiple cultural viewpoints.	4	3.8/	4.1	4.1	4.3	4.4/	4.1	4

*/ p<.05

However, overall significant differences between the PRE and POST test with regard to three different items have been revealed. The first one is “My life experience enables me to be successful in any cultural context” ($Z=-2.744$, $p=.006$), a fact which points out to an overall significantly higher perception of being able to be successful in any cultural context at the end of the stay abroad. The second item is “I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways in any context” ($Z=-3.134$, $p=.002$). This indicates again, a significantly higher overall perception of being able to be successful in any cultural context at the end of the stay abroad. Finally, the third item with regard to which significant differences were encountered is “I can look at any situation from a variety of cultural points of view” ($Z=-3.134$, $p=.002$), signaling, once more, an overall significantly higher perception of disposing of multiple cultural viewpoints at the end of the Erasmus experience. Finally, while no significant differences between the three settings were found in the PRE test, one significant difference was revealed with respect to the item “My decision-making skills are expanded

by having multiple cultural viewpoints” ($\chi^2(2)=11.706$, $p=.003$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons signaled significant differences between Oulu and Bucharest ($p=.002$), indicating that those participants who spent their stay in Bucharest seem to have been significantly more affected by the experience with regard to their multiple cultural viewpoints than the ones who spent their stay abroad in Finland.

After enquiring about their perceived present identities, another aspect of the participants’ identities that was elicited by means of the questionnaire was the value attributed to and the perceived capacity of the participants to adapt to different cultures. As can be observed in Table 5. 4, the students seem to agree to a high extent with the fact that all cultures have the same value.

Table 5. 4: Attitudes towards other cultures

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
All cultures have the same value.	4	4	3.6*	4.2	4.4*	4.1	4	4.1
Different cultural backgrounds can be a barrier to communication.	2.9	2.9	3.1	3	3	3.1	3	2.9
No matter their culture, people everywhere are motivated by the same things.	3.3	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2
The more cultural differences, the better – it’s boring if everyone is the same.	3.9	3.9/	3.9	4.1	4	4.4/	3.9	4
People in other cultures are different in ways I hadn’t thought before.	3.4	3.8	3.3	3.6	3.3	3.8	3.4#	3.7#
Everywhere is home, if you know enough how things work there.	3.7	3.7	3.9	4.1	3.9	4	3.8	3.9

*#/ $p<.05$

However, in the PRE test, there was a significant difference between the groups apropos of the first item: “All cultures have the same value” ($\chi^2(2)=7.234$, $p=.027$), where the Bucharest group assigned a significantly higher score to the equal value of all cultures than the Lleida group ($p=.028$). Of considerable importance is also the high total score attributed to the celebration of cultural differences, as well as the one assigned to the last item, which states that everywhere is home if you have enough knowledge about how things work there.

The only significant difference between the PRE and the POST test concerns the item “People in other cultures are different in ways I hadn’t thought before” ($Z=-3.371$, $p=.001$). This is a possible indication of the fact that the stay abroad might raise the cultural awareness of the students, no matter the place they choose as a destination. Significant differences in the POST test have also been revealed with regard to the item “The more cultural differences, the better – it’s boring if everyone is the same” ($\chi^2(2)=10.891$, $p=.004$): the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the one for Bucharest ($p=.003$), pointing out a significantly higher tendency to celebrate cultural difference in the Bucharest group when compared to the Oulu group at the end of the Erasmus experience. Noteworthy is also the fact that while in the PRE test there were significant differences between the Lleida and the Bucharest group with regard to the first item “All cultures have the same value”, these differences seem to have disappeared in the POST test. This could denote that the Erasmus experience might be a factor that triggers the perception of equal value among cultures.

Furthermore, on the topic of how the students perceive themselves with respect to the community of their stay abroad, the highest total score, as represented in Table 5. 5, is assigned to the category of “traveler”.

Table 5. 5: Self-perception respecting the community of the stay abroad

How do you perceive yourself with regard to the local community in which your stay will take place:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
An immigrant	2.6*	2.1	2	2.2	1.7*	2.1	2.2	2.1
A local	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.7	1.9	2.5	2.1#	2.4#
A traveler	4	3.9	4	4	4.3	4	4.1	4
A stranger	2.9	2.5	3	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.9#	2.6#

* # $p<.05$

In the PRE test, a significant difference between the groups was found with regard to the category “immigrant” ($\chi^2(2)=14.124$, $p=.001$): the Oulu group’s score was significantly higher than the one for the Bucharest group ($p=.001$), pointing to the fact that at the beginning of the stay abroad, those students who chose Finland as a destination identify to a higher extent with the category

“immigrant” than those who chose Romania. This difference, which does not appear in the POST test might exist for two possible reasons: one of them could be the fact that in general, Finland could be seen as a country that receives immigrants while Romania could be regarded more as a country that sends immigrants. The second hypothesis is that those students who chose Bucharest as a destination are more inclined to feeling at home in the world to a higher extent than those who chose Oulu.

Also, significant differences between the PRE and the POST test with respect to two items have been revealed. The first one is the item “local” ($Z=-2.699$, $p=.007$), which indicates that overall, the participants felt as a local to a significantly higher extent at the end of their stay abroad than at its beginning. Furthermore, significant differences were also found with regard to the item “stranger” ($Z=-2.392$, $p=.017$), signaling that at the end of their stay abroad, the students perceived themselves as strangers in their host communities to a significantly lower extent than at the beginning.

Referring to the perspective to live in different places in the future, as presented in Table 5. 6, the idea of living in any European country surpasses the idea of living anywhere else both in the PRE and in the POST test. In fact, the expectancy to live in any European country is even higher than the one of living in one’s own country.

Table 5. 6: Future mobility perspectives in different settings

In the future, I see myself living:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
In my country	3.6	3.6#	3.7	3.6-	3.3	3.1#-	3.5	3.5
In any European country	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.9	4	3.9	3.8	3.8
In any occidental country	2.8*	3/	3.3	3.5/	3.4*	3.5/	3.1	3.2
In any place of the world	3.1	2.9*	3.1	3.5*	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.1

*#/ $p<.05$

In the PRE test, significant differences have been found with respect to the third item: “living in any occidental country” ($\chi^2(2)=10.978$), with the Oulu group scoring significantly lower than the Bucharest group ($p=.006$), and almost significantly lower than the one for the Lleida group.

Therefore, the results give the impression that the group who had the lowest predisposition towards living in any occidental country chose Finland as a destination.

No significant differences between the beginning and the end of the Erasmus stay were encountered. However, while in the PRE test, there was a single significant difference with regard to the item “living in any occidental country”, in the POST test, there were significant differences between the contexts concerning three of the four items. Firstly, with respect to the item “own country” ($\chi^2(2)=6.451$, $p=.040$), the mean score for Oulu is significantly higher than the mean score for Bucharest ($p=.020$) and the one for Lleida ($p=.033$). This signals that at the end of the sojourn, for those students who have spent their stay in Oulu, the perspective to live in their own country in the future is significantly higher than for the ones who had Bucharest and Lleida as a destination. The second item in which significant differences appeared in the POST test was “any occidental country” ($\chi^2(2)=9.858$, $p=.007$). The mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for both Lleida ($p=.030$) and Bucharest ($p=.035$), indicating that at the end of the stay abroad, the participants in Oulu envisioned themselves living in any occidental country to a significantly lower extent than both those in Bucharest and Lleida. Finally, significant differences were also found with respect to the item “any place of the world” ($\chi^2(2)=6.478$, $p=.039$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons showed that the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the one for Lleida ($p=.045$), pointing out that at the end of their Erasmus experience, those participants who had Finland as a destination pictured themselves in any country of the world to a significantly lower extent than those who chose Lleida.

In fact, the only item with regard to which there are no significant differences between the groups both in the PRE and the POST test is the possibility to live in any European country. This might be understood as an indicator of the fact that European youth participating in the Erasmus program, overall, do consider mobility inside the EU as a future option.

5.1.1. Representations of Europe and European identity

In Table 5. 6 it can be observed that when it comes to future mobility perspectives, on the whole, living in a European country seems to be the most plausible option, and also the only one with regard to which there aren't significant discrepancies neither at the beginning nor at the end of the stay abroad. This could be considered an indicator of a certain degree of identification with Europe. In the following lines I will introduce the results of the questionnaire items that look into the position of the participants with regard to the EU and European identity at the beginning and at the end of their Erasmus experience.

The participants were asked to rate how much they felt they belonged to their town/city/province, their country, Europe, and the world. As represented in Table 5. 7, sense of belonging to Europe is the lowest among the four categories, both in the PRE and in the POST test, a surprising fact if we compare it with the high perspective to live in any European country in the future, and which might indicate a certain degree of divergence between the sense of belonging of the participants and the ways they see possibilities for their future. In fact, it could signal a certain divergence between the participants' sense of belonging and the possibilities of the social structures through which they navigate, or those they foresee that they might be able to navigate.

Table 5. 7: Sense of belonging to different places

How much do you feel you belong to:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Your town/city/province	3.6	3.6	3.9	3.5	4	3.9	3.8	3.6
Your country	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.9	3.2	3.1	3.8	3.8
Europe	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6
The world	3.8	3.9	3.7	3.8	4.1	3.9	3.9	3.9

No significant differences were encountered between the three contexts, neither at the beginning, nor at the end of the stay abroad. Furthermore, the overall scores assigned to the four

categories are almost the same in the PRE and the POST test, which might suggest that on the whole, the stay abroad does not have an impact on the sense of belonging to any of the four places that appear in the table. If we recall the discourse of the EU which praises the Erasmus program as one of the engines to promote European identity, the results of the POST test with regard to sense of belonging to Europe at the end of the Erasmus experience are not very encouraging.

By the same token, when it comes to identification with different groups of people based on the languages they speak, the highest score, both at the beginning and at the end of the sojourn is attributed to people with whom the first language is shared, followed by people who speak English, and finally, European people, no matter their language. No significant differences were found between the PRE and POST test or between any of the three groups, but the Oulu group seems to point towards a lower identification with “European people, no matter their language” than both the Lleida and Bucharest groups. Interestingly, speaking English gives the impression to play a more important role than sharing a European identity, when it comes to group identification, as can be appreciated in Table 5. 8:

Table 5. 8: Identification with speakers of different languages

To what extent do you identify with:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
People who speak your first language.	3.9	3.9	3.9	4	4.1	4.1	4	4
People who speak English	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.6
European people, no matter their language	3.1	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.3	3.3

Table 5. 9 shows the perceptions of the students with respect to having as street neighbors people from other regions in their countries, other European countries, or countries outside Europe. It is important to mention that this question was formulated in a negative way, but the results have been reversed, so in fact, the scores in the table actually mean how open the participants would be to have as neighbors people from the different places mentioned below.

Table 5. 9: Willingness to have different neighbors

How opposed would you be to having as street neighbors (REVERSED RESULTS):								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Neighbors other regions in your country	4	4.1	3.8	3.7	4.2	3.9	4	4
Neighbors other European countries	4	4.1	3.7	3.9	4.1	3.7	3.9	3.9
Neighbors countries outside Europe	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.7	4.1	3.8	3.9	3.9

As can be observed, similarly high scores are attributed to each of the three categories, and no significant differences have been encountered between the PRE and POST test or between the three contexts, indicating that the participants feel the same way about having as street neighbors people from their own countries, as people from other European countries, as well as people from other countries outside Europe. This might be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it can be concluded that young Europeans who enroll in a mobility program are already considerably open to having neighbors from different places; and on the other, it might suggest that the stay abroad may not have a significant impact on the acceptance of foreign people as neighbors, no matter where they come from.

Concerning the frequency the students follow local, national, and European news, as can be observed in Table 5. 10, the total mean scores show similar results for the three categories, even though there is a higher preference for national news and affairs.

Table 5. 10: Frequency following news and affairs

How frequently do you follow the following news and affairs:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Local	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.8	3	2.7	2.9#	3.1#
National	3.3*	3.2	3.4	3.2	3.8*	3.4	3.4	3.4
European	2.9*	2.8	3.2	3	3.4*	3.1	3.1	3.2

*# p<.05

However, in the PRE test, there are significant differences between the groups with regard to national news ($\chi^2(2)=7.328$, $p=.026$) and European news ($\chi^2(2)=6.685$, $p=.035$). Concerning the

second item: “national news and affairs”, the mean score for the Bucharest group is significantly higher than the one for the Oulu group ($p=.020$). Respecting the third item: “European news and affairs”, the Bucharest group scored significantly higher than the Oulu group ($p=.033$). These results suggest that the students who chose Romania as a destination manifest a higher interest both for national news and affairs and for European news and affairs than the ones that chose Finland. Furthermore, significant differences between the PRE and the POST results were detected with regard to the item “local news” ($Z=-2.198$, $p=.028$). This might suggest that overall the stay abroad has determined the participants to follow to significantly higher extent local news and affairs. Furthermore, while there were some significant differences between the groups in the PRE test, the results of the POST test show overall agreement among the three settings, pointing, again, to a possible homogenizing effect of the Erasmus experience.

In relation to their sense of pride for being European, as illustrated in Table 5. 11, significant differences were found between the PRE and the POST test ($Z=-2.903$, $p=.004$). This indicates an overall significantly higher disenchantment with being European at the end of the stay abroad. Again, the results, which coincide with the previous ones, are not very encouraging when it comes to the idea of fostering European identity through the Erasmus program. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting these results since the data were collected at a time where the EU was starting to face the refugee crisis which triggered negative reactions from many EU citizens.

Table 5. 11: Pride of being European

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
How proud are you to be European?	3.7	3.3	3.8	3.5	4	3.5	3.8*	3.4*

* $p<.05$

Table 5. 12 shows how proud the participants felt about Europe at the beginning and at the end of their stay abroad with respect to the following aspects: “the way democracy works”, “the

political influence in the world”, “economic achievements”, “history”, “treatments of all groups in society”, and “contribution to the foundation of modern civilization”. Both in the PRE and in the POST test, the highest mean score is attributed to the contribution of Europe to modern civilization, followed by its history, whereas the lowest score is attributed to European political influence in the world.

Table 5. 12: Pride of being European with regard to different aspects

How proud are you of Europe in each of the following:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Way democracy works	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.1
Political influence	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.9	2.9	3.1	2.8	3
Economic achievements	3.4	3.2	3	3	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.1
History	3.3*	3.2	3.6	3.3	3.9*	3.4	3.5#	3.3#
Treatment of all social groups	3.1	2.9/	3.1	3.5/	3.2	2.9/	3.1	3.1
Contribution to modern civilization	3.8	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.4	3.7#	3.5#

*#/ p<.05

In the PRE test, the item “history” showed significant differences ($\chi^2(2)=7.831$, $p=.020$) with the score for the Oulu group significantly lower than the one for the Bucharest group ($p=.020$). Furthermore, significant differences between the beginning and the end of the stay abroad were revealed with regard to the items “European history” ($Z=-2.507$, $p=.012$) and “contribution to modern civilization” ($Z=-2.478$, $p=.013$). Once more, these results signal a significantly lower sense of pride for European history and the contribution of Europe to the formation of modern civilization. In fact, even though it is not to a significant extent, the participants seem to show less pride for Europe in all the aspects that appear in the table, with the only exception of the political influence of Europe in the world. Again, these results do not seem to be too encouraging when it comes to promoting European identity through the Erasmus program. Finally, in the POST test, significant

differences between the three contexts were revealed with regard to the item “treatment of all social groups” ($\chi^2(2)=8.419$, $p=.015$): the Lleida group scored significantly higher than the Oulu ($p=.029$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.026$). This might suggest that those students who spent their stay abroad in Lleida feel prouder about the way Europe treats all social groups than students who enrolled in a stay abroad both in Oulu and in Bucharest.

With respect to the importance assigned to certain elements that might conform European identity, as represented in Table 5. 13, both in the PRE and in the POST test, the highest score is attributed to human rights, followed by open borders, whereas the European flag is attributed the lowest importance.

Table 5. 13: European identity: important elements

When you think about the European identity, how important do you consider to be:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
European flag	2.8	2.5/	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.2/	2.9	2.7
Euro	3.6	3.5	3.1*	3.3	3.8*	3.7	3.5	3.5
Open borders	4.4	3.9	4.3	4.1	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.1
Shared cultural heritage	3.6+	3.4	4.1	3.7	4.2+	3.8	3.9#	3.6#
Multilingualism	3.8*	3.7	4.2	4.1	4.2*	4	4	3.9
Common future	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.8	4.2	4	3.9	3.9
Sports competitions	3.4	2.9	3.8	3.1	3.5	3.3	3.5#	3.1#
Human rights	4.5	4.4	4.5	4.1	4.5	4.3	4.5#	4.3#

*+#/ $p<.05$

In the PRE test, significant differences were encountered with regard to the Euro ($\chi^2(2)=7.843$, $p=.020$): mean score for the Lleida group is significantly lower than the one for the Bucharest group ($p=.022$). Furthermore, significant differences were found between the groups with respect to the item “shared cultural heritage” ($\chi^2(2)=9.573$, $p=.008$): the Oulu group scored significantly lower than the Bucharest group ($p=.015$). Regarding this item, when the one-way ANOVA test, followed by the Tukey post-hoc test were run, significant differences were found also between the Oulu ($M=3.62$, $SD=1.06$) and the Lleida ($M=4.1$, $SD=.78$) group, where the results for the former were lower than the ones for the latter. Finally, significant differences between the groups

were revealed concerning the item “multilingualism” ($\chi^2(2)=8.301$, $p=.016$): the Oulu group scored significantly lower than the Bucharest group ($p=.036$). Moreover, significant differences between the PRE and the POST test were signaled with respect to three items. The first one is “shared cultural heritage” ($Z=-3.298$, $p=.001$), the second are “sports competitions” ($Z=-4.621$, $p=.000$), and the third are “human rights” ($Z=-2.605$, $p=.009$). In the three cases the results of the POST test are significantly lower than the ones of the PRE test, in line with the other previously mentioned results and indicating, once more, a significantly more pronounced degree of disenchantment with Europe at the end of the stay abroad. Furthermore, in the POST test, there seems to be general agreement between the three groups with regard to almost all the items. The only exception is the “European flag”, with regard to which significant differences were revealed ($\chi^2(2)=9.055$, $p=.011$): the score for Oulu is significantly higher than the one for Bucharest ($p=.008$). This indicates a significantly lower pride for the European flag in the Oulu group than in the Bucharest group. In fact, the POST test shows lower scores for all the items with except of the euro which is assigned exactly the same importance at the beginning and at the end of the sojourn abroad. The euro is, in fact, most of the times, the first element the students mention in their interviews when they report on possible unifying elements in the EU. It is noteworthy that the significant differences between the groups found in the PRE test seem to have disappeared in the POST test, indicating, again a higher level of homogeneity among the groups at the end of their stay abroad.

Furthermore, when it comes to the idea of voting, the participants seem to be more likely to vote in national elections than in any other type of election both at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. Regional and local elections follow the national ones, and European elections are the ones in which the students seem to be the least likely to vote.

Table 5. 14: Probability to vote

How likely are you to vote in the following elections:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Local	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.8
Regional	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.8
National	4	4.2	4.4	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.1	4.2
European	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.6

No significant differences have been found among the three groups nor between the PRE and the POST test, as can be observed in Table 5. 14. It is important to reiterate, again, that caution should be exercised when interpreting the results in this section since the data were collected at the time the EU was facing the beginning of the refugees' crisis and the participants' responses could have been affected by how the EU managed this situation.

5.1.2. Investment and expectations

In the following lines, to begin with, the expectations of the students with respect to their Erasmus stay will be analyzed in order to understand how invested they are, in what aspects of their stay abroad, and for what reasons. The main aim here is to shed light on how expectations are framed at the beginning of the experience, and what part of the students' investment is played by language. This is an attempt to understand, certainly to a limited extent, how desire for study abroad is framed in terms of potential goals and in terms of its perceived advantages, establishing patterns of expectations, forms of investment, and how each of them is weighted. In a nutshell, the final objective is to grasp who is anticipating what, and most importantly, what is the role of languages and language learning in the Erasmus experience.

In the second place, the perceived degree of accomplishment of the initial expectations at the end of the stay abroad will be examined. This will enable us to determine to what extent the narration of the expectations at the beginning is similar to the narration of the experience at the end of the sojourn abroad, and therefore, shed light on the relationship between the discourse behind the program to which the participants might have actually adhered and its actual impact, as perceived by the students at the end of their stay. Again, the focus will be on language learning and language attitudes, but these will always be examined as part of the broader meaning of the Erasmus stay as a complex social experience.

As can be observed in Table 5. 15, on the whole, the participants have considerably high expectations for their stay abroad experience. The highest ones are related to knowledge of other cultures, and knowledge of English, followed by two personal goals, such as autonomy and self-confidence. Acceptance of other cultures and knowledge of other languages follow shortly after.

Table 5. 15: General expectations from the mobility experience

This mobility experience will have/ has had an influence on my:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Knowledge of English	4.6*	4.2/	4.1*+	3.4/-	4.7+	4.3-	4.5#	4#
Knowledge of other cultures	4.5	4.4/	4.6	4.7/	4.7	4.5	4.6	4.5
Autonomy	4.3	4.1/-	4.6	4.5-	4.4	4.6/	4.4	4.3
Self-confidence	4.2	4	4.6	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.2
Knowledge of other languages	3.5*	3.6/	4.6*	4.5/-	4.3*	3.9-	3.9	3.9
Acceptance of other cultures	3.9*+	3.8/	4.4	4.3/	4.5+	4.2	4.2	4

*+ #-/. p<.05

When comparing the results obtained by the students in the three different contexts, significant differences were showed between the groups concerning the items “knowledge of English” ($\chi^2(2)=11.027$, $p<.004$), “knowledge of other languages” ($\chi^2(2)=27.020$, $p=.000$), and “acceptance of other cultures” ($\chi^2(2)=15.362$, $p=.000$). Regarding the item “knowledge of English”, significant differences were found between the Lleida and the Oulu group ($p=.009$) on the one hand, and between the Lleida and the Bucharest group, on the other ($p=.008$). Furthermore, in relation to

the item “knowledge of other languages”, the mean score for the Oulu group is significantly lower than the mean score for both the Lleida group ($p=.000$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.002$). Finally, the Oulu group scored significantly lower than the Bucharest group ($p=.001$) and it was close to score significantly lower than the Lleida group with respect to the item “acceptance of other cultures”. In fact, significant differences were detected by the one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 151)=8.07$, $p<.05$) and the Tukey HSD post-hoc test in this respect: Oulu ($M=3.9$, $SD=1.02$), Lleida ($M=4.4$, $SD=.86$). These differences are indicative of a certain disparity between the three groups in terms of who is expecting what. Undoubtedly, all the participants, independently on the context, have high expectations from their experience abroad. However, while the Oulu and the Bucharest group seem to have English at the top of their desires, the Lleida group shows a lower expectancy with regard to their prospective improvement in English. Furthermore, the Lleida group has higher expectations when it comes to gains of other languages. These two distinguishing marks are indicators that the Lleida group has divergent linguistic goals from the Oulu and the Bucharest groups. Finally, the significantly lower score to the possibility to improve their degree of acceptance of other cultures in the Oulu group is quite intriguing, potentially pointing to a lower interest for cultural learning as an asset to be obtained from the experience of those students who chose Finland as a destination than those who chose Bucharest.

As for the degree of accomplishment of the expectations from the mobility experience, again, the scores assigned to all the items in the POST test are lower than the ones in the PRE test (see 5.15). In fact, the overall score for the item “knowledge of English” was significantly lower at the end of the stay ($Z=-5.175$, $p=.000$). However, significant differences between the contexts in the POST test have also been revealed with respect to all the six items: “knowledge of English” ($\chi^2(2)=9.560$, $p=.008$), “knowledge of other cultures” ($\chi^2(2)=6.020$, $p=.049$), “autonomy” ($\chi^2(2)=10.609$, $p=.005$), “self-confidence” ($\chi^2(2)=9.299$, $p=.010$), “knowledge of other languages” ($\chi^2(2)=20.790$, $p=.000$) and “acceptance of other cultures” ($\chi^2(2)=8.792$, $p=.012$). Concerning the first one, “knowledge of

English”, the mean score for Lleida is significantly lower than the mean score for both Oulu ($p=.014$) and Bucharest ($p=.020$), signaling that those students who spent their stay abroad in Lleida gained significantly lower knowledge of English than those who had Oulu and/or Bucharest as a destination. With regard to the second item, “knowledge of other cultures”, the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for Lleida ($p=.043$). This finding might suggest that those participants who spent their sojourn abroad in the Catalan city believe that their knowledge of other cultures has increased as a result of the stay abroad to a significantly higher extent than those who spent their stay abroad in the Finnish city. Likewise, with regard to “autonomy”, post-hoc comparisons revealed that the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for both Lleida ($p=.031$) and Bucharest ($p=.019$). Once more, this indicates that the participants in Oulu were less positive than both their Lleida and Bucharest counterparts about the effects of the stay abroad on their autonomy. Regarding “self-confidence”, again, the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for Bucharest ($p=.026$), which points out again, to the fact that the perceived impact on self-confidence for the students who spent their stay in Finland is significantly lower than the one perceived by the students in Romania. In relation to “knowledge of other languages”, the mean score for Lleida was significantly higher than the mean score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.005$).

This indicates that those students who had Lleida as a destination gained significantly higher knowledge of foreign languages apart from English than the ones in both Oulu and Bucharest. This might be due to the fact that in Lleida, contact with Spanish and Catalan was difficult to avoid, and also desirable in the case of the former. Finally, concerning “acceptance of other cultures”, the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for Lleida ($p=.031$), which indicates, another time, that the perceived effect of the sojourn abroad on the acceptance of other cultures of the students in Oulu is significantly lower than for the students in Lleida. Noteworthy is the fact that the Oulu group already showed lower expectations of improvement with regard to acceptance of

other cultures, straight from the beginning, and in fact, the outcome regarding this aspect is considerably low.

In a similar way, on the whole, the participants seem to have considerably high expectations in relation to personal, academic, and professional benefits (Table 5. 16). However, personal benefits give the impression to be the most expected ones. In the PRE test, no significant differences have been found among groups, even though the Bucharest group appears to give an almost significantly higher importance to personal benefits than the Oulu group. Concerning the respective degree of accomplishment of the initial expectations, overall, as can be observed in Table 5. 16, excepting personal outcomes, both academic and professional outcomes appear to be significantly lower than expected: academic benefits ($Z=-4.781$, $p=.000$) and professional benefits ($Z=-2.820$, $p=.005$).

Table 5. 16: Expected benefits from the experience

This experience will/ has benefited me:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Personally	4.7	4.7	4.8	4.8	4.9	4.9	4.8	4.8
Academically	4.1	3.5	4.3	3.9	4.2	3.8	4.2*	3.7*
Professionally	4.1	3.9	4.3	4	4.2	4	4.2*	4*

* $p<.05$

With respect to the people the participants would like to spend most of their time with, as presented in Table 5. 17, it seems that, by far, the students wish to spend most of their time with other international students, followed by local people, and native speakers of English. Noteworthy is the fact that on the whole, the desire to spend their stay with other international students and with local people is considerably high, while the desire to learn the local languages (Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan) is rather low. The desire to spend their stay with people from their own countries is quite low, an indicator of a rather negative predisposition to it. In fact, the wish of the participants to spend their time abroad with native speakers of English is higher than with people from their own

countries, even though none of the host institutions were in a country where English is the native language.

Table 5. 17: Expectations for spending the stay

I want to spend/ I spent most of my stay with:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Local people	3.9	3	3.8	3.2	4.1	3.1	3.9/	3.1/
Other international students	4.2*+	4.4	4.6*	4.5	4.6+	4.6	4.4	4.5
People from my own country	2.6	3.1	2.6	3.3	2.4	3.5	2.5/	3.2/
Native speakers of English	3.4	2.2#	3.3	2.5#	3.6	1.3#	3.4/	2/

*+/# p < .05

Significant differences between the groups were found in the PRE test only with respect to the second item: “other international students” ($\chi^2(2)=14.347$, $p=.001$). The mean score for the Oulu group is significantly lower than the one for both the Lleida group ($p=.013$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.003$).

In relation to the people with whom the stay was expected to be spent and the people with whom it was actually spent, significant differences were also revealed. With respect to the item “local people”, expectations are significantly higher than outcomes ($Z=-6.826$, $p=.000$), while the perspective to spend the stay with “people from my own country” is significantly lower than the actual time spent with co-nationals ($Z=-5.563$, $p=.000$). Concerning the expected amount of time with “native speakers of English”, the expectations are significantly higher than the actual time that is reported to have been spent in their company ($Z=-8.801$, $p=.000$). However, significant differences between the contexts have been found with regard to this last item ($\chi^2(2)=33.101$, $p=.000$): the mean score for Bucharest is significantly lower than the mean score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Lleida ($p=.000$), which points out to a significantly lower contact with native speakers of English of those students who had Bucharest as a destination than of both those who chose Oulu and Lleida.

5.1.2.1. The role of languages

Language related expectations seem to be among the most outstanding ones students have about the Erasmus experience. In the following lines, the responses of the students with respect to language investment, their linguistic expectations and the perceived language-related outcomes of the experience will be presented. However, these cannot be understood without considering the attitudes and the perceptions of the students in relation to the role of languages in Europe, which is, as reported by the participants, the most plausible context where they see themselves living in the future.

When it comes to considering multilingualism in Europe, the participants give considerable importance to the need for every European citizen to know at least two foreign languages. More moderate scores are attributed to the idea of giving equal official recognition to all languages in Europe, as well as to having a common official language in Europe.

Furthermore, as indicated in Table 5. 18, there are significant differences ($\chi^2(2)=15.228$, $p=.000$) with regard to the first item: “every European citizen should know at least two foreign languages” in which the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for both the Lleida group ($p=.036$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.001$). Furthermore, with respect to the second item: “it would be a good idea to have a common official language in Europe”, significant differences were found among the groups ($\chi^2(2)=7.872$, $p=.020$). The Lleida group scored significantly higher than the Bucharest group ($p=.020$). Finally, with respect to the third item “all languages in Europe should have equal official recognition”, significant differences appeared between the groups ($\chi^2(2)=7.184$, $p=.028$), with the mean score for the Bucharest group being significantly higher than the Oulu one ($p=.039$).

Table 5. 18: Languages in Europe

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Every European citizen should know at least two foreign languages.	3.5*+	3.6	4.1*	3.8	4.4+	4	3.8	3.7
It would be a good idea to have a common official language in Europe.	3.3	3.2	3.6*	3.3	2.6*	2.8	3.2	3.1
All languages in Europe should have equal official recognition.	3.2*	3.5	3.6	3.8	3.8*	3.7	3.4	3.6

*+ p<.05

With regard to the participants' attitudes towards languages in Europe (Table 5. 18), it seems that overall the same scores are maintained through the stay, with no significant differences between the PRE and the POST test. Furthermore, while there were some significant differences between the contexts at the beginning of the stay, such differences did not appear anymore in the POST test, which might be an indicator of a possible homogenization effect of the sojourn abroad.

In a similar way, when it comes to the multiplicity of languages in Europe as a possible handicap for economic competition with other continents, as can be observed in Table 5. 19 (where the scores have been reversed due to the negative construction of the question), significant differences have been found ($\chi^2(2)=9.378$, $p=.009$), with the mean scores for the Bucharest group significantly higher than the ones for both the Oulu group ($p=.027$) and the Lleida group ($p=.017$). No significant differences have been found between the PRE and the POST measurements, and in fact, also the significant differences between the groups encountered at the beginning are not present anymore at the end of the stay abroad.

Table 5. 19: Perceived role of the multiplicity of languages in Europe

The multiplicity of languages in Europe is a handicap for:								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Economic competition with other continents	3.3*	3.4	3.1+	3.1	3.8*+	3.5	3.4	3.4
Internal cohesion	3.2	3.2	2.9	3	3.2	2.9	3.2	3.1

*+ p<.05

The above question is closely related to the one enquiring about the perceived role of the English language in Europe. Table 5. 20 shows that students in the three groups allocate considerable importance to English as a tool for bringing Europeans together, and this importance seems to be significantly higher at the end of the stay ($Z=-1.960$, $p=.050$). However, when the three groups are considered separately, the significant differences are located only in the Bucharest group ($Z=-2.101$, $p=.036$). This indicates that for some reasons those students who had the Romanian capital as a destination appreciate to a considerably higher extent the role of English in keeping European people united. However, when it comes to the kind of rules that the English spoken in Europe should follow, the importance attributed to native speaker (NS) rules does not seem to be very high, and scores remain almost unchanged from the beginning to the end of the sojourn. By the same token, when it comes to English language lessons, overall, the participants seem to allocate considerable importance to communication beyond native speakers' rules. No significant differences have been found between the groups.

Table 5. 20: Perceived role of English in Europe

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
English is an important tool for bringing the Europeans together.	4.5	4.5	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.4*	4.5*
The English spoken by all Europeans should follow NS rules.	3.4	3.4	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4
English lessons should focus on communicating rather than on imitating the rules of the NSs.	3.9	4	4.2	4.3	3.6	4.1	3.9*	4.1*

* $p<.05$

The assumption that English lessons should focus on communicating rather than on imitating the rules of native speakers is almost significantly higher at the end of the stay ($Z=1.932$, $p=.053$). The significantly higher scores assigned to the importance of communication over imitating native speaker rules in the POST test might signal that the sojourn abroad increased the participants' belief that communication matters more than native-likeness. This tendency seems to be even more

accentuated in the Bucharest group, although no significant differences were found within any particular group.

In fact, in the interviews conducted with the students, both at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad, language-related aims come out straightly after being inquired about the reasons to participate in the program. In the following lines, I will report on data related to the language expectations of the participants in connection to their own stay abroad experience, as well as to their attitudes towards the different languages they found in each setting.

As can be observed in Table 5. 21, there were significant differences between the three settings in the PRE test with respect to two items. The first item is “local language” where Finnish, Spanish, and Romanian are compared ($\chi^2(2)=36.102$, $p=.000$): mean score in the Lleida group significantly higher than both the one in the Oulu ($p=.000$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.000$). This points out to the fact that straight from the beginning the importance of the local language Spanish is a considerably more significant factor for the choice of the stay abroad than both Finnish in Oulu and Romanian in Bucharest. The second item with respect to which significant differences between the three groups were encountered in the PRE test is “other languages” ($\chi^2(2)=8.298$, $p=.016$). Pairwise post-hoc comparisons signaled that the mean score for the Bucharest group is significantly higher than the mean score for the Oulu group ($p=.006$) and the one in the Lleida group ($p=.034$).

Table 5. 21: Language learning motivation

To what extent did the opportunity to learn one of the following languages motivate you to take part in this mobility program?								
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		Total	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
English	4.4	4.4/	4	3.7/#	4.5	4.3#	4.3	4.2
Local language (Finnish/Catalan/Romanian)	2.9/	2.6/	3	2.6	3	2.6	2.9*	2.6*
Local language (Finnish/Spanish/Romanian)	2.9*	2.6/	4.5*+	4.6/#	3+	2.6#	3.3-	3.1-
Other languages	2./*	2.3*	2.-	2.1	2.6/-	2.3	2.2	2.3

*+/#- $p < .05$

Worth mentioning is also the fact that the mean scores for the item “English” in the Lleida group and both the mean scores for the same item in the Bucharest and Oulu group are very close to significant. Finally, no significant differences have been revealed when the local languages Catalan, Finnish, and Romanian were compared. This could be regarded as an indicator of the fact that the motivation for learning the three local languages at the beginning of the stay was similar. Taken together with the significant differences between the contexts when Spanish is introduced, we might get some clues about the different economic value of languages perceived by study abroad students.

At the end of the sojourn, when the same test was run, the language motivations from the beginning appeared to be regarded by the participants in a different way. In the first place, there are significant differences between the groups concerning the first item, “English” ($\chi^2(2)=11.085$, $p=.004$), where the mean score for the Lleida group was significantly lower than the mean score for both the Bucharest ($p=.024$) and the Oulu group ($p=.004$). The second significant difference was found, in a similar way to the beginning of the stay, with respect to the item “local language” where Finnish, Romanian, and Spanish were compared ($\chi^2(2)=51.753$, $p=.000$). Once more the mean score assigned to Spanish was significantly higher than the mean scores assigned to both Finnish ($p=.000$) and Romanian ($p=.000$). Furthermore, it seems that at the end of the stay, the perceived motivation for learning other languages had also been homogenized among the three groups. Significant differences between the answers of the PRE and the POST tests were also revealed with regard to two items. The first one is the motivation to learn Finnish ($Z=-2.626$, $p=.009$), where the perceived motivation to learn Finnish in Oulu is significantly lower at the end of the stay. In fact, a similar trend is observed concerning all the three local languages (Catalan, Romanian, and Finnish) but in the case of Romanian and Catalan it is not significant, probably due to the more reduced number of participants in these two groups. The second item in which significant differences have been encountered is the motivation to learn “other languages” in the Oulu group, which is perceived as significantly higher at the end of the Erasmus stay ($Z=-2.082$, $p=.037$). Finally, when the three

groups are considered together, significant differences can be observed regarding the item “local language (Finnish/ Catalan/ Romanian)”: ($Z=-3.176$, $p=.001$), where a clear descending perceived motivation can be observed. The other significant difference concerns the item “local language (Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian)”: ($Z=-2.157$, $p=.024$) but it is clear that lower score is motivated by the presence of Finnish and Romanian in the group, since for Spanish the tendency is reversed.

In a similar way, when it comes to language use, as represented in Table 5. 22, in the PRE test English is the language that is most expected to be used and that is reported to have been used in Oulu and Bucharest, with remarkably high scores.

Table 5. 22: Language use 1

Which language do you think you'll use/have used more during your mobility stay?							
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest		
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	
Local language Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian	2.1*+	1.9#%	4.4*/	4.9#-	2.5/	2.5-%	
Catalan			2.7+	2.2			
English	4.9*	4.8#	4.2*+	3.9#-	4.9+	4.7-	
Own language	2.9*	3.1	2.4*	2.9	2.8	3.4	

*+ / - # % $p < .05$

In the PRE test, significant differences appeared between the groups with regard to their imagined use of English ($\chi^2(2)=26.245$, $p=.000$). The mean score for the Lleida group was significantly lower than the mean score both for the Bucharest ($p=.000$) and the Oulu group ($p=.000$). Furthermore, in the PRE test, there are significant differences ($\chi^2(2)=6.326$, $p=.042$) between the groups with respect to the item “local language Finnish/ Catalan/ Romanian”. Despite the fact the non-parametric Pairwise test did not detect between which groups these differences exist,

the Tukey post-hoc test showed the mean score for the Lleida group ($M=2.7$, $SD=1.22$) is significantly higher than the one for the Oulu group ($M=2.1$, $SD=.85$). This indicates a higher prospective of using Catalan in Lleida than Finnish in Oulu, and it may not be surprising if we take into account that many students report on imagining Finland as an English-speaking country, whereas the ones who arrived in Lleida might have already realized that Catalan is more important than they had imagined despite the short time they had spent in the city. Furthermore, significant differences also appeared with regard to the item “local language Finnish/Spanish/Romanian” ($\chi^2(2)=61.818$, $p=.000$): the Lleida group assigned significantly higher scores to Spanish than the Bucharest group did to Romanian ($p=.000$) and the Oulu group to Finnish ($p=.000$). Finally, despite the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test not showing significant differences between the groups regarding the perspective of the students to use their “own language”, the one-way ANOVA signaled significant differences ($F(2, 150)=3.01$, $p<.05$) with significantly lower scores for the Lleida group ($M=2.4$, $SD=1.23$) than for the Oulu group ($M=2.9$, $SD=1.05$).

In the POST test, significant differences were signaled in relation to the item “local language Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian” ($\chi^2(2)=77.084$, $p=.000$): the scores for the Oulu group were significantly lower than the ones for both the Bucharest ($p=.017$) and the Lleida group ($p=.000$) and the scores for the Bucharest group were significantly lower than the ones for the Lleida group ($p=.000$). This fact points once more to the hierarchy of the three local languages: Spanish definitely was the language that was most extensively used among the Erasmus students in Lleida. Furthermore, it indicates that those students who had Bucharest as a destination used Romanian to a considerably higher extent than those having chosen Oulu used Finnish. Significant differences were also found when English was considered ($\chi^2(2)=26.558$, $p=.000$): mean score for the Lleida group was significantly lower than the ones for both the Bucharest ($p=.005$) and the Oulu group ($p=.000$).

Significant differences have also been found between the perspectives of language use and the actual reported language use of the participants. For reasons of clarity, the same questions with

their respective items have been reported in a separate table (Table 5. 23). In it, the significant differences of the Wilcoxon test have been represented. As can be observed, there are significant differences between the PRE and the POST test with regard to the use of Finnish in Oulu ($Z=-2.337$, $p=.019$), the use of Catalan in Lleida ($Z=-2.059$, $p=.000$), and the use of English in Bucharest ($Z=-2.000$, $p=.046$). Furthermore, with regard to the imagined and the actual use of their own language, significant differences have been found in both the Lleida ($Z=-2.486$, $p=.013$) and the Bucharest group ($Z=-2.513$, $p=.012$). The tendency is towards a significantly lower reported use of both English and the local languages and a significantly higher reported use of their own languages.

Table 5. 23: Language use 2

Which language do you think you'll use/have used more during your mobility stay?						
	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Local language Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian	2.1*	1.9*	4.4	4.9	2.5	2.5
Catalan			2.7/	2.2/		
English	4.9	4.8	4.2	3.9	4.9-	4.7-
Own language	2.9	3.1	2.4+	2.9+	2.8#	3.4#

*+/- # $p < .05$

Finally, when it comes to expectations and attitudes with regard to languages (Table 5. 24), in general lines, there are very positive attitudes towards English across the three contexts, both at the beginning and at the end of the stay. On the other hand, attitudes and expectations concerning three of the local languages (Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan) seem to be kept on a moderate level, and when compared to English, their importance becomes even lower. This tendency is maintained through the stay. The Spanish language appears to stand out from the rest of local languages.

Table 5. 24: Linguistic attitudes and language expectations 1

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
I'll never use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian, so it's/ it was useless to learn it. (REVERSED) Catalan	3.9* 3.9	3.4/ 3.4	4.7*+ 3.6	4.7/# 3.2	4.2+ 4.2	3.7# 3.7
We should all use/ have used Finnish/Spanish/Romanian frequently. Catalan	3.1* 3.1	3/% 3	4.1*+ 2.9	4.1/# 2.9	3.4+ 3.4	3.5#% 3.5
Learning Finnish/Spanish/Romanian is/ was more important than learning English. Finnish/Catalan/Romanian	2* 2	1.9/ 1.9	3.1*+ 1.5/	3.4/# 2	2.2+ 2.2/	1.9# 1.9
I like or I would like to speak Finnish/Spanish/Romanian. Catalan	3.9* 3.9	3.5# 3.5	4.8*+ 3.4/	4.8#% 2.9-	4.2+ 4.2/	3.9% 3.9-
I like listening to people speaking Finnish/Spanish/Romanian. Catalan	3.8* 3.8*	3.7/ 3.7%	4.6*+ 3.3*/	4.9/# 2.8%-	3.9+ 3.9/	3.8# 3.8-
I will never use English, so it's/ was useless to learn it.(REVERSED)	4.9	4.8	4.9	4.9	4.8	5
We should all try/ have tried to use English frequently.	4.5	4.6*	4.5	4.1*+	4.4	4.9+
I like or I would like to speak English.	4.6	4.7	4.7	4.6	4.6	4.9
I like listening to people speaking English.	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.5	4.7

*+ / #%-p<.05

Significant differences between the groups were encountered with respect to five of the nine items, and all differences involve Lleida vs. the other two locations, which suggest that the sole language that accounts for such differences is Spanish:

- I'll never use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian, so it's useless to learn it: ($\chi^2(2)=22.931$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly higher than the ones for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.045$).
- We should all use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian frequently: ($\chi^2(2)=21.632$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly higher than the mean score for both the Oulu ($p=.000$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.018$).

- Learning Finnish/Spanish/Romanian is more important than learning English: ($\chi^2(2)=26.041$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly higher than the mean score for both the Oulu ($p=.000$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.001$).
- Learning Finnish/Catalan/Romanian is more important than learning English: ($\chi^2(2)=9.259$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly lower than the one for the Bucharest group ($p=.008$). This indicates that the interest to learn Catalan in Lleida is not just low, but significantly lower than the interest to learn Romanian in Bucharest.
- I like or I would like to speak Finnish/Spanish/Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=26.435$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly higher than the one for both the Bucharest group ($p=.007$) and the Oulu group ($p=.000$).
- I like or I would like to speak Finnish/ Catalan/ Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=10.392$, $p=.006$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly lower than the mean score for the Bucharest group ($p=.004$).
- I like listening to people speaking Finnish/Spanish/Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=22.377$, $p=.000$). Mean score for the Lleida group is significantly higher than the one in the Oulu group ($p=.000$) and the Bucharest group ($p=.000$).
- I like listening to people speaking Finnish/Catalan/Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=6.155$, $p=.046$). Despite the fact the non-parametrical Pairwise test did not show between which groups there were differences, the Tukey HSD post-hoc test showed a significantly lower mean score for pleasure listening to people speaking Catalan ($M=3.3$, $SD=1.25$) with respect to Finnish ($M=3.8$, $SD=.95$) and Romanian ($M=3.9$, $SD=.94$).
- We should all try/ have tried to use English frequently: ($\chi^2(2)=19.918$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly lower than both the mean score for Oulu ($p=.009$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$)

Finally, as previously mentioned, the participants showed very positive attitudes and rather ambitious expectations with regard to the English language. The only significant difference between the contexts with regard to English is for the item “We should all try/ have tried to use English frequently: ($\chi^2(2)=19.918$, $p=.000$), where the mean score for Lleida is significantly lower than both the mean score for Oulu ($p=.009$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$).

In the POST test, the following significant differences between the groups appeared:

- I will never use Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian, so it was useless to learn it: ($\chi^2(2)=34.144$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly higher than the score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$).
- We should all have used Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian frequently: ($\chi^2(2)=26.156$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly higher than the one for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.039$). Also, despite the fact the non-parametric post-hoc Pairwise test just indicated a tendency in this respect, the Tukey HSD post-hoc test signaled that the mean score for Bucharest ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.12$) is significantly higher than mean score for Oulu ($M=3$, $SD=1.14$).
- Learning Finnish/Spanish/Romanian was more important than learning English: ($\chi^2(2)=29.120$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly higher than mean score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$).
- I would like to speak Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=34.957$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly higher than mean score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.001$).
- I would like to speak Finnish/ Catalan/ Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=10.093$, $p=.006$). Mean score for Lleida significantly lower than mean score for Bucharest ($p=.004$).
- I like listening to people speaking Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=34.475$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly higher than the mean score for both Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$).

- I like listening to people speaking Finnish/ Catalan/ Romanian: ($\chi^2(2)=11.788$, $p=.003$). Mean score for Lleida significantly lower than mean score for both Oulu ($p=.008$) and Bucharest ($p=.005$).

- We should all have tried to use English frequently: ($\chi^2(2)=19.918$, $p=.000$). Mean score for Lleida significantly lower than both mean score for Oulu ($p=.000$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$).

Overall, it appears that again, Spanish continues playing a role that is substantially different from the role played by all the other local languages. In fact, the power of Spanish seems to equal the power of English in the Lleida group. This may account for the reason why, in some cases, Catalan is assigned significantly lower scores than Finnish and Romanian. This animosity towards Catalan can be perceived most especially when it comes to a possible wish to learn Catalan, and even the mere fact of listening to people speaking Catalan.

Table 5. 25 includes the same items as in Table 5. 24, with an indication of the results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The following differences have been encountered between the PRE and the POST tests:

- I'll never use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian, so it's/ was useless to learn it: Oulu ($Z=-2.826$, $p=.005$), Bucharest ($Z=-2.184$, $p=.029$).

- Learning Catalan was more important than learning English: ($Z=-2.380$, $p=.017$)

- I like or I would like to speak Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian: Oulu ($Z=-3.283$, $p=.001$). Bucharest ($Z=-2.184$, $p=.029$).

- I like listening to people speaking Spanish: $Z=2.111$, $p=.035$.

- I like listening to people speaking Catalan: $Z=-2.220$, $p=.026$.

- We should all try/ have tried to use English frequently: Lleida ($Z=-2.035$, $p=.042$), Bucharest ($Z=-2.961$, $p=.003$).

- I like/ would like to speak English: Bucharest ($Z=-2.209$, $p=.025$)

Table 5. 25: Linguistic attitudes and language expectations 2

	Oulu		Lleida		Bucharest	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
I'll never use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian, so it's/ was useless to learn it. (REVERSED) Catalan	3.9*	3.4*	4.7 3.6	4.7 3.2	4.2/	3.7/
We should all use/ have used Finnish/Spanish/Romanian frequently. Catalan	3.1	3	4.1 2.9	4.1 2.9	3.4	3.5
Learning Finnish/Spanish/Romanian is/ was more important than learning English. Catalan	2	1.9	3.1 1.5#	3.4 2#	2.2	1.9
I like or I would like to speak Finnish/Spanish/Romanian. Catalan	3.9#	3.5#	4.8 3.4	4.8 2.9	4.2%	3.9%
I like listening to people speaking Finnish/Spanish/Romanian. Catalan	3.8	3.7	4.6* 3.3/	4.9* 2.8/	3.9	3.8
I will never use English, so it's useless to learn it.(REVERSED)	4.9	4.8	4.9	4.9	4.8	5
We should all try/ have tried to use English frequently.	4.5	4.6	4.5+	4.1+	4.4-	4.9-
I like or I would like to speak English.	4.6	4.7	4.7	4.6	4.6*	4.9*
I like listening to people speaking English.	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.5*	4.7*

*+ / #%- p<.05

We may argue that, with regard to the first question: “I’ll never use Finnish/Spanish/Romanian, so it’s/ was useless to learn.”, at the end of the stay, significantly more positive attitudes are reported by the students in Oulu towards Finnish, and by the students in Bucharest towards Romanian. However, the reversed trend can be observed with regard to Catalan in Lleida, even though the difference is not significant. Spanish, on the other hand, maintains the same high score. Interestingly, when it comes to the importance of learning Catalan as opposed to English, and despite the fact that the score is still very low in the post test, it is significantly higher than in the PRE test. However, if we take into account also the results of the first item with regard to Catalan, and the significantly lower score to the item “I like listening to people speaking Catalan”, we might interpret the increase in the perceived importance of the need to learn Catalan when compared to the

need to learn English in Lleida as an outcome of the realization that the Catalan language had a considerable weight for the local people in Lleida, and therefore, the participants might have realized it was more important than they initially thought. However, this situation may, in fact, have led to an increased animosity towards the Catalan language. In fact, more negative feelings towards the local languages Finnish and Romanian, also become apparent in the POST test, where the participants assign significantly lower scores than in the PRE test (both in the Oulu and the Bucharest group) to the item “I like or I would like to speak Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian”. Finally, with respect to English, the students in Lleida assign a significantly lower score to the item “We should all have tried to use English frequently”, while the ones in Bucharest do the opposite, assigning a significantly higher score to the same item. A possible interpretation could be that the Lleida group might perceive they did not learn as much Spanish as they had expected to, and using English might have interfered with their use of Spanish. On the other hand, the students in Bucharest might also think that their English level may not have improved to the extent they expected. If we take into account the reported time the students spent with people from their own countries, using one’s first language might be understood as a factor limiting the use of English, which the participants could regret at the end of their stay abroad.

Regarding the perceived language-related outcomes of the stay abroad, significant differences between the three settings have also been signaled with respect to the four items that appear in Table 5. 26. Regarding “level of English”: ($\chi^2(2)=14.529$, $p=.001$), the mean score for the Lleida group is significantly lower than the mean score for both the Oulu ($p=.007$) and the Bucharest groups ($.001$), signaling that the students in Lleida believe to a significantly lower extent that their level of English has improved as a result of their stay abroad than both the students in Bucharest and those in Oulu. In relation to the second item: “local language Finnish/ Spanish/ Romanian”, ($\chi^2(2)=11.299$, $p=.004$), the main score assigned to Spanish in Lleida is significantly higher than the one assigned to Finnish ($p=.004$) in Oulu as well as to the one assigned to Romanian ($p=.016$) in Bucharest. No significant

differences were found when the three local languages (Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan) were compared. This indicates that, overall, the level of improvement of Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan has been similar in the three contexts. In relation to the third item “knowledge of other languages” ($\chi^2(2)=6.556$, $p=.038$) the mean score for Lleida is significantly higher than the mean score for Oulu ($p=.033$). It seems that the students in Lleida might have gained significantly higher knowledge of languages other than English and the local languages than those in Oulu. Finally, with respect to “communicative skills” ($\chi^2(2)=8.525$, $p=.01$), post-hoc comparisons signaled that the score for Bucharest is significantly higher than the score for Oulu ($p=.036$). This points out to a significantly higher perception of the participants in Bucharest that the mobility stay impacted positively on their communicative skills than in the case of the participants in Oulu.

Table 5. 26: Perceived language-related outcomes of the stay

I can say that, as a result of this mobility stay			
	Oulu	Lleida	Bucharest
My level of English has improved.	4.3*	3.4*+	4.5+
My level of Finnish/Spanish/Romanian Catalan has improved.	3.7*	4.6*+ 3.2	3.2+
My knowledge about other languages has improved.	2.4*	3.2*	2.6
My communicative skills in general have improved	4*	4.4	4.5*
This mobility stay made me feel that I want to know more languages.	3.9*+	4.4*	4.6+
My English now is more native-like	3.2	2.9	3.3
Even though my English is not native-like, it comes out more easily.	4.2*	3.5*+	4.3+

*+ $p<.05$

Furthermore, when it comes to the impact of the stay abroad on the willingness to learn other languages, significant differences between the settings have also been revealed ($\chi^2(2)=16.378$, $p=.000$). The score for Oulu is significantly lower than the score for both Lleida ($p=.028$) and Bucharest ($p=.000$), which indicates a significantly lower motivation to learn foreign languages as a

result of the stay abroad of those students who had Finland as a destination. Finally, with regard to the item: “even though my English is not native-like, it comes out more easily”, the overall high score is quite noteworthy. Yet, significant differences between the three groups have been found ($\chi^2(2)=14.840$, $p=.001$). Post-hoc comparisons pointed out that the score for Lleida was significantly lower than the main score for both Oulu ($p=.008$) and Bucharest ($p=.001$).

Concerning the activities the participants report having performed during their stay abroad in order to improve their English level (Table 5. 27), the highest score is assigned to the item “meeting with other speakers of English to practice the language”, while going to English lessons is assigned the lowest score. Significant differences have been found regarding the items: “going to English lessons” ($\chi^2(2)=9.632$, $p=.008$). Post-hoc comparisons showed the mean score for Oulu is significantly lower than the mean score for Bucharest ($p=.009$). Therefore, it appears that the participants in Romania went to English lessons to a significantly higher extent than those in Finland. The non-parametric Kruskal Wallis test also signaled possible differences between the groups with regard to the item “trying to speak English with people who speak your first language”. Significant differences were found when the one-way ANOVA test was run ($F(2, 152)=3.12$, $p<.05$): the mean score for Lleida ($M=2.7$, $SD=1.57$) is significantly lower than the one for Bucharest ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.28$), showing that students in Bucharest probably were more inclined to use English in all circumstances, even among co-nationals, than those in Lleida.

Table 5. 27: English language related activities

To which extent have you performed the following activities in order to improve your level of English:				
	Oulu	Lleida	Bucharest	Total
Writing Facebook/Twitter posts in English.	3.2	2.8	3.5	3.2
Meeting with other speakers of English to practice the language.	4.2	4.1	4.5	4.2
Going to English lessons.	2.4*	2.9	3.3*	2.7
Trying to speak in English with people who speak your first language	3.1	2.7*	3.5*	3.1

* p<.05

So far, Chapter 5 has shown the quantitative results with respect to the two broad topics that give shape to the present project: identity and sense of belonging, on the one hand, and the role of expectations and investment in study abroad, on the other. In a nutshell, the results of the questionnaire enabled us to identify general patterns of identification, expectations, outcomes, and imagined ways to transform them into human capital. The following chapter will serve as a way to complement the above quantitative results, and at the same time, it will facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons behind them.

Chapter 6. Qualitative results

This chapter examines how the participants construct their identity and sense of belonging and explores the degree of knowledge and the capacity to adapt to other cultures, as deployed by the participants at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. It also analyses the representation of Europe and European identity as reported by the participants at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn.

Similarly to Chapter 5, the present chapter aims at shedding light on the expectations of the Erasmus students and those practices in which they wish to invest during their stay, as well as on what they expect to receive in return and the participants' reports on the actual outcomes of the experience at the end of their sojourn. Therefore, the idea of *capital* in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 1991) is at the center of the chapter, with respect to the capital that is perceived to be gained and to the one that is reported to have been gained, as well as to the imagined impact of this capital on the future of the participants. The guiding axis of the chapter is the role of language(s) and language learning in study abroad, always in reference to the broader social and material meaning of the experience, with the intention to understand how, why, and to what extent the participants believe their Erasmus experience can be converted in material value in an economic sense.

In a nutshell, this chapter pretends to serve both as means to complement the quantitative results previously presented by digging deeper in the role of investment, expectations, and experience, and by attempting to answer the key question of what part language(s) play in the participants' investment in the study abroad experience. Therefore, it examines how the students frame their experience and how they position themselves with regard to it at its onset and at its end, aiming at understanding patterns of what is recurrent, what is different, what is puzzling, and what tensions emerge in the participants' discourses. By doing so, I believe more light will be shed on the

actual impact of the stay abroad on participants' identity, what sort of social actors they expect to become, and the associated symbolic and material value of the identities they aim to at the beginning of, or they claim to have achieved at the end of their stay.

As mentioned in the methodology section, the sixteen participants (with their respective thirty-two interviews that will be analyzed in this chapter) have been selected because they embody particular ways of being an Erasmus student and each of them encapsulate a particular type of experience. For this reason, the sixteen students whose interviews have been selected are believed to be telling cases that will illuminate and also challenge the quantitative results previously exposed. Important to mention is the fact that the questions that guided the interviews with the students can be found in Appendix 2 (PRE-interview) and Appendix 3 (POST-interview).

6.1. The inward look: identity and sense of belonging

In the following lines, I will analyze how the students define themselves at the beginning and at the end of their stay abroad, focusing mainly on their sense of belonging from a geographical, social, and cultural point of view, but also taking on board any other information that the participants include in their responses and which might be relevant for the purpose of the present chapter.

This subsection will be organized according to the contexts, in order to maintain clarity and keep track of who the participants in each context are according to their own accounts at the onset and at the offset of their Erasmus experience. Before analyzing the students' accounts on their sense of belonging, it is important to state that in more than one case, they seem to identify with more than one place at a time. However, for the categorization below, I have chosen the first or the most outstanding categories each of them refers to.

The Oulu group

As stated in the methodology section, six participants from the Oulu group have been selected. The participants, whose names have been changed for preserving their anonymity, are the following: Jennifer C. (JC, female, 21, Spain), Diego D. (DD, male, 23, Spain), Meyer L. (ML, male, 21, Germany), Mila J. (MJ, female, 22, Bulgaria), Claudia Q. (CQ, female, 22, Spain), and Stefaan M. (SM, male, 22, The Netherlands).

With regard to their sense of belonging at the beginning of the stay, the accounts the participants give are all different. For instance, Jennifer states the following:

JC: *de mi tierra/ pero sí sé que mi casa es donde yo voy porque/ no me importa vivir en cualquier lado la verdad/* (from my land/ but I do know that my home is where I go because/ I don't mind living in any place, to be sincere/)

(...)

VM: *cuando dices que eres de tu tierra/ Jennifer/ qué quieres decir? tu pueblo o tu...* (when you say you are from your land/ Jennifer/ what do you mean? your village or your...)

JC: *sí/ en plan de que nací allí/ me crie allí cuando era pequeña/ tengo mis bonitos recuerdos allí/ mis amigos...* (yes/ in the sense that I was born there/ I grew up there when I was a kid/ I have my beautiful memories there/ my friends/)

(...)

JC: *Gran Canaria/ XX/ no? porque no solo tengo amigos en mi pueblo/ no? entonces mis recuerdos bonitos de mi infancia/ que es una etapa bonita/ los tengo allí/ pero poco más/* (Gran Canaria/ XX/ no? because I don't just have friends in my village/ right? so my beautiful childhood memories/ which is a nice period/ they are there/ but little more than that/)

In her narrative of belonging, Jennifer starts mentioning “her land”, which seems to be both her village and the island of Gran Canaria, but immediately after she states that she does not mind living anywhere else, opening the possibility, in fact, to what will be a constant in her discourse tightly connected to the idea of an imminent future mobility. The things that seem to tie Jennifer to “her land” are beautiful childhood memories and friends.

At the end of her stay, Jennifer's discourse does not seem to have changed much. In fact, she adopts the same position of someone who knows where she belongs to, but does not mind living somewhere else. With regard to the impact of the Erasmus program, she highlights the fact that it teaches you how to be able to live by yourself in a foreign city and ultimately, it is a sort of training for the moment one will "really" need to move in search for a job. Once more, in Jennifer's narrative, the imminent need to move for job reasons becomes visible:

JC: *no sé/ me siento de allá donde voy/ no sé/* (I don't know/ I feel from those place where I go/ I don't know/)

(...)

JC: *el Erasmus yo creo que lo que te enseña es a/ a saber cómo moverte cuando realmente te vayas a mover de verdad a trabajar a otro sitio/* (I think the Erasmus teaches you to/ to know how to move when you'll really move to work somewhere else/)

(...)

JC: *decir aprendes a hacerlo tú/ tú sola las cosas/ por ti misma/ a irte a una ciudad/ a vivir allí/ aprender allí a comprar/ no saber en dónde pero vas y compras/ eso/ a eso/ básicamente/ pienso yo/* (I mean you learn to do it yourself/ things alone/ by yourself/ going to a city/ living there/ learning to buy there/ not knowing where but you go and buy/ that/ basically/ I think/)

Meyer (ML) connects his sense of belonging to Germany, but he states that he would not say he is super German:

ML: *ah/ yeah of course/of course I'm German and I feel like belonging to Germany ah/ but it's not like that I'm... part/patriot/ ah can't think of the word/ I don't know/*

VM: *yeah/ patriotic/ maybe?*

ML: *OK/ yeah patriotic ah... and I'm not like I feel/ I feel attached to a special part of Germany because I'm from the north and then I moved to the south and then I moved farther up to the south and then I went back to the north again/ now I'm in Finland/ so I'm from Germany and I'm from Europe but I wouldn't say that I'm like ah/ super German or /"hey I'm from Europe"/ I wouldn't...yeah/*

It seems that despite reporting being connected to a national state, Meyer's discourse converges with Jennifer's in their relative looseness and high capacity to adapt to new settings when it comes to mobility.

At the end of his stay, Meyer, similarly to Jennifer, does not appear to have substantially changed his narrative. He still feels he belongs, firstly to the area in Germany where he comes from, and secondly to Germany itself, and he would not say he is a citizen of the EU. With respect to the impact of the Erasmus experience, he affirms it does not change his sense of belonging:

ML: mmm/ maybe like... I come from home/ like/ like Germany/ like maybe the part where of Germany where I come from/ ah/ but/ not... of course/ yeah of course I'm German so also as a German but nothing more than that actually/ so I wouldn't say hey I'm a citizen of the European Union or like al...

VM: mhm/ alright/ and do you think that a mobility program can have any effects on your sense of belonging?

ML: ahh/ not really/ I think... ah I mean you are alike to/ alike to get to know other places and I also I was living in other places also for like more than one year/ two year/ or whatever but like where I come from and where I belong to is still like home for me/

The other four participants in Oulu report feeling a sense of belonging to the world in the first instance at the beginning of their stay. For example, Claudia, one of the Spanish participants states the following:

CQ: no/ yo creo que yo soy del mundo/ sí/ no/ y además/ yo siempre le digo a mi madre mándate a mudar a otro lado porque yo no voy a vivir aquí/(laughs)/ me encanta Tenerife pero... no veo que yo vaya a vivir en Tenerife hasta dentro de muchos años/ porque sé que mi futuro no está allí/ o puede que no es la isla/ o puede que fuera de España/ pero sé que Tenerife no/ porque no tengo salida yo allí/ y... yo creo que pertenecemos al mundo y que sí... no sé/ (no/ I believe I am from the world/ yes/ and also/ I always tell my mum go to live in another place because I'm not going to live here anymore/ (laughs)/ I love Tenerife but... I don't see myself living in Tenerife for many years/ because I know my future is not there/ or maybe it's not the island/ or maybe it's outside Spain/ but I know that not in Tenerife/ because there are no opportunities for me there/ and...I believe we belong to the world and that yeah...I don't know/)

(...)

CQ: pero no/ que si hay que emigrar/ pues se emigra y ya se volverá/ (but no/ if we have to emigrate/ then we emigrate and we will come back some day/)

Claudia affirms that she belongs to the world, and even though she likes Tenerife, she has made up her mind to the fact that she is not going to live there in the following years because of the lack of opportunities, probably in relation to the employment market. Similarly to the other Spanish female participant in Finland, the necessity to move, to emigrate, seems to be a constant in Claudia's

discourse and it comes to the surface even when no related information is elicited. However, at the end of her stay, Claudia states that she feels Spanish, and Canarian:

CQ: *a ver/ yo me siento española/ y soy canaria/ pero también tengo: familia de todos lados/ entonces a mi me encanta Canarias y Andalucía/ es que... pero... (let's see/ I feel Spanish/ and I'm Canarian/ but I also have: family from everywhere/ so I love Canarias and Andalucía/ it's... but...)*

Regarding the impact of the period abroad on her sense of belonging, Claudia affirms that she does not know if it might affect how she feels about belonging to a particular place but she thinks it may give her an open mind and a loss of fear to go to different places in the future.

CQ: *no sé si en el sentido de pertenecer a algún sitio/ pero en el sentido de tener mentalidad abierta de irte a otro sitio/ (...) pero mmm quizás el hecho de no tener miedo de ir allá donde el futuro te depare/ (I don't know if on your sense of belonging to somewhere/ but in the sense that you have the open-mind to go somewhere else/ (...)) but mmm maybe the fact that you are not afraid to go where the future awaits for you/)*

On a similar note, Diego (DD), declares the following:

DD: *pues... a mí me gusta decir que... el mundo ahora poco a poco va a la unión todo/ (well... I like saying that... the world now advances towards a union little by little/)*

VM: *vale/ (OK/)*

DD: *o sea no me gustan las separaciones y tal/ entonces yo diría primero pues soy del mundo/ luego de Europa / de España/ y de Ceuta/ pero obviamente tengo más raíces en Ceuta porque tengo allí más con/ más... mi familia es de allí/ y todos mis amigos de allí/ luego de España en general porque me puedo X/ y ya pues Europa y tal pero... (I mean I don't like separations and so/ then I would say firstly I'm from the world/ then from Europe/ from Spain/ from Ceuta/ but obviously I have more roots in Ceuta because there I have more with/ more... my family are from there/ and all my friends from there/ then from Spain in general because I can X/ and then well Europe and so but...)*

VM: *vale/ pero más de Europa que del mundo/ o/ o/ o dirías que lo mismo/ que... (OK/ but more from Europe than from the world/ or/ or/ or you would say that the same/ that...)*

DD: *no/ no/ del mundo sí/ (no/ no/ from the world yes/)*

From his response, it seems that Diego identifies firstly as belonging to the world, since his perception is that nowadays the world is unifying. However, as he expands on it, he mentions different categories of belonging which he orders from first to last: world, Europe, Spain, and Ceuta. Despite this order, he actually ends stating that in fact, he has more ties in Ceuta than anywhere else.

Again, in the same way as Jennifer, Diego brings to the fore family and friends as things that root him to his home city.

At the end of his stay abroad, there. Diego explains that in fact he feels that as time goes by, he becomes less and less worried about his sense of belonging, and he shows awareness about the fact that before he was more conscious about belonging to his city, his province, country, and continent:

DD: *sí/ porque estoy allí en medio entre dos/ mmm y no sé/ ahora mismo también estoy un poco cambiando en...como que yo me/ perte/ pertenezco a todo y no pertenezco a nada/ sabes? soy yo y punto/ y yo vivo pues...y lo que hay/ pero...no sé/ antes sí era más/ soy de Ceuta/ andaluz/ y después de Andalucía y de España/ y de Europa/ pero no sé/ ahora cada vez voy más/ me da igual todo/ me da igual eso en verdad/(yes/ because I am there in the middle of two/ mmm and I don't know/ right now I'm changing a little bit in...the way I be/belo/ belong to everything and I don't belong to anything/ you know/ it's me and enough/ and then I live...and this is the situation/ but... I don't know/ before I was more/ I'm from Ceuta/ Andalusian/ and after Andalusia and from Spain/ and from Europe/ but I don't know/ now each time I go more/ I don't care at all/ I don't care about that actually/)*

With regard to the effect of the program on his sense of belonging, Diego affirms that it makes you realize things that are different to how they are in your country:

DD: *puede ser porque a ver hay muchos/ o se/ allí a lo mejor estando allí decía coño pues en Ceuta era esto era así/ y te gustaba más o te gustaba menos/ entonces veías como diferentes cambios/ pero realmente lo que es así decirte ahora me siento más o me siento menos/ yo creo que no/ pero sí darte cuenta de las cosas/ decir eso en España es de tal manera/ aquí no/ me gustaba más en España/ pero bueno/ estoy aquí y aquí me gusta esto más/ (it could be because let's see there are many/ or/ there maybe being there I said damn this in Ceuta was this was this way/ and you liked it more or you liked it less/ so you saw like different changes/ but really about telling you if I feel more or I feel less/ I don't think so/ but you do realize things/ saying this in Spain is that way/ here it's not/ I liked it more in Spain/ but well/ I am here and here I like this more/)*

Similarly to Diego, at the beginning of his stay, Stefaan (SM) states that he knows he is Dutch and he identifies with some things that he defines as typically Dutch, like whining and complaining, but shortly after he affirms that he does not feel any bound to his country. As a reason, the participant highlights the fact that he really likes different cultures and he sees that borders exist for practical reasons, but he believes that it would be better if they would not exist at all. Finally, he points to the fact of having fun with someone as more important than sharing a certain nationality:

SM: *no/ actually not at all/ a:h/ I/ I know I'm Dutch/ and I'm ah whining like a Dutch/ I'm complaining like a Dutch/ but I don't really feel like I'm Dutch/ I'm not really country bound/ (laughs)/ at all/*

VM: *OK/ ah/ do you think there is any reason that makes you feel that way?*

SM: a: h/ well/ yeah/ I guess there's plenty of reasons but the main reason is ah/ because ah/ I really like different cultures/ and you can learn from them/ and I think borders are just there to/ I don't know/ for practical reasons/ but I think it would be better to not have them at all/ so...I can just have more fun with a German or whatever/ person/ than a Dutch person/

At the end of his experience, Stefaan claims to be proud of his home city and of being Dutch, something which he does not mention in his interview at the beginning of his stay. However, the participant still affirms that he does not feel he belongs to the Netherlands:

SM: no/ no/ I feel/ it sounds like a hippie answer but I feel like I belong to the world/ I don't feel bound to any place or region/ of course I'm proud of of my home city and to be Dutch/ but I don't feel like I specifically belong there/

VM: mhm/ and what makes you feel this way? like what makes you feel like you belong/ you can belong everywhere/ like you belong to the world?

SM: people are just people/ they're nice/ and there's so many new things you can learn from everyone/ and as long as you just learn a little bit about their culture and just adapt yourself/ ah they will most likely accept you/

When reflecting about the impact of the sojourn abroad, Stefaan affirms that it shows people that the world is not so scary and that cultural differences are not as big as it is said in the news, which might trigger viewpoint changes in a lot of cases:

SM: ahm/ yeah/ I think it does/ I think it shows a lot of people that the world is not so scary and that people just... ah there there are some cultural differences but it's not just as big as the news would say/ and yeah/ I think it really changes your view on a lot of cases/

At the beginning of her stay, Mila, the Bulgarian participant states, in the first place, that she certainly does not belong to Bulgaria, and adds that she does not think she belongs anywhere because in today's world, one belongs to the world, there is freedom of movement, and there are no borders in Europe. When it comes to the reasons why she feels this way, Mila affirms that she does not like to be put in a frame which she expands by stating that she does not like being Bulgarian, nor immigrant. From Mila's discourse, one has the impression that the terms Bulgarian and immigrant have almost the same meaning. The participant ends her statement by pointing out that freedom of movement and travelling are very important, and that she does not want to live in Europe for her whole life, even though she has not decided where yet, but she declares the intention to travel and discover other countries:

MJ: no/ definitely not/ and I don't know but I don't belong in Bulgaria for sure/ but I don't think I don't belong to anywhere/ in today's world/ you belong to the world/ you can go wherever you want/ especially in Europe there are no borders/ you can just decide and go wherever you want/ and start a life there/ (laughs)/

VM: OK/ and what makes you feel this way? what makes you feel that you belong to the world?

MJ: ah/ it's just/ I don't like ah/ ah/ being put in/ a frame/ in some kind of frame/ ah I don't like being Bulgarian/ I don't like being an immigrant/ I just/ I just feel that the world is ours and ah people should be able to do/ what they want/ and to go wherever they want because/ it's very important that you travel/ that you explore different cultures/ I don't even want to stay in Europe for my whole life/ I don't know where I wanna live but I know that I want to travel a lot/ in other continents/ in other countries/

In the POST interview, Mila says she has never felt that she belongs to Bulgaria, similarly to what she declared in her PRE interview. However, at the end of her stay she brings to the fore the idea that she feels Europe as home, while at the same time having met people from everywhere leads her to think that people everywhere are very much alike:

MJ: well/ not really/ like I have always/ I have never felt like I belong to Bulgaria/ ah/ maybe I felt more that I belong let's say to Europe/ I just feel/ Europe somehow as a home/ but at the same time now that I met so many people like from Africa/ from Asia/ from everywhere/ I think that the/ the continent or the country doesn't matter/ when you meet so many people/ when you see that they are so alike you and you just tell yourself that we are not different in any way/ just that we speak different languages and we live in a different point in the world/ but it's all the same/ so I don't think...

Concerning the impact of the stay abroad, Mila affirms that she feels more attached to Finland than to Bulgaria and points out that there are many things that she does not like in her home country:

MJ: ah/ well/ maybe yeah definitely I feel more attached to Finland than never now and I was just talking yesterday with another girl who went on exchange in Spain/ by the way/ and we were talking that we don't have like/ we don't have any sense of home anymore/ like there are so many places that you can call home that/ (laughs)/ I don't know which is home but definitely I feel... that I belong more to Finland like now/ (laughs)/

VM: than to Bulgaria?

MJ: yes/ definitely there are so many things that I don't like here and of course there are stuff like that everywhere but because it's my country and I really like/ I don't know/ I don't know... I'm maybe more...how to say it? words escaped me/ (laughs)/ I'm more critical maybe towards the things here since I've been here all my life/

Furthermore, on a similar note to Diego's discourse, the participant feels she does not have a sense of home anymore, while at the same time being aware there are multiple places you can call home.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, the selected participants are the following: Federica H. (FH, female, Italy, 21), Sami M. (SM, male, 24, Finland), Jussi N. (JN, male, 24, Finland), Jesús O. (JO, male, 22, Spain), Kalina N. (KN, female, 22 Bulgaria).

With regard to her sense of belonging, on a very straightforward note, Federica states clearly that she feels Italian, without further elaborating on her answer:

FH: I am Italian/ (laughs)/

However, at the end of her stay, her sense of belonging is not expressed in such a straightforward way as at the beginning, and she explains she belongs to her country but also to Europe:

FH: ahhh I belong to my country/ of course/ but also Europ/ Euro/ Europe/

Furthermore, when reflecting about the impact of the mobility program on her identity, the participant states that her point of view has changed because she has lost the fear to live in a different country, and that even though her Italian identity is the same as before the program, the stay abroad has helped her to feel more European through contact with people from different countries from which she learnt to see the world from another point of view:

FH: ah/ yes/ I think this mobility changed my point view because now I can try to stay in another country and I didn't ah/ ah...one moment/

VM: yes/

FH: mmm/ I don't know in English/ I didn't a:h/ wait/

VM: maybe you can say in Italian/

FH: paura/

VM: oh/ OK/ fear/

(...)

FH: *eh/ I think it's the same/ I feel Italian as before the mobility/ but I think the mobility helped me to feel more European/*

VM: *mhm/ right/ OK/ why/ Francesca/ why this mobility made you feel more European?*

FH: *because I met a lot of people from other countries/ such as France/ Spain/ Belgium/ and other parts of the world/ and this experience told me that the...the other person/ the other people are important because help you to know the/ the world in another point view/*

At the beginning of their sojourn, the two Finnish participants report on feeling a sense of attachment to their city, Tampere. The things that tie Jussi (JN) to his city are, similarly to the ones in Jennifer and Diego's discourses, related to his childhood, and the long time spent there. However, Jussi envisions that his stay abroad might make a change in this aspect and he might not have to struggle when it comes to moving to another city or to another country afterwards. Finally, with regard to his sense of belonging to Europe, Jussi states he belongs to western countries, which he defines as developed countries:

JN: *definitely yeah/ I/ I belong in Tampere/*

VM: *mhm/*

JN: *but/ it's maybe because I/ I have always lived in Tampere/ gone to school in Tampere/ but this might change things/ mmm ... I've always been drawn to that certain city/ but after this trip/ it might not matter to move to another city or other country/*

(...)

VM: *and what about your feeling of belonging to Europe?*

JN: *Europe/ well/ I think belong in western countries/ like...*

VM: *mhm/*

JN: *developed countries/*

However, at the end of the stay abroad, Jussi declares that even though he knows he belongs to Finland, he feels that going somewhere else is easier, because some barriers have been broken, at least with regard to countries inside Europe:

JN: *a:/ I know I belong in Finland/ but not like/ a: before it was like/ I want to like get a job from my own city/ and buy a house from my own city town/ Tampere/ and stuff like that/ so it kind of broke some barriers/ it's easier to go/ mmm/ but maybe inside Europe because:/ I have never been outside Europe/ so it's kind/ kind of like weird area/ gray area for me/*

Furthermore, the participant affirms that, with the Erasmus, he has learnt that if you feel accepted, then you can call any place home. His account is similar to the one of Stefaan, one of the participants in Oulu:

JN: *my sense of belonging... yeah I guess you/ a:/you can belong anywhere/ if there's/ these certain things you know like/ friends/ family/ like/ if you feel accepted somewhere/ maybe you can call/ any place home/*

VM: *and that's something you learnt with the Erasmus?*

JN: *yeah/*

In a similar way, Sami (SM), reports on feeling attachment to his city before anything else at the onset of his stay abroad:

SM: *ah/ yeah/ I was born in Tampere and I've always always there/ and I'm very genuinely Tamperian/ I don't know if you say it like that but yeah/ I'm very Finnish/ but ah with/ with the experience with different cultures so far/ I've become more like international but definitely like Finnish/*

In fact, the participant actually defines himself as “genuinely Tamperian” and states that despite experiencing with different cultures and becoming more international, he would define himself as Finnish. However, at the end of his stay abroad, Sami offers a quite different narrative of belonging and states that he feels European and he has not felt like a Finn for a long time. His European identity is related to the easiness to travel around Europe and the common things among Europeans which make adaptation to a different European country easier than in the case of other continents:

SM: *hm...if I if I have to choose I would say I feel European/ it's been quite a long time that I haven't felt like a Finn/ and I I don't consider myself as a Finnish person/ but yeah I I feel European/*

VM: *what makes you feel European/ Sami? Sami/*

SM: *yeah/ it's good/ ah/ what makes me feel European it's that it's very easy to travel around Europe/ and we still have some things in in common although Finnish people are slow and/ not so talkative/ but we/ it's easy for us to react and adapt into different cultures and I think these European cultures are closer to us than well/ Asian and and/ other/*

When reflecting about the impact of the Erasmus program on his sense of belonging, Sami brings to the fore that he has spent a lot of time with Romanian, French, and Spanish people, which he identifies as Latin cultures, and he characterizes them as emotionally very different to Finns. This fact has made him more emotionally open:

SM: ahm/ yeah yeah/ I I spent a lot of time with Romanians and ah French and Spanish/ all Latin cultures and/ as you know/ they are very different emotionally to Finnish/ and ah I think it has made me a little bit more Latin (laughs)/ ah/ not X much though because here in Finland we really stay with schedules and if we agree on something it stands very/ you know/ like written in the stone/ and/ that's maybe something that's difficult for me to understand but/ their use of time/ mostly/ it's something different/

VM: mhm/

SM: but emotionally maybe I I have become more/ open/

On a different token, at the beginning of his stay, Jesús declares that despite being aware of his birthplace, city, and country, he does not feel different for being from a given country. He also affirms being very much at ease with open borders in Europe. Even though Jesús does not literally express his sense of belonging to Europe, Europe and the European Union are the first emerging categories in his discourse:

JO: yo para eso soy muy... para esto sí que... de hecho se me vio en el test/ soy muy/ estoy muy a gusto con el hecho de las fronteras abiertas dentro de Europa/ bueno/ en la Unión Europea porque al fin y al cabo yo puedo tener una identidad o sea/ me siento realmente... sé de donde soy/ sé donde nací/ sé e:/ dónde está mi ciudad/ sé dónde está mi país/ pero yo no me siento diferente por ser de un país u otro/ no me siento mejor o peor/ yo soy español pero seguramente si fuera francés me sentiría la misma persona/ y que en ese sentido/ no tengo un/ un sentimiento de que... yo soy lo que soy por ser de un sitio/ (me for that I'm very... for that I actually... in fact it was obvious in the test/ I'm very/ very pleased by open borders in Europe/ well/ in the EU/ because in the end I can have an identity I mean/ I feel really... I know where I am from/ where I was born/ I know e:/ where my city is/ where my country is/ but I do not feel different for being from a country or another/ I don't feel better nor worse/ I am Spanish but surely if I was French, I would feel like the same person/ and in this sense/ I don't have a/ feeling that I... am what I am for being from a certain place/)

In his POST interview, Jesús seems to bring back the same identity narrative and affirms that he is not determined by random names assigned to groups of people (referring to national groups), but by the context. However, when he is asked if he would define himself in any way, the participant brings to the fore the fact that it is the Galician culture that has the biggest effect on him. In fact,

from Jesús' discourse, it seems that he became aware about his Galician identity through his stay abroad by getting awareness about things that are said about Galician people that are true:

JO: *o sea/ yo soy consciente de donde he nacido/ de... soy consciente que nací en mi ciudad/ en qué provincia está/ en que comunidad autónoma está/ en qué país y en qué continente/ yo de eso soy muy consciente/ pero si hay algo que yo no he querido que me defina nunca es la gente de mi alrededor en el sentido de...te lo explico con el tema Cataluña/ a mí/ económicamente me pare/ o sea/ yo no tengo nada/ una idea social acerca de si deben tener derecho a decidir o no/ o sea/ no tengo una opinión formada/ pero yo sé que a mí que estén o no formando parte de España/ a mí no me hace un español diferente/ igual que no me hace una persona diferente/ a mí no me influye si ellos se llaman de una forma u otra/ igual que no me influye si yo me llamo gallego o no/ me influye por el ambiente/ por el... por el... por el contexto/ pero no me influye decir "me llamo así"/ (so/ I'm aware about where I was born/ about...I'm aware I was born in my city/ in what province it is/ in what autonomous community is/ in what country and on what continent/ I'm very aware about that/ but if there's something I never wanted to be defined by is people around me in the sense... I explain it with the Catalan case/ for me/ economically I th/ I mean/ I have nothing/ a social idea about if they should have the right to vote or not/ I mean/ I do not have a formed opinion/ but I know that for me if they belong or not to Spain/ that does not make me a different Spaniard/ in the same way it doesn't make me a different person/ it does not influence me that they are called in one way or another/ in the same way I'm not influenced by being called Galician or not/ it impacts me because of the environment/ because of...of the...because of the context/ but saying "I'm called this way" doesn't influence me/)*

VM: *mhm/ vale/ de acuerdo/ entonces tú no te definirías de ninguna manera?(mhm/ OK/ alright/ so you wouldn't define yourself in any way?)*

JO: *no/ si tuviera que decir qué cultura tiene más efecto sobre mí/ yo diría que la gallega/ (no/ if I had to say what culture has more impact on me/ I would say the Galician/)*

(...)

JO: *no es que/ no es que me... considere más gallego que otra cosa/ sabes/ pero yo creo que tiene más efecto sobre mi personalidad porque te das cuenta sobre ciertas cosas que se dicen sobre nosotros que son ciertas/ el hecho de dar las respuestas totalmente ambiguas/ de pregun/ responder con preguntas/ la total indecisión/ eso es/ eso es totalmente cierto/ el... decir... sabes un tipo de actitud de... aquí la respuesta más dada es decir cuando te preguntan si crees que algo va a pasar/ decir "malo será"/ es una frase que escuchas como veinte veces al día/ yo creo que en ese tipo de cosas/ en cómo es la gente/ yo creo que es lo... yo creo que eso es lo que tiene más impacto sobre mí/(it's not/ it's not that I...consider myself more Galician than anything/ you know/ but I think it has a bigger impact on my personality because you become aware about certain things that are said about us that are true/ the fact of giving totally ambiguous answers/ of question/ answering with questions/ the total indecision/ that is/ that is totally true/ the...saying...you know a type of attitude of...here the most given answer is saying when you are asked if you thing something will happen/ saying "bad it will be"/ this is a sentence that you hear like twenty times a day/ I think this type of questions/ in how people are/ I think it is that...I think this is what has a bigger impact on me/)*

Furthermore, when Jesús gives an account of the impact of his participation in the program on his sense of belonging, he brings back the idea of becoming aware of different things: good, different, and bad. The participant exemplifies that despite not being patriotic, he became proud of Spain when he realized that in Romania the attitude towards, for example, black people or homosexuals is not as good as in Spain. Finally, Jesús also turns the spotlight on the importance of

learning other points of view from different places as a factor that impacts on how one feels with respect to the place he or she comes from:

JO: *sí/ porque te puedes dar cuenta de lo que te decía antes/ te puedes dar cuenta de las cosas buenas/ de las cosas diferentes/ y de las cosas malas/ te puedes dar cuenta de esto/ yo por ejemplo/ yo nunca he creído especialmente en el tema patriotismo/ pero me he sentido orgulloso de España en el sentido de/ pues nosotros/ lo normal es que tú le preguntes a una persona aleatoria por la calle y que respete a los homosexuales/ o que... haya una persona negra por allí y nadie le vaya a decir nada/ como es lógico/ y... bueno/ tampoco es que lo haya visto en Rumania/ pero como que la actitud es diferente/ eso te puede hacer sentir más orgulloso/ luego puedes aprender otros puntos de vista de otros lugares/ y eso sí que creo que tiene una influencia muy alta en cómo te sientes tú/ respecto a de dónde eres/(yes/ because you become aware about what I told you before/ you can become aware about the good things/ about the different things/ and about the bad things/ you can become aware about that/ and for example/ I've never especially believed in the topic of patriotism/ but I felt proud of Spain in the sense that/ well we/ the normal thing is that you ask a random person on the street and that this person respects homosexuals/ or that... there is a black person around and nobody tells him or her anything/ as it is logical/ and...well/ it's not that I've seen it in Romania/ but it seems that the attitude is different/ that can make you feel more proud/ then you can learn points of view from other places/ and I think that has a very big influence on how you feel/)*

Kalina reports belonging to the Planet Earth, and expresses her wish to live everywhere at the beginning of her sojourn:

KN: *I don't know...I believe to:/ I actually belong to the planet Earth and that's it/ I don't know/ I want to live everywhere/ with everyone/ (laughs)/ not in that sense/ not in that sense/*

At the end of her stay, Kalina's narrative is different and for some reason she does not talk about the Earth, and instead she expresses belonging to warm countries:

KN: *I think I belong to the warm countries/ (laughs)*

(...)

KN: *the hot one/ the warm one/with a warm weather/ I think I belong there/*

VM: *a:/ to warm countries (laughs)/ OK/ and what makes you feel this way?*

KN: *I really don't like the cold/ I really don't like it/ and as I'm used to it here/ to have four seasons/ I can't a:/ I can't ignore none of the four seasons/ I want all of them/ if I'm moving somewhere/ it must be like here/ or better/*

When reflecting about the impact of the Erasmus program on her sense of belonging, the participant calls the attention to the fact that it has been a way to determine if she wants to live abroad or in Bulgaria, though she does not seem to have reached a final answer to this question:

KN: *yes/ definitely/ that way I learnt if I want to live abroad/ or if I want to live in Bulgaria/*

VM: *mhm/*

KN: *so I decided that I want both/ most of time in Bulgaria and some other times in other countries/*

Ultimately, it seems the experience has brought to her a more situated perspective in her sense of belonging, from a very general statement referring to the whole Earth, to a more pragmatic combination of her home country and other places that are not too cold but also have a variety of seasons.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, the interviews with the following participants have been selected: Federico B. (FB, male, 21, Italy), Mildri L. (ML, female, 25, Norway), Petronela S. (PS, female, 21, Poland), Radka T. (RT, female, 23, Czech Republic), and Mădălina S. (MS, female, 20, Moldova).

At the onset of her stay abroad, Petronela expresses that it is difficult to say where she feels she belongs to, but ends up saying she belongs to a country:

PT: *from a country/*

At the end of her stay, the participant positions herself in quite a different way, and states that she feels that she belongs more to Europe, bringing to the fore the fact that she has never been to countries outside Europe (to which she refers with the term “abroad”) so she cannot say she can live in the whole world:

PT: *I think to the Europe more/ because I never been abroad/ so I can't say this/ that I'm/ that I live in all the world/*

VM: *mhm/*

PT: *I don't know their culture/ whatever/*

When reflecting upon the impact of the stay abroad, Petronela turns the spotlight on the fact that she feels it actually did have an impact since she is able to speak better English and Spanish and she knows more about biotechnology, which seems to have been a positive outcome for her since it is not her major:

PT: yes/ of course/ mm...I know more English/ Spanish/ and also the practices were/ were so/ and I know more about biotechnology/ there were not strictly my subjects/ and I know more something about biotechnology/ and maybe in the future I will choose the studies about this/

At the beginning of her stay, Mildri, the Norwegian participant, reports on the fact that she likes Norway and she believes she might end up in Norway at some point. However, the participant admits having the feeling that she needs to explore more places, and she thinks she might fit for instance in Spain because she likes the Spanish lifestyle. In fact, Mildri's attraction for Spain and the Spanish culture is a constant in her interview:

ML: ah...actually I/ I like/ I like Norway and I probably wanna end up in Norway at some time/ but right now I'm/ I wanna explore a little bit more/ I don't feel like I need to go to Norway right now because I think I would/ I think I would be/ I think I would fit in for example in Spain/ I would like the lifestyle they have here but...

At the end of her stay, Mildri's discourse does not seem to have changed much, and she feels as Norwegian as before. However, she declares she also feels she could belong to many other places in the world:

ML: I feel like I belong to Norway/ I'm from Norway and the people from Norway have...maybe they have the same background/ the same cultures and the same way of thinking I think/ but also I think I would feel like I could belong if I was other places in the world also/ like it's not only in Norway that I would feel that I have a place/

With regard to the impact of the Erasmus stay, the participant stresses that maybe it affected her sense of belonging in the sense that through having met people from different cultures, she understood people are similar in many ways, and ultimately this led her to believe she could easily

feel like she belonged to other places and not just to Norway. However, Midlri finishes her statement by affirming that she is Norwegian and that such feeling has remained unchanged:

ML: ah... I don't know/ like/ like I said I think maybe I would/ I met a lot of people from different cultures/ and I realized we are very similar in many ways/ and I think/ I think/ like I said that I could easily feel like I belong ah other places too/ if I tried/ but ah still I think that I come from Norway/ I'm Norwegian/ I don't think that changed that much/

In a similar way, at the start of her stay abroad, Mădălina, the Moldovan participant asserts that she feels attached to Moldova because she has spent her entire life there. In fact, she highlights a need to tell people who might be mistaken about her origins that she comes from Moldova. However, Mădălina also mentions feeling European and at the same time, not as a matter of choice but of circumstance, she feels connected to soviet customs and traditions:

MS: ah/ probabil ca apartin/ (laughs)/ probleme de identitate/ ah ma simt foarte legată de Moldova/ e adevărat/ cat de mult as încerca sa zic ca nu/ nu pot pentru că mi-am petrecut toata viața acolo/ si nu... așa ca de fiecare dată când cineva ma întreabă de unde/ daca tot... am aceeași problema/ daca cineva nu știe/ si spune ca sunt de undeva de pe aici/ nu/ eu sunt din Moldova/ îmi pare rău/ trebuie să știi/ si mă simt cumva foarte europeana/ cumva din zona asta/ europeana si in același timp cumva cu mai mult... nu pentru că aș fi vrut eu dar pentru că așa au fost... circumstanțele/ cu o... obiceiuri si tradiții mai mult legate de partea asta sovietică din Rusia pentru ca involuntar de acolo vin/ asta nu înseamnă ca mie mi-ar plăcea eventual dar așa a fost sa fie/ (ah/ probably I belong/ (laughs)/ identity problems/ ah I feel very attached to Moldova/ it's true/ no matter how much I'd try to say it's not true/ I can't because I've spent my entire life there/ and no...so every time someone asks me from where/ if I just have the same problem/ if someone doesn't know/ and they think I'm from somewhere around here/ no/ I'm from Moldova/ I'm sorry/ you have to know/ and I somehow feel very European/ somewhere from this area/ European and at the same time somehow with more... not because I wanted but because those were... the circumstances/ with a...customs and traditions tied more to this soviet part of Russia because involuntarily I come from there/ it does not mean that I eventually like it but this is how it was meant to be/)

In Mădălina's discourse, identities are distributed somehow in a circular way, where Moldova, with customs and traditions that he connects to the historical attachment to Russia, is in the middle, and the European identity is situated on an outer circle. Interestingly, Mădălina's account of her Moldovan identity being circumstantial, and not something that she eventually likes, but something that was meant to be, connects her discourse to the one of Mila, the Bulgarian participant in Oulu, who somehow portrays national identity as a burden.

A different story is told by the participant at the end of her stay. Mădălina states that she still feels identified with Moldova but she also identifies with the whole world:

MS: ha/ me acuerdo que me hiciste la misma pregunta al principio y te dije que me identificaba con Moldavia creo/ ahora/ no sé por qué/ me sigo identificando con Moldavia creo pero como que me siento más, me identifico también con con el mundo entero/ o sea no solo/ aunque/ me entiendes? que que no me identifico necesariamente con España o con algo así/ pero con el mundo/ no/ no sé/ me siento más así/(ha/ I remember you asked me the same question at the beginning and I told you that I identified with Moldova I think/ now/ I don't know because/ I still feel identified with Moldova I think but it's like I feel more, I feel identified also with the whole world/ I mean not just/ even though/ do you understand me? I do not feel identified necessarily with Spain or something like that/ but with the world/ no/ I don't know/ I feel more that way/)

By the same token, concerning the impact of the program on her identity, Mădălina brings to the fore the fact that it does have an impact because meeting people from different countries contributes to make you start to understand that differences are not that important, which leads to more love and tolerance towards the others, which is the actual impact of the program in her case:

MS: sí/ yo creo que sí/ porque de pronto conoces a personas de diferentes países XX y empiezas a entender que las diferencias no son lo más y que en realidad/ que nos tenemos que aceptar/ y nos tenemos que tolerar exactamente como estamos y empezamos a amarnos y a querernos más/ por eso creo que también influyó mi caso/ digo/ sí/(yes/ I believe it does/ because suddenly you meet people from different countries XX and you start to understand that differences are not the most important and that in reality/ that we have to accept each other/ and we have to tolerate each other as we are and we start to love each other and love each other more/ it is for that that it had an influence in my case/ I think/ yes/)

All in all, it seems that Mădălina's horizon has been expanded through her Erasmus stay. While at the beginning she felt Moldovan, and connected to the soviet part of Europe as a matter of circumstance, at the end of her stay she feels both Moldovan and a citizen of the world, an identity that is not a matter of circumstance anymore, but a matter of choice.

On a different note, Federico states clearly that he feels he belongs to Europe at the start of his stay in Lleida:

FB: no/ for me just Europe/ no not the whole world/

However, at the conclusion of his stay, the participant highlights the fact that his participation in the Erasmus program has made him feel more attached to his country, but most especially to the world, a position he now declares he has always had:

FB: *mmm/ e:h/ el Erasmus me...ha hecho sentir más parte de mi país también/ pero sobretodo del mundo/ yo siempre me he considerado como un ciu/ un ciudadano del mundo/(mmm/ e:h/ the Erasmus has...made me feel more a part of my country also/ but mostly of the world/ I've always considered myself as a cit/ a citizen of the world/)*

Concerning the impact of the experience, Federico declares that by means of getting to know other cultures, he has felt that he belongs a little bit to each of the countries he has got to know, probably referring to the actual people from different countries he has met during his stay in Lleida:

FB: *en...bueno/ conociendo muchas otras culturas me ha hecho sentir pertenecer un poco a todos los países que he conocido/(in...well/ knowing many other cultures made me feel I belong a little to every country I knew/)*

Radka (RT), the Czech participant affirms at the beginning that she feels more European than Czech:

RT: *like if I feel I belong to Czech or to:/ well/ hmm more than Czech I think I belong to Europe/ I don't feel like Czech/ X/ (laughs/)*

Finally, at the end of the stay abroad, Radka seems more convinced about the fact that she belongs to Prague, even though she does not like it nor she feels proud of the Czech culture:

RT: *well yeah/ I feel I belong to Prague/ but I'm not really...I don't like the culture Czech at all/ well/ yeah / of course/ but I'm not really proud of it/ I don't feel like proud of it/*

With regard to the possible impact of the stay abroad on her sense of belonging, Radka, in fact, is the only participant that brings to the fore the issue of Catalonia and the fact that speaking to Catalan people and listening to multiple points of view may help her open her mind to understanding the reasons of other people.

RT: mmm yeah/ I think so because I spoke to... to many people in Catalonia/ and yeah I saw their point of view and yeah/ and I actually in general/ I think if you travel you/ you will get so many points of view/ and then you won't be that/ that strict/ you will consider many reasons and yeah/

Synthesis

In a nutshell, at the beginning of the stay, in the Oulu group we can establish three different patterns of representation. In the first place, Jennifer and Meyer refer to either a national state or a more reduced entity, like a city, when they have to construct their narratives of belonging. The other four participants: Claudia, Diego, Mila, and Stefaan seem to define themselves as “citizens of the world”, even though they bring to the fore different reasons. On the one hand, Claudia is concerned with the reduced amount of possibilities that young people have in her country and in her city, and she relates sense of belonging to the world with human migration, which she foresees she will overtake. On the other hand, Diego and Stefaan embody the figure of what could be the representative European young university-educated citizen for whom borders are disturbing. Finally, Mila seems to embrace the identity of a world citizen and one of the reasons is the fact she does not like the Bulgarian identity assigned to her. In fact, in Mila’s discourse, the puzzling aspect is that the first thing she states when asked about her sense of belonging is that she certainly does not identify with Bulgaria. It is also exclusively found in Mila’s discourse the lack of connecting elements with her country or city of origin.

At the end of the stay, we can see that for some participants, the study abroad experience seems to have had an impact on their identities. However, the result does not appear to be the acquisition of a new identity, but the somehow destabilization and hybridization of their identities. Therefore, it can be claimed that the way they understand their relationship to the world, and how they see possibilities for the future (Norton, 2013: 45) has been altered by the Erasmus experience. At the same time, some participants do not seem to have undergone major changes in this respect. However, the recurrent pattern for all of them is that they claim that through the stay abroad, they

have been confronted with difference, which gives awareness about how things work in different places, it shows that the degree of difference between people might not be as significant as one might have thought, and it leads to ultimately losing the fear to move in the future, the fear to the world, and the fear to be by oneself.

Similar to the Oulu group, at the beginning of the stay abroad, the Bucharest group position themselves in different ways regarding their sense of belonging. On the one hand, Federica refers straightforwardly to her Italian identity, while both Sami and Jussi identify themselves as “Tamperian”. On a different token, Jesús and Kalina report on being citizens of the world.

However, at the end of their stay abroad, it seems that all the participants feel different with regard to who they are and where they belong to. On the one hand, Federica reports on feeling as Italian as before but having acquired a European identity she did not seem to feel identified with initially. Sami and Jussi do not feel like Tamperians anymore, and while Jussi declares that he still feels quite Finnish, Sami highlights the fact she had not felt like a Finn for a long time. Both participants show a quite open identity towards moving and towards a European identity. On the other hand, it seems that Jesús has become more aware of his Galician identity through the program while Kalina feels that now she can decide where she wants to live in the future, and, surprisingly, it is in her country, Bulgaria, where she declares she wants to be most of the time.

Once more, at the onset of their stay abroad, the accounts of the students in Lleida are different from each other. On the one hand, Petronela, Mildri, and Mădălina display a certain degree of identification with their countries of origin, even though in Mildri’s discourse, the possibility to live somewhere else also appears, and in Mădălina’s account, the European identity is also mentioned. On the other hand, both Federico and Radka report on a sense of belonging to Europe.

In a similar way to the participants in the other two groups, the students in Lleida also report a different impact of the stay on their sense of belonging. While Mildri, Federico, and Radka seem to

come back with an increased sense of belonging to their countries, Petronela and Mădălina have somehow adopted a wider identity, which Petronela describes as European and Mădălina uses the term world-citizen to refer to it.

From the accounts of all participants on their sense of belonging at the beginning of their stay abroad, two outstanding aspects are important to mention here. The first one is the fact that most of the participants either identify with their town/city or they express a certain feeling of belonging to the world, or to live in and explore different places.

Secondly, from the students' reports on their sense of belonging at the beginning of their stay, one gets the impression that some participants do not feel identified with their countries because of what they perceive as adverse conditions, constraining social and/ or political structures or a society where they do not fit. It is hard to know if these feelings of adversity towards their countries already existed before the beginning of their stay abroad, or if, on the contrary, they were a result of the confrontation with difference, and often with what they may have perceived as a better socioeconomic situation than the one in their home countries, experienced in the few days from their arrival to the time of the interviews. Another interpretation could also be that they adopted the circulating discourses which portray their countries of origin as poor, backwards, and with fewer opportunities. This might be the reason behind Mila's equalization of the term Bulgarian with the term immigrant, which she does not want to adopt as an identity. Despite the fact it is rather complex to establish a direct connection between the negative predispositions of the participants and the socioeconomic contexts in their countries of origin, it is important to mention that the participants that show this attitude belong to the Eastern-European bloc.

At the end of the stay, a clear evolution in the way the participants position themselves with regard to their sense of belonging can be observed almost unanimously. However, the progression is not always in the same direction. In spite of this fact, there appear to be three recurrent patterns:

some of the participants become more aware of the fact that they belong to their respective countries or to the region they come from, some others come back with an increased sense of being European, and finally, a considerable part of the participants experience a strong feeling of being citizens of the world. In none of the cases, the participants report having lost their previous identities, but instead they claim having added new ones, or having become aware of others. In all cases, it is confrontation of difference that triggers change in the identities of the participants. In some instances, change brings a feeling of similarity and unity with other groups of people (European or whole world) and in some other instances, it triggers a feeling of belonging to the place where the participants were born, usually by means of identities that are assigned to them by third people or a feeling of pride in how certain things are in their countries of origin. Finally, probably the most outstanding fact that comes out from the participants' interviews at the end of their stay abroad is a considerably increased willingness to become mobile, discover new places and new cultures. From their words, the most outstanding impact of the Erasmus experience is the fact that they lost the fear to move to a place where everything is foreign, either through having been able to successfully live with difference and learn from it, having improved their level of foreign languages, or having acquired new and looser identities that allow them to identify with extended categories, and to be able to feel at home in multiple places.

6.1.1. Representations of European identity and language diversity

In the previous section, the development of the sense of belonging of the Erasmus students has been approached. From their accounts, their sense of attachment to Europe does not seem to be especially strong at the beginning of their stay. However, more than half of the participants bring Europe out in their discourse. Furthermore, we must also note that at the same time as the data were collected, the EU was facing the beginning of what would later be called “the refugees’ crisis”, and

the participants sometimes referred to the poor management of the crisis by EU institutions and countries. I believe this situation may have somehow triggered certain disenchantment with Europe among participants in the study.

A glance at the interviewees' understanding of the European identity will enable us to shed light on what elements the Erasmus students identify as key in bringing Europeans together, at both moments, right when their Erasmus experience has started and after its conclusion. At the beginning of their stay, some of the participants state they cannot identify any element that defines the European identity and/or the European culture. Others refer to considerable differences between the European countries that make establishing bonds rather difficult. Another group remark common elements, such as: the common currency, ease to move across the European countries, rights, freedom, democracy, convergence to the norms, respect, behavior, and education. A recurrent element in their discourse is money, which most of the times alludes to the common currency, the euro, but sometimes concerns directly the fact that the EU countries have an interdependent economy. In the following lines, the reports of the students in each context with regard to their feelings in relation to European identity will be exposed.

6.1.1.1. Beginning of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Claudia notes that money, namely the euro, is what unifies Europe. To this, Jennifer adds that she believes the common currency is actually the only thing Finland shares with the rest of EU countries:

CQ: *el dinero?*(money?)

VM: *el dinero/ qué quiere decir el dinero/ Claudia?* (money/ what does money mean/ Claudia?)

CQ: *no sé mm... hombre realmente Europa es Europa porque compartimos el euro/* (I don't know mm well actually Europe is Europe because we share the euro/)

(...)

JC: *yo creo que este país es lo único que comparte/* (I think it's the only thing this country shares/)

Diego mentions European citizenship as a matter of residence:

DD: *la persona que reside en Europa/* (the person who resides in Europe/)

On a different note, Meyer reports common behavior as an element that connects European citizens. To contrast his statement, the participant gives the example of Korean people, who behave in a totally different way. Besides, he cannot find any concrete European element but he reiterates the fact that you can certainly see who comes from any given continent:

ML: *hmm... well I think at least there are mmm.../ some things that...ahm...that connect Europeans but just in their in their way of behavior/ so just when you're living together with many nationalities/ you'll pretty soon recognize that maybe German/ Spanish/ and Czech people behave like similar/ and the Korean people behave like in a totally different way/ they're like super close to each other/ and directly hug you and everything and yeah... and... I would I wouldn't have any points now that I can concretely say "this is Europe"/ but ah yeah I think/ I think that you would recognize pretty sure who comes from which continent/*

Stefaan makes the point of education as binding Europeans. However, when he elaborates a little more on this, he ends up stating that education might not be the same for all Europeans, but the standard is pretty high. Finally, the participant affirms that maybe he has this idea because of the other people there, referring probably to the international students in Oulu, which he qualifies as pretty smart. It seems that for Stefaan, European people are embodied by the other international students at the university:

SM: *a: h/ well/ overall the only one I could come up with/ since I think there are cultures that are pretty different/ ah/ the one that defines European people is that they are pretty well educated I guess/*

VM: *OK/ so education/ do you think it's the same for almost everywhere in Europe?*

SM: not/ not at all either/ but/ but the standard's pretty high I guess/ but it's also/ the people that are here/ that they are pretty smart I guess/ otherwise they wouldn't be here but/

Moreover, when Stefaan reflects upon the idea of European identity, he stresses the fact that there are a lot of differences and too many cultures to say who is European and who is not. Finally, he highlights the fact that Canadians could be more Dutch than Spanish people, turning the spotlight on the idea of “Western culture” as an identifying element:

SM: no/ no/ because there's/ no:/ I don't think there's something that really makes you European/ too many different cultures to/ say who is European and who isn't/ I mean Canadians could be more Dutch than Spanish people/

In a similar way, Mila asserts that she does not like classifications and believes that at the end of the day we are all people:

MJ: mm/ I don't like this classification like/ are you a European? are you American? like you are a human being/ you are... yeah you have different backgrounds than the others/ ah/maybe you have different traditions/ different food but at the end of the day we're all people/ we all have the same values/ so I don't think that I can classify someone like “you're European”/ “you're American”/we're just people/

All in all, at the beginning of their Erasmus experience, it seems that in the Oulu group, the participants position themselves with regard to their representations of Europe in three different ways. On the one hand, practical things such as the common currency or residing in Europe are brought to the fore as unifying elements. On the other hand, the idea of symbolic elements, such as behavior or good education is brought up. Finally, the idea of “Western identity” as a whole is represented in the participants' discourses as more outstanding than the idea of European identity, which appears to be too small or limited to encompass all the people who share a similar set of cultural elements.

The Bucharest group

At the onset of their stay abroad, Jussi and Sami also stress the considerable differences among European countries. However, Sami mentions that even though it is easier to move around Europe, he does not really see any connection among different countries. Finally, Jussi brings to the fore the idea of the euro again, which he says has existed only for a couple of decades, and reports to believe unification will take longer or might not even happen:

JN: *ah...not as a whole/ I think every country has their own/*

SM: *yeah/*

JN: *own stuff/*

SM: *I guess the only thing is that it's easier to go from one place to another/ I/ I don't really see the connection between countries/*

JN: *yeah/ yeah/*

SM: *in Europe/*

JN: *and this euro thing has only been around for like a couple of decades/ so I think it will take more for like Europe to unite/ maybe it won't ever happen/ I don't know/*

Jesús can identify many elements that according to him serve as a bond for European people, which are integration, respect, and the fact that in the world Europeans (“us”) represent rights, well-being, democracy, and doing things the right way:

JO: *yo sí que...que considero lo que/ la integración/ la/ el respeto/ el...dentro de lo que es el mundo/ se supone que nosotros representamos los derechos/ la/ el bienestar/ el/ la democracia/ que las cosas se hagan como teóricamente deben ser hechas/ (I do...consider that/ integration/ respect/ the...in what the world is/ it is supposed that we represent rights/ the/ well-being/ the/ democracy/ that things are done how they theoretically should be done/)*

In the Bucharest group, at the beginning of the stay abroad, the participants seem to enumerate, again, different patterns of identification for the European people. While on the one hand, practical issues such as the euro and freedom of movement are mentioned, accompanied with a

certain degree of skepticism, on the other, Europe, which takes the collective form of “us” becomes a representation of integrity, respect, rights, well-being and democracy for the rest of the world.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Mildri stresses the differences among European countries straight from the beginning of her stay:

ML: European...? I/ I don't know/ because there are many differences within Europe/ for example/ Spain/ Norway and Poland/ which I have been living in/ it's/ they have some/ many similarities/ I guess/ and many differences also but/ may:be/ I'm not sure/ but maybe compared to/ for example/ South America or something like this/ that people are a little bit more closed in Europe/ but they also are/ for example/ in south of Spain/ or south in Italy/ people are very open and outgoing/ so... I don't know/ I think there are so many differences within Europe that it's difficult to compare Europe with...

On a similar token, Mădălina, the Moldavian participant in Lleida refers to the concern with the norms that somehow brings Europeans together:

MS: ah... cultura europeană in general? cu siguranță există dar fiecare țară are specificul sau aparte/ specificul sau/ nu știu... per general am percepția asta despre europeni ca sunt foarte/ nu știu în foarte mult la norme/ la... la etichetă să zicem așa/ poate dincolo de ocean nu se tine atât de mult cont de chestiile astea/ ah... nu știu la asta ma gândesc eu... (ah...European culture in general? surely they exist but every country has its particularities/ its particularities/ I don't know...in general I have the perception of Europeans that they are very/ I don't know they are very concerned about rules/ about...etiquette let's say/ maybe overseas there's not so much concern about these things/ ah...I don't know this is what I think...)

Mădălina seems to agree with the fact that there is something that can be defined as European culture in general, but she immediately brings to the fore that each country has its own specificities. Finally, she refers to the importance of norms as a common element to Europeans, and also a differential element with people from overseas.

All in all, the accounts of the participants with regard to their representation of Europe at the beginning of their sojourn are different from each other, and while some students seem to identify

some patterns of identification for European people such as the euro and the open-borders, just one of them characterizes Europe as representative of symbolic values.

6.1.1.2. End of the stay

At the end of their stay abroad, the participants were asked to report, again, on the elements that might define European identity, and also to express the way they foresee the future of the European Union. In the following lines, the answers of the students in each of the three contexts will be presented.

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Diego, who at the beginning claimed that European identity was based on residence, struggled to answer the question at the end, even though he affirmed there are many things that form European identity. However, he was not able to identify any and highlighted that during his Erasmus stay, the Korean and Japanese students were a little bit different. With this assumption, the participant, in fact, made a distinction between “us”, the Europeans, and “them”, the Asians:

DD: pfff... es que yo creo que es muchas cosas/ no? la definen/ pero... es que no sé exactamente cómo responderte a esta pregunta/ pues...pues si ya ves/ allí por ejemplo en nuestra estancia había muchos coreanos/ no? y japoneses y se notaba que eran un poquito más distintos/ no? pero mmm no sé/ no sé/(pfff...I believe there are a lot of things/ right? that define it/ but... the thing is I don't exactly know how to answer this question/ so... so you see/ there for example in our stay there were a lot of Koreans/ right? and Japanese and it was clear they were a little bit different/ right/ but mmm I don't know/ I don't know/)

On a different note, Jennifer and Claudia talk about the mere fact of belonging to the EU and money as being at the core of European identity, while Jennifer repeatedly states it is all about politics:

JC: *lo único que tienen en común es pertenecer a la Comunidad Europea/* (the only thing they have in common is belonging to the European Community/)

CQ: *y el dinero/ el dinero/* (and money/ money/)

JC: *y la moneda/* (and the currency/)

CQ: *la moneda porque incluso Francia que es nuestra vecina...* (and the currency because even France which is our neighbor...)

JC: *politiqueo/* (politicking)

CQ: *en sanidad nos da mil vueltas Francia a nosotros/* (in healthcare France winds and twists us/)

JC: *eso es politiqueo/ a mí que me lo digan/* (that is politicking/ don't they dare tell me/)

Similarly, Meyer also addresses the issue of the common currency and turns the spotlight on the multiplicity of cultures as a difficulty when it comes to defining Europe:

ML: *I mean/ somehow of course like the common currency/ a:h/ but more than that I think/ like you think about Europe is that there are so many different cultures so/ I wouldn't know what to define as a Europe/ as a European culture/*

On a different token, Mila affirms she does not believe that “we” (Europeans) are too different from other people, even though she states that European people have similar customs, especially neighboring countries who have very much in common, and the cities look similar. Interestingly, while Mila does not seem to believe in European identity as much different from the others, in her discourse, she refers to European people with the first person plural forms “our” and “we”, which gives the impression she might see Europe as a community she belongs to:

MJ: *ah... ah I don't/ I don't think so think so/ like I don't think that we are that different than all the other people/ and the European culture/ of course that we have our very similar customs/ especially with the neighboring countries like Bulgaria and Romania/ we have very much in common/ ah... and of course maybe the like the cities look kind of similar/ especially the capitals/ like you can say “OK/ this is a typical European capital”/ and everybody knows what you mean/ ah but at the same time I haven't really been in other continents/ so I can't say/*

Furthermore, when it comes to making predictions about the future of the European Union, the participants show different attitudes, from an imminent war to hopes for better. For instance, Meyer expects that open borders and the euro, which he sees as a big advantage for European people will not be altered:

ML: well...I hope and I wish that it stays like that/ and that will still have the open borders and the currency and/ cause it's like very easy for everybody/ it's good for the economy/ it's just like a big advantage for like most people living here/

Similarly, Diego gives the example of Brexit as a hard hit for Europe but uses it to expose his idea that this could work as a way for Europe to prevent such a thing to happen in the future:

DD: pues bueno pues ahora encima con lo del Brexit y todo esto/ pues... ha sido como un duro golpe/ no? como el fracaso de Europa/ parece ser/ pero yo creo que no va a ser así/ yo creo que va a ser/ un refuerzo al final/ va a ser como/ vamos a hacer las cosas mejor para que no pasen estos/ estas cosas/ no? o...pero no sé/ también yo pienso que lo del Brexit es culpa de ellos/ de los británicos y no de Europa/ vaya/ (so well so now on top of that the thing with Brexit and all that/ well... it was like a hard hit/ right? like the failure of Europe/ it seems to be/ but I don't think it will be that way/ I think it will be/ a reinforcement in the end/ it will be like/ let's do things in a better way so these won't happen/ these things/ right? or... but I don't know/ I also think the thing with Brexit is their fault/ of the British and not of Europe/ anyways/)

The other side of the coin is represented in Mila and Stefaan's discourses. While the former exposes her belief that a war will come in the future, which she bases on the recent events, probably referring to the refugee crisis, the latter talks about a future failure due to the fact that the EU wants to concentrate too much power for its own and the cultures that conform the EU are too different to let themselves be governed by one central government:

ML: ah... well I don't think that it's going very well/ and I kind of see us in some kind of war in the near future/ like I don't know if it will be like some massive third world war or it will be like a war between us here/ but I definitely don't see things peaceful/ being peaceful/ like judging by the recent events/

SL: I believe that in the long term it will fail because the European Union wants to have too much power for its own/ and other cultures are just way too different to let everything go to to one big central government/

In summary, the opinions with regard to both those elements that form European identity and the future of the EU are different from each other in the Oulu group, also at the end of the stay abroad. However, two patterns can be observed. On the one hand, concerning European identity, despite the fact that the participants struggle to enumerate any concrete elements, it seems that a way

to unify Europeans is by distinguishing them from those who are not. On the other hand, and probably due to the experience with people from outside Europe provided by the Erasmus sojourn, the opposite effect is achieved if individuals focus more on similarities than on differences. Similarly, while some participants perceive the late events including the refugee crisis and the Brexit issue as signs of the failure of Europe, some others focus on the good things Europe has, such as open borders, and even the outcome of the British referendum in favour of abandoning the EU, as an event from which the EU can learn and improve.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, a recurrent theme, when it comes to putting a name to elements that might give shape to European identity, is the fact that some of the participants identify different regions or blocs in Europe. For instance, Federica, a participant from Italy, talks about the occidental and oriental groups of Europeans:

FH: ah...mmm no/ I don't th/ I think that I'm European/ ah people/ European person/ and I:/ because I stay in Bucharest/ and this experience help me to feel European/

(...)

FH: mmm/ yes/ I think that the occidental group and oriental groups is the two groups of European/

Similarly, Kalina states there are some things that characterize European culture but she also identifies some regions based on language, to which she later adds similarity in the ways people look, speak, and their habits. Interestingly, Kalina brings to the fore the fact that Europe is international but Europeans have not had enough time yet to get used to all the other Europeans, so we still feel more identified with our neighbors:

KN: yes/ I think/ a:/ but I think Europe is a:/ divided in some regions/

VM: *mhm/*

KN: *maybe the language...*

VM: *can you explain me more about these regions?*

KN: *maybe the language reasons/ like the Latin/ the Germanic languages/ Scandinavian countries...because people are very different/ and when they have like similar features/ they...I think they understand each other a:/ better than the a: other regions/ because Europe is like...yes/ it is like international society/ but it's not that for that long international society/ so most of us we are used to people who are very similar to us/ who look similar/ who speak similar/ and have like similar habits (xxx)/*

In a like manner, Jussi, besides struggling to answer the question, brings to the fore the idea of “Western countries” which have a similar religion, to which he adds the English language as a connector:

JN: *that's a tough one/ (laughs)/ I don't know/ it's a really difficult question I think/*

VM: *mhm/*

JN: *but maybe/ the things that connect us are the kind of like all/ Western countries and/ kind of like similar/ religion/ stuff like that/*

VM: *mhm/*

JN: *and/ of course the English language/ connects it/*

On a different token, Sami turns the spotlight on the fact that there are too many different cultures to be able to define European culture as a whole:

SM: *hm/ I think that there are so many different cultures/ in in the European/ European group that/ it's it's not just one/ one big group of/ countries/ it's it's many different cultures/ and you you can't just define the European culture/*

Finally, Jesús, who was very positively oriented towards European values at the beginning of his stay, shows quite a different attitude and reduces the unifying elements to a relatively common history and mostly, to the economy, which he summarizes with a rather cynical tone by stating that “what feeds you better, makes you feel better, and makes you feel more like a part of it”:

JO: *pues...antes yo pensaba que era respetar ciertos derechos/ (laughs)/ ahora con el tema refugiados y...esa política anti migratoria que han adoptado muchos países/ y que sobretodo que no le ha costado votos/ porque si fuera cosa de un gobierno y la población se opusiera/ sería diferente/ pues yo antes consideraba eso/ ahora/ como cultura que nos agrupa/ yo creo que simplemente se da en nuestra historia/ el saber que tenemos una historia relativamente común/ y sobre todo/ la economía/ saber que perteneces a la Unión Europea/ y que eso te*

ayuda positivamente/ claro/ lo que te da mejor de comer/ te hace sentir mejor/ y te hace sentir más parte de ello/(well...before I thought it was respecting certain rights/ (laughs)/ now with the issue of refugees and...this politics against migration that many countries have adopted/ and that especially did not cost them votes/ because if it was the issue of a government and the population would oppose it/ it would be different/ so before I considered that/ as a culture that brings us together/ I think that simply it happens in our history/ knowing we have a relatively common history/ and mostly/ the economy/ knowing you belong to the European Union/ and that positively helps you/ clearly/ what feeds you better/ makes you feel better/ and makes you feel more like a part of it/)

With regard to the future of the European Union, similar to the Oulu group, the students in the Bucharest group show different opinions. On the one hand, Europe is seen as more important than national states, and staying together, a priority, as exposed by Federica:

FH: ah...I don't know/ I think that Euro/ Europea is more important than maybe we can try to stay together with other countries/ with other people/ and we...we mustn't feel Italian or Spain or...Spanish or French/ and that's it/

Similarly, Kalina shows doubtful but hopeful attitudes with respect to the development of the EU:

KN: hm/ a:h/ hmm/ hmm/ I hope it will continue developing/ but with this politics that are going now in the European Union/ I'm really doubting it will continue developing/

And so does Sami:

SM: it's hard to say/ yeah/ things are not very good/ right now and/ and I/ they have been talking that maybe Finland is gonna leave the euro/ but/ I don't know/ I hope it's going better/ but/it doesn't look very good/

On the opposite side, Jesús shows a much more pessimistic attitude and brings to the fore the fact that new problems are arising and creating a feeling of disunion between the countries:

JO: pues... jodido en el sentido de:/ no en el sentido de la individualidad de cada país/ sino en el sentido de que una vez se han alcanzado unas cuotas comunes/ y están apareciendo unos problemas que antes no habían aparecido/ se está generando un clima de:/ como de desunión entre los países/ entonces en ese sentido/ no lo veo bien/ no le veo un buen futuro/ (well...screwed in the sense that/ not in the sense of individuality of each country/ but in the sense that once some common fees have been achieved/ and there are appearing some problems that did not appear before/ there is being generated a climate of/ like of disunion among the countries/ so in that sense/ I don't see it well/ I don't see it a good future/)

In short, it seems that in the Bucharest group, like in the Oulu group, positions and visions with regard to representations of Europeanness and the future of the European Union are divided. However, a particular theme that arises in the group that chose Romania as a destination is the division of Europe in different regions, based on either the separation between the Western and Eastern blocs, or on other elements such as families of languages. It is rather disappointing to see that, in some cases, participants who initially deployed quite a positive attitude towards Europe, at the end of the experience have shifted towards a much more skeptical position. Despite the fact we can easily relate the answers to the hardship the EU was going through at the moment the data were collected, it is rather intriguing that not all students were affected in the same way, which leads to the idea that there are instances in which the participation in the Erasmus program may affect in a negative way the students' representations of Europe and European identity.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, as in the Oulu and the Bucharest ones, there does not seem to be much consensus among the participants. For instance, Federico affirms that the common thing that defines European identity is the fact that it is part of the Western culture, which sees the other cultures as lower:

FB: *eeee...mmm...mhmhmmh... la... la cultura occidental sobretodo que ve las otras culturas como un poco menores/ (eeee...mmm...mhmhmmh... the... the occidental cultura mostly which sees the other cultures as a little bit lower/)*

Mildri remarks the multiplicity of cultures within Europe and she does not think there is any specific European trait. She rather observes that some people from South America, for instance, can be similar to some European people, and sometimes more similar than different Europeans among themselves:

ML: *ah...well I don't know/ like I said/ if you meet people from Brazil for example/ they can be very similar*

ML: *so/ actually/ I/ I don't think so/ I don't think there's something specific because in Europe there are so many different countries/ also/ like Norway is very different from Italy for example and...*

VM: *mhm/*

ML: *so I don't think people in Europe are more similar than for example people in some places in Europe and in some places in South America/ for example/*

Likewise, Petronela remarks that Europe should be together even though she also highlights that the people she had met in Lleida made her gain awareness about the considerable differences among Europeans:

PT: *ah/ I think Europe should be together/ but in each country/ there's something different/ because I met a lot of people there/ so from each area of Europe there are different people I think/ there are more/ a lot of difference/*

On a different note, Mădălina is able to mention different elements that define the European identity as a whole, such as democracy, freer spirit, open-mindedness, and tolerance:

MS: *la democracia/ democracia así se dice? sí? el espíritu más libre/ la manera más abierta de pensar/ la tolerancia...* (democracy/ democracy right? yes? freer spirit/ more open-mindedness/ tolerance/)

Finally, Radka states that there are some things that define European identity but she is not able to come out with any examples. However, she explains that there are countries more similar than others. In fact, Radka's discourse resembles that of Kalina, one of the participants in Bucharest, who claimed that the EU is too young and for the time being, just the neighboring countries have had the time to get to know each other better:

RT: *mmm...hmmm/ hmmm/ definitely yes but...I'm trying to think about some examples/ I don't know/ it's hard to explain (laughs)/ I'm sorry/*

VM: *yes/ but are the countries in Europe different/ or are there countries that are more similar to others?*

RT: *yeah/ of course there/ there are country where/ which are more similar/ for example Czech and Slovak/ it used to be one country/ now we are two/ but I think the personalities and characters/ and cultures is more or less the same/ and...yeah/ I would say in general/ the countries who/ who has the same border/ who has the border with another countries are more similar than countries from one part of Europe to another/*

With respect to the ways the participants foresee the future of the EU, opinions are again divided. However, the common pattern in the Lleida group seems to be a generalized hope for better, despite the considerable awareness of the students regarding the hardship Europe was going through at the moment of the interview. This can be observed in Federico and Mildri's discourses:

FB: *mmm/ lo veo un poquito difícil por cómo estamos ahora/ pero espero que se se va[d]a hacia una integración mayor/ (mmm/ I see it a little bit hard for how we are now/ but I hope it will go to a higher integration/)*

ML: *I don't know/ like for example Norway is not in the European Union so ah/ I don't know/ I think yeah/ European Union will bring Europeans more together/ maybe like I said the borders will be less ah/ less ah/ ah/ or more loose or like we will be more like one people/ maybe/*

Similarly, Mădălina affirms that despite the fact there are a lot of problems, like the refugees issue and terrorism, the future can be bright if these are solved:

MS: *eh...solucionando algunos problemas que son como muy importantes en el día de hoy de los refugiados/ no? y también el terrorismo/ yo creo que el futuro será muy brillante/ pero...pero siento que todavía hay muchos problemas/(eh...solving some problems that are quite important nowadays with refugees/ right? And also terrorism/ I think the future will be very bright/ but...but I feel that there are still many problems/)*

On a more skeptical note, Petronela points out the differences and the competition between countries. Interestingly, she also turns the spotlight on the fact that her country (Poland) is placed in the former Eastern European bloc. She actually states "the East part of the world", but it seems obvious she has Europe in mind rather than the whole world.

PT: *oh my god/ (laughs)/ I think there are a lot of difference between our countries/ of Europe/ of course/ and it will be/ always somebody has to say something another than another country/ and I think it will be not so close their/ for example our country I see more on the east part of the world/*

Petronela's account resembles both Kalina and Radka's discourses, and even though it is hard to establish a certain connection between their countries of origin and their similar vision of Europe, the three participants were from countries that used to belong to the Eastern-European bloc, and their respective first-languages belong to the same Slavic family. Similarities can also be found between

their discourses and Mădălina's account at the beginning of her Erasmus experience of her sense of belonging to the soviet part of Europe.

Finally, on a similar note of skepticism, even though for a different reason, Radka points out that she is afraid Europe is trying to erase differences between different countries and their cultures:

RT: mmmm/ yeah/ I'm a little bit skeptical about the way how it's going right now because...because I think it's more important or...for me it's important that the country should/ should have its own culture and it shouldn't be a: somehow a: somehow/ how to say it/ a: yeah/ I don't think it would be nice if every country would look exactly like another European country/ I think it's important there are differences/ and I'm afraid European Union is trying to/ is trying to a:/ to do/ to make one equal state instead of community of different countries/ so that's what I'm afraid of/

In fact, Radka is the only participant who makes the future of Europe a personal issue and explains those things that are important for her and those that she is afraid of. She appears to be genuinely concerned about the loss of each country's individual culture.

All in all, it seems that, in the Lleida group, the students' representations at the beginning of their stay abroad are different from each other. While some of their accounts give the impression that they feel optimistic about the future of the EU to a considerable extent, some others show fear either for the European project not being able to succeed because of too many differences, as for the European project as a threat to individual differences.

Synthesis

Taken together, the accounts of the students regarding their sense of belonging and their representations of Europe and European identity tell us that identity is rooted in different locations through powerful symbolic elements such as childhood memories, family ties, or lifelong friendships. From the interviews with the participants, it appears that, in their discourses, their cities, provinces, countries of origin, and their childhood memories, family, friends, and probably positive

feelings such as love, protection, and attachment are a whole entity that cannot be easily disentangled. Consequently, it seems rather hard that a few months abroad will truncate an identity so strongly rooted.

However, what can be easily observed is that almost all the participants report on an increased willingness and more ease to become mobile in the future, and the conviction that they can feel at home in many places. In some cases, this is expressed through the desire to search for a job in a different country, while in some others it becomes a loss of their sense of home and less concern about their sense of belonging. Therefore, the impact of the Erasmus stay seems to be a destabilization and hybridization of the identities of the participants. Accordingly, it appears that studying in a foreign university for at least one semester provides an environment where individuals are confronted with difference: cultural, symbolic, and probably material too. This prolonged exposure to difference seems to give the participants certain awareness of how things work in different places, which leads to a change in the way they see the world, and the position their places of origin occupy in the world. Ultimately, this process can have a two-folded effect. On the one hand, it triggers the feeling that differences between people are not as big as the participants had imagined, and in this case, one becomes more tolerant, open, and prone to expand his or her horizons with regard to the places he or she could belong to. On the other hand, it might lead to an enhanced sense of belonging to their own country or region, through the means of realizing one's own distinguishing features, or by noticing that certain things work better in the country of origin than elsewhere, and becoming prouder of one's origins. The outcome is, in most of the cases, the acquisition of a second identity that most of the times comprises the more localized one. Nevertheless, in all cases, the participants lose the fear to move, the fear to be by themselves, and come back with an increased feeling that they can be easily accepted everywhere. It is, in fact, a process of breaking barriers, of overcoming fears by exposing themselves to those things that frighten them, and also a process of understanding where they want to be. In any case, it is a way of

expanding horizons, and becoming transnational individuals. Therefore, more than acquiring a different identity, it seems that the Erasmus experience is an opportunity for acquiring multiple identities, which has significant implications with respect to what the future behavior of the participants might be. It is definitely a form of symbolic capital with many chances of being transformed into material capital. It could be, therefore, that the repeated sense of belonging to what the students call developed countries or Western countries is not a coincidence but the expression of their desire to belong to this imagined community.

With regard to the participants' representations of Europe and European identity, it is hard to draw a conclusion that would apply to the impact of the Erasmus on the whole group. Instead, patterns of representations and patterns of foreseeing the future can be established across the three groups. In the first place, the difficulty many of the students express when they have to enumerate what elements might conform European identity is very telling for that it gives the impression that the participants are not able to define what unifies European people. Consequently, identification with Europe becomes more an idealistic goal than a reality, since it is an unattainable endeavor to identify with something one struggles to define. In the second place, considerable importance is assigned to practical issues of the EU, such as the common currency, residence in Europe, open borders and freedom of movement. Certainly, remarking these unifying elements is better than not being able to tell anything at all. However, they do not have the appearance to be symbols of identification, or at least, they are rather distant from the emotional experiences and ties the students describe as determining their sense of belonging. Thirdly, the fact that many participants report on differences rather than similarities between European countries, both at the beginning and at the end of their stay abroad, conveys the impression that identification with Europe does not seem to have a fertile terrain to grow. On the other hand, the fact that some students find elements that are common to all Western or developed countries and that they bring to the fore common elements such as the common good education of Europeans might be interpreted as an indicator of the fact that when the

students imagine Europeans, what they have in mind is middle-class, university-educated students from different European (and not just European) countries. In this sense, middle-class, well educated, and Western could be more powerful unifying elements than an alleged European identity.

Further, worth mentioning are also the accounts of some students claiming that EU's history is too short for all the people to identify with the others. According to the participants, unification will take longer, if it is ever going to happen, and the construction of European identity is done by means of differentiating it from other identities, such as Asian. Finally, with regard to the future of the EU, many participants show a hopeful but nevertheless quite skeptical attitude. While the feeling of disunion and a general problematic time, strongly determined by the crisis of the Syrian refugees, is always in the background, at the end of the stay some of the students are able to find some optimism besides everything, and they express some hope that the EU will learn from mistakes, and ultimately become a better place to live.

6.2. The outward look: language investment, expectations, and imagined identities

From the interviews with the participants at the beginning of their stay it seems that in many instances, their decision to enroll in a stay abroad has been brewed for a far from negligible period of time, and it is to a considerable extent a result of their life experiences, highly influenced by significant people in their lives. However, and in spite of the fact that, in the vast majority of cases, the decision to embark on the experience gives the impression to be a personal one, in many instances, the participants recall a certain type of discourses on the importance of a stay abroad, discourses whose origins are hard to detect, but which, nevertheless, have a tremendous impact on their choices. These also show very refined indications with regard to the characteristics of the contexts of the stay. Listening to the participants as they recall some of the discourses they have appropriated can be, at some point, a bewildering experience, especially for the perplexing certainty that they seem to display.

This section will examine the accounts of the students with regard to those things they are invested in, their expectations, and the identities they imagine for themselves as they articulate them at the beginning of their stay abroad. Further, their perception of the degree of accomplishment of those initial expectations, as well as the outcome of their investment and the identities the participants imagine for themselves at the end of their stay abroad, will be analyzed.

Finally, the expectations, investment, and outcomes will be compared and contrasted in order to shed light on the relationship between them, and establish patterns of expectations and outcomes, if any.

6.2.1. The importance of the context and its linguistic landscape

As previously mentioned, many of the participants did not choose to enroll solely in an Erasmus stay, but in an Erasmus stay in a certain place. However, since the selection process of the program implies deciding on a list of preferred destinations which depends on factors that include level of demand and is often affected by their academic marks, some of the students were not allocated to the settings they had chosen as a first option. Yet, the countries where they finally spent their stay abroad were often among their choices, and in most of the cases, among their very first ones. When asked about the reasons behind their election of context, the participants came out with different types of incentives, goals, purposes, and expectations. In the following lines, I will report, firstly, on the accounts the participants in each of the three contexts give when it comes to their destination, and secondly, on the accounts they give about the place their stay took place at the conclusion of their Erasmus experience.

6.2.1.1. Beginning of the stay

It is interesting to note from the beginning that, even though by the time of the interviews the participants had already spent a few days in the host countries, their accounts of their destinations seem to rely, to a considerable extent, on their imagination rather than on their experiences in those settings up to that moment.

The Oulu group

The students in the Oulu group give the impression to have been motivated by the attraction of Finland and the Finnish outstanding role in education and social welfare, as well as by the high

level of English proficiency of the Finnish people, and by the high standards of Finnish education, as perceived from the outside.

From their discourse, it seems that both Claudia and Jennifer chose Finland as a destination because, in their imagination, Finland is an English-speaking country. In fact, they do mention the fact that they were given different options to choose from, but none of them were perceived as English-speaking countries, with the exception of Estonia, which is seen as a place where English is spoken to a considerable extent, but not as much as in Finland. The possibility to study the whole semester in English and to be immersed in “English-speaking” Finland comes out as the first reason that determined the two Spanish girls to go to Oulu:

CQ: *sí/ pero de lo que nos daban a elegir/ todos los países que nos daban a elegir/ en ninguno se hablaba inglés/ entonces eran Italia...*(yes/ but from the choices they gave us/ all the countries we could choose/ in none was English spoken/ so then there was Italy...)

JC: *solo Bélgica/ sí/(just Belgium/ yes/)*

CQ: *y Bélgica aun así se habla fran francés/ y ... porque teníamos Italia/ Portugal/ Estonia/ que también se habla inglés pero está peor que Finlandia/ y Bélgica/ y luego teníamos cuatro lugares diferentes de Finlandia para elegir/ y elegimos Finlandia por el inglés y porque el año pasado/ una niña de nuestra universidad también vino y vino encantada/ así que...*(and even in Belgium they speak Fren French/ and... because we had Italy/ Portugal/ Estonia/ where they also speak English but it's worse than Finland/ and Belgium/ and then we had four different places in Finland to choose from/ and we chose Finland for English and because last year/ a girl from our university also came and she came back delighted/ so...)

VM: *muy bien/ o sea por el inglés/ (very good/ so for English/)*

JC: *sí/(yes/)*

VM: *porque aquí os ofrecen un grado íntegramente en inglés/ o cómo es?(because here they offer you a full degree in English/ or how does it go?)*

CQ: *sí/ sí/ en inglés/ (yes/ yes/ in English/)*

The second reason they mention is the perceived high level of Finnish education:

JC: *sí/ la diferencia es a nivel de educación/ (yes/ the difference is in the education standards/)*

CQ: *sí/ (yes/)*

JC: *están muy avanzados/ entonces nada más con eso/ me da igual no hacer nada/ ni poner un pinchazo pero simplemente ver cómo lo hacen/ (they are very advanced/ so just for that/ I don't mind not doing anything/ not even giving a shot but simply seeing how they do it/)*

CQ: *sí/ (yes)*

JC: *es que es ya...* (just that is already...)

CQ: *y además que están muy avanzados en el hecho de aprender cosas nuevas/* (and also that they are very advanced with regard to learning new things/)

JC: *cosas nuevas a trabajar/* (new things to work on/)

CQ: *cosas nuevas y diferentes formas de llevar las clases/ en grupo y eso que yo creo que/ que solo con vivirlo/ ya te enriquece a nivel de educación/* (new things and different ways to manage lessons/ in group and so I think that/ that just living that/ is already enriching with regard to education/)

JC: *te entran ganas de quedarte en la universidad a vivir/ no como en España que te entran ganas de irte a tu casa/ estas mirando de que termine ya la clase/* (you feel like staying in the university and living there/ not like in Spain that you feel like going home/ that you are looking forward for the lesson to finish once for all/)

It seems that both Jennifer and Claudia feel that Finnish education has such a high quality that simply watching how things are done there will already be an enriching experience. Since they are studying a Nursing degree, they formulate their high expectations stating that even if they do not do any practical activity during their stay, not even giving an injection, the level of their learning will already be very high, just because Finnish education is of a very high standard *per se*. Furthermore, when the participants compare the university in Oulu with their home university, they report feeling a desire to actually remain in the Finnish university, while in Spain they report looking forward to the lessons to finish in order to go home. The level of education in Spain is therefore undermined, and portrayed like boring when compared to the quality of the Finnish one. All in all, the discourse of the two Spanish participants in Oulu gives the impression that they are completely lured by their imagined portray of Finland and its people.

In a similar way, Stefaan points out to having chosen Oulu because of the quality of the game industry at the game lab of the university:

SM: *eh/ well/ it was actually because of a friend of mine went to Finland for a game lab and since this master is very wide/ I didn't know what I want to do/ so/ ah/ then he told me a lot of stuff about it and about the game industry here/ and I really wanted to do something with music/ composing/ sound design/ and I really would like to keep it go within the game industry/ to meet very important/ to see the certain mood and atmosphere for a game/*

VM: *OK/ very good/ and why Finland?*

SM: *why Finland? Because the industry is really big over here/ and.../ah/ well/ not for the weather/ (laughs)/ I guess/*

Stefaan believes that the game industry in Finland is really big, and therefore, being able to spend some time in the mood and atmosphere of the place will allow him to keep working in the game industry.

Mila also highlights Finnish education as one of the most outstanding reasons to choose Finland as a destination for her stay:

VM: *and a:/ why Finland?*

MJ: *well/ (laughs)/ I have some personal and some more professional reasons/ ah/ I was here two years ago/ but it was only a vacation for then/ for ten days/ and I really liked it very much and I knew that I want to come back some day for longer/ and now I had the chance/ and the more professional part of the reasons is that ah/ this year I was ah/ a teacher at a private school/ English teacher/ and I just thought that that's the best opportunity to: learn some more about teaching and to incorporate the ideas that I will learn here in my job/ because all the time I'm reading articles about the educational system of Finland/ how it's the best and so on/ but seeing it in person is always something different/*

Mila brings to the fore having visited Finland for ten days before her stay and getting a very good impression that made her decide to come back for a longer period. At a more professional level, she remarks seeing her stay in Oulu as the best opportunity to expand her knowledge in her teaching career by personally experiencing the Finnish educational system. Mila's account is different from the other participants' because her expectations from the Finnish education system seem to be based on scientific articles portraying the Finnish education system as the best.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, the participants appear to have different reasons for having chosen Romania. For instance, Kalina states that she has elected Bucharest as a destination because she wants to meet Romanian people, be close to home, and learn Romanian. The geographical proximity between Bulgaria and Romania appears as a determinant factor in her choice:

KM: *ah...I want to meet Romanian people/ and to be close to home and to learn Romanian/*

However, as the interview advances, we discover that it is not just geographical proximity that affected Kalina's choice, but also some sort of cultural and social proximity:

KM: *a:/well...I was...the past years I've been living...I'm not from the capital of Bulgaria but I was living in Sofia/ I was studying there/ so...Romania and Bucharest is like Bulgaria/ is like Sofia/ a little bit better/ (laughs)/ so/ it's the same/ we have everything/ we have the street dogs/ we have the gypsies/ we have a...the robberies/ we have everything bad/ but here people are more smiley/ more nicer and no...I didn't expect here to be like better but I like it/*

From her account, living in Bucharest is more or less the same as living in Sofia, and by extension Romania and Bulgaria are depicted as very similar places. Many examples of what can be categorized as issues of concern for the two countries are mentioned: street dogs, gypsies, robberies, and "everything bad". Therefore, it seems that Kalina does not see any of the two countries in a positive way. However, she ends up stressing that Romanian people smile more and are nicer. In spite of this fact, she does not expect Romania to be better than Bulgaria, but on a concluding note, she affirms she likes it, somehow alluding to the comfort of being at ease with the place, probably due to the fact that it is not much different from what she is used to. Interestingly, Kalina mentions similarity between her country of origin and her country of destination as a determinant factor for her stay while Jesús remarks the opportunity to discover a whole new place, which he describes as completely different from the place he was born as a determinant reason for his choice:

JO: *(...) y sobretodo porque para mí es una oportunidad muy grande de viajar estando centrado en una zona que me permite ver todo el resto de Europa... quizás... bueno Georgia y Armenia aún siguen considerándose Europa/ e:/ entonces me permite ver toda esta zona que de normal no tengo la oportunidad/ ((...)) and mainly because for me it is a very big opportunity to travel being centred in an area that allows me to see all the rest of Europe... maybe... well Georgia and Armenia can still be considered Europe/ e:/ so it allows me to see all this area that I wouldn't have the opportunity to see/)*

VM: *y por qué Bucarest?(and why Bucharest?)*

JO: *yo sobre todo por... por lo que dice él/ de ser una capital porque yo siempre he vivido en una ciudad pequeña/ la ciudad más grande en la que he vivido tiene ochenta y pico mil habitantes y me gustaría...pues que en el día de mañana/ cuando tenga que moverme porque...supongo que me tendré que mover/ que no me sorprenda vivir en una ciudad muchísimo más grande y tal y...y eso...Bucarest también porque...por lo que decía antes/ por la z/ por la zona para viajar/ (me mainly for... for what he says/ that it is a capital because I've always lived in a small city/ the biggest city where I lived has a little bit over eighty thousands inhabitants and I would like to... that in the future/ when I would have to move because... I suppose I will have to move/ that I won't be stricken to live in a much bigger city and so and... and so... Bucharest also because... as I said before/ for the a/ for the area to travel/)*

VM: *fue Bucarest vuestra primera opción?(was Bucharest your first option?)*

JO: *yo...fue también mi segunda opción/ la primera era Cracovia/ básicamente porque tenía ya referencias/ luego e:/ eso/ fue la segunda porque... básicamente porque me apetecía eso/ una gran ciudad y...y un sitio no especialmente caro para poder estar sin problemas/(me... it was also my second option/ the first one was Cracow/ basically because I already had references/ then e:/ so/ it was the second because... basically because that's what I wanted/ a big city and... a city not too expensive in order to live without problems/)*

In the account of his choice of destination, Jesús talks about the big opportunity to travel to an area in Europe to which he would not have travelled to. Romania, and Eastern Europe by extension, seem to exert a certain type of exotic attraction for the participant, and he even mentions countries like Georgia and Armenia, as possible visiting spots. Also, the size of Bucharest, a capital city, appears to be regarded as an environment that will offer certain training for the future. Therefore, this is a chance to encounter difference, confront it, and therefore avoid unpleasant surprises in the future. Finally, the participant mentions that the lower prices in Bucharest were also an incentive, since he predicts he would not have economic problems during his stay. At the end of his account, he briefly mentions Cracow as his first option, but he does not seem to be very concerned about the fact that he finally went to Bucharest. In fact, it rather appears to be what he wanted, and Cracow and Bucharest become, in his discourse, undistinguishable one from the other, just a big, affordable city in Eastern Europe. Worth mentioning is also the fact that for Jesús, the need to move (and become an immigrant) in the future is an imminent one.

As mentioned before, Federica chose Bucharest with the expectation it would be a good place to learn English. In fact, as previously stated, she had the option to choose between Spain and Bucharest and she chose Bucharest because in her perspective, in Spain she would have learnt Spanish, which is not a language she wants to invest in:

FH: *English/ because we speak English in Bucharest/ but in Spain we we speak Spanish/*

Finally, Sami and Jussi highlight that they chose Bucharest because it was the only place where they were allowed to go together. In fact, Jussi had Poland as a destination and Sami wanted to go to the UK, but things did not go as expected, as they relate in their interview:

SM: *I was/ first I was ah chosen to go to UK and Jussi was ah agreed to/ how do you say this?*

JN: *Poland/*

SM: *to Poland/ yeah/*

JN: *and no/ we had decided long ago that we will go to the same place/*

VM: *mhm/*

SM: *so/ we went to the outgoing office of our university and said no this is not gonna happen/ we're going to the same place/ and they said/ well/ then you go to Romania/ uh/ then we go/ then we're here/*

(...)

JN: *yeah/ first of all/ we'll get a new perspective about how people live in other countries/ very different countries than Finland/*

SM: *yeah/ and well Bucharest is/ it's a very big city and where we live in Tampere/ there are like two hundred thousand inhabitants/ ah it's a big difference/ the distances are greater and...*

VM: *mhm/*

SM: *well/ the culture is always a shock/ at first but we are very open-minded here and I hope we will meet lots of locals/ and also people from other countries...*

In their account, their main reason for choosing Bucharest was the fact that they had decided long ago that they would embark on the Erasmus experience together, no matter what. It appears that they both sacrificed their first destination choices in order to be able to live it together, which seems to be more important than the place where the experience actually takes place. This is indicative of the fact that for some students, the Erasmus experience might be understood as an experience to be sought in itself regardless of the exact context where it takes place. However, both participants appear to be quite happy about their final destination, and they seem to be aware of the fact that the Romanian culture is very different from the Finnish one, which will provide them with a new perspective about how people live in a place very different to the one they come from. In a similar way to Jesús, Jussi and Sami also bring to the fore the big size of Bucharest, a capital city, considerably bigger than their home city. Finally, Sami mentions the culture shock they are experiencing at the beginning of their stay, but he is confident their open-mindedness and the opportunity to meet both locals and international students will help them overcome the culture shock.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Mildri mentions Spanish as the main incentive for her destination choice, even though she had another Spanish city, Santiago de Compostela, as a first option. In her account of how she arrived to Lleida, Mildri actually mentions that she did not know anything about the city:

ML: ah... the truth is that in Spain we only have two options/ it was Santiago de Compostela and Lleida/ and I applied for Santiago de Compostela/ (laughs)/ but I didn't/ they didn't accept me there but they accepted me in Lleida/ so/

(...)

ML:yeah/ I didn't know anything about Lleida before so/ it was actually just a coincidence/ (laughs)/

In a similar way, Mădălina reports on not having Lleida, but Spain as a destination:

MS: in primul rând pentru ca eu cred că cumva/ nu știu cum/ poate că în altă viață m-am născut în Spania sau ceva de genul sau într-o țară în care se vorbește spaniola/ pentru că voiam foarte tare să merg într-o țară în care se vorbește spaniola/ avusesem pe lista mea/ erau două opțiuni/ A Coruña și Lleida/ ah o prietena de-a mea a ales A Coruña și mie mi-a rămas Lleida și eram fericită cu asta pentru că vin în Spania/ (in the first place because I think that somehow/ I don't know why/ maybe in another life I was born in Spain or something like that or in a country where Spanish is spoken/ because I wanted very much to go to a country where Spanish is spoken/ I had on my list/ there were two options/ A Coruña and Lleida/ ah a friend of mine chose A Coruña and I was left with Lleida and I was happy with it because I was going to Spain/)

Straight from the beginning of the interview, Mădălina displays some sort of fascination with Spain and the Spanish language. Similarly to Mildri, Mădălina chose another Spanish city, A Coruña, as a first destination, but she was equally happy when she was assigned Lleida, because she knew she was going to Spain.

Petronela, the Polish participant in Lleida, states that she had no choice:

PT: I didn't have choice too /(laughs)/

Finally, Radka, who had Lleida as her first option, brings to the fore a very different reason:

RT: well/ actually in my university/ or in my/ in my faculty I could choose two universities from Spain/ and Lleida was much more open for English speaking students/ so and I didn't learn Spanish before/ well I just started so... (laughs)/ yeah/ yeah/ it was more open for English speaking people/

For Radka, Lleida seemed to be a more open place for English-speaking students, even though she does not mention how she reached this conclusion. It is possible that Radka was asked for a certain level of Spanish when she applied for the stay abroad while Lleida did not ask for it.

6.2.1.2. End of the stay

At the end of the stay, the participants were asked two questions with regard to the context where their experience took place. One of them was related to how they imagined the setting before arriving there and to what extent they would say their expectations were accomplished. The other question was if they felt welcomed by the society where their stay took place. In the following lines, the answers of the participants in each context will be examined and a brief summary contrasting their accounts with regard to the respective contexts at the beginning and at the end of the sojourn will be introduced.

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Claudia and Jennifer bring to the fore different aspects with regard to the place where their stay took place. Firstly, the issue of the darkness in Finland, together with the fact that the participants perceive there are no places where you can have a coffee and a chat, and the limitation imposed by the high prices in Oulu are regarded as negative aspects of the setting. Furthermore, Claudia highlights the fact that her Erasmus scholarship arrived one day before her stay

was over, and therefore she had to self-finance her whole stay in Oulu, without being able to fully enjoy it, for which she blames the authorities:

CQ: *sí/ sí/ la verdad es que yo también lo aguanté porque dije buf/ no sé/ pensábamos que eran seis meses/ y al final nos quedamos en cinco/ yo creo que nada más por eso lo pude aguantar/ porque sino a mí me dan los choques/ porque esto de la noche/ a mí me agobia mucho el hecho de que no haya bares donde ir a tomarte un desayuno/ un café/ una terracita...(yes/ yes/ the truth is that I beared it cause I said buf/ I don't know/ we thought it would be six months and in the end it was five/ I think that was the only reason I could bear it/ otherwise I would have had a shock/ cause this thing of the night/ it stresses me out a lot the fact that there are no bars to have breakfast/ coffee/ a terrace)*

(...)

JC: *pero por ejemplo un sitio en el que vayas/ te pidas tú una cerveza/ o un café/ no? y te sientes a hablar con alguien y empieces a hablar y tal/ mmm lo hay/ no? puedes ir/ pero luego te miran mal como "vete ya/ qué haces aquí hablando? vete/" (but for example a place where you can go/ ask for a beer/ ir a cofee/ right/ and sit and chat with someone and you start to chat and so on/ mmm there isn't any/ right? you can go/ but then they look at you in a bad way like "go away/ what are you doing chatting here? go away")*

CQ: *"vete que tenemos más clientes"/ y es en plan "pues nada/ pues nos vamos sabes que..." y también es que te gastas doce euros en dos cafés/ entonces es una burrada/ entonces también una parte de las que nos limitó demasiado a nosotras por ejemplo es que a mí la beca me llegó un día antes de irme/ en dici - en enero/ entonces... fatal/ esta es una cosa que está muy mal organizada por parte de/ por lo menos de la universidad de las Palmas de Gran Canaria/ mmm... de qué me vale irme de Erasmus si al final no lo voy a poder disfrutar al cien por cien porque tú no me das esa beca que me estás diciendo que me vas a dar? sí es verdad que te dicen que te la dan al cabo de dos meses?"("go away cause we have more clients"/ and it's like "well then/ we are leaving you know..." and the also that you spend twelve euros on two coffees/ it's nonsense/ then another thing that limited us too much was for example that my scholarship arrived one day before I left/ in Dice - in January so... awful/ this is something very badly organized by/ at least by the university of las Palmas de Gran Canaria/ mmm... why is it worth it going on Erasmus if in the end I won't be able to fully enjoy I because you are not giving me that scholarship you say you'll give me? if it's true that they give it after two monthts?)*

Furthermore, concerning the society where their stay took place, the participants emphasize that the students were kind to them. However, they also stress out that they did not feel they were treated well, nor they felt valued during their practicum in the hospital:

CQ: *mmm cuando los conoces/ por ejemplo las estudiantes/ las más jóvenes/ sí/ si es ver/ todas las estudiantes fueron súper amables con nosotras/ pero por ejemplo mmm había algunas enfermeras que... uff/ y por los médicos/ que también me sentí un poco...no muy bien...tratada o valorada/ como para así decirlo/ y desp/ después...(mmm when you know them/ for example the students/ the youngest/ yes/ it's tr/ all the students were super kind with us/ but for example mmm there were some nurses that...uff/ and for the doctors/ I also felt a little...not very well...treated or valued/ to put it that way/ and th/ then...)*

JC: *no/ en la universidad/ eh tampoco me sentí...en el momento de las prácticas tampoco me sentí bien porque eh/ me asignaron un rotatorio que era por consultas de otorrinolaringología/ e yo estoy en cuarto de enfermería y aquí mí me dan prácticas para yo estar en una planta haciendo cosas de enfermería/ no para estar en consulta/ eh dándole el material al/ al...(no/ in the university/ eh I didn't feel... at the moment of the practicum I didn't feel well cause eh/ I was assigned a workshift that was for othorhinolaryngology consultations/ and I'm in the fourth year of nursing and here I have practicum which implies that I am on a section doing things related to nursing/ not being in a consultation/ eh giving material to/ to...)*

Similarly, regarding their university, the two students complain about the fact that the schedules were very difficult to follow, and the instructors were not much approachable. Finally, they end up saying the university staff was very rude and that they had to confront many problems during their stay. The healthcare system is also described as awful:

CQ: *esa/ mmm casi nos suspenden porque para mí desde mi punto de vista tienen una gran cómo se dice? una gran organización con los Erasmus/ eh encima no/ no nos valoran como nos tienen que valorar/ muchos de “ay sí coming/ coming”/ pero después no me importas una mierda/ sabes? porque las clases son a la misma hora/ tú te tienes que buscar la vida/ la del curso viene y te dice que puedes faltar dos veces/ y la otra te dice que no puedes faltar ningún día/ y coinciden las clases/ pues cómo lo hacemos?(that one/ mmm they almost fail us because from my point of view they have a big how do you say? a big organization with the Erasmus/ and on top of that they don't/ don't value us as they should/ a lot of “ay yes coming/ coming”/ but then I don't give a penny on you/ you know/ cause lessons are at the same time/ you have to manage it/ the teacher comes and tells you can skip twice/ and the other one says you can't skip any day/ and lessons coincide/ so how do we do it?)*

(...)

CQ: *sí/ y además lo que hablábamos nosotras/ que son muy maleducados porque te están...(yes/ and then what we were saying/ they are very rude cause they are...)*

JC: *ah sí/ (oh yes/)*

CQ: *tú les estás hablando/ y ellos hablan contigo caminando/ sabes/ y dicen “ya ya”/ y siguen caminando/ y tu “pero es que mira/ es que quiero contarte/ quiero hablar contigo”/(you are talking to them/ and they are talking to you while walking/ you know/ and they say “OK OK”/ and they keep walking/ and you “but look/ I want to explain you/ I want to talk to you”/)*

(...)

CQ: *hay que afrontar muchos problemas/ muchos/ muchos/ (one has to face many problems/ many/ many/)*

JC: *no si después es...(and then after there is...)*

CQ: *y en cuanto al sistema sanitario...(regarding healthcare...)*

JC: *eso/ eso/ (exactly/ exactly/)*

CQ: *fatal/ fatal/ (awful/awful/)*

Overall, it seems that for Jennifer and Claudia their stratospheric expectations with regard to the context of their stay were unaccomplished. In fact, one has the feeling they were highly disappointed by what they encountered in Oulu, from issues related to the weather, or practicalities such as a perceived lack of bars or cafeterias, to problems concerning prices and what is described as rude behavior of the university and the hospital staff. All in all, their feeling of not being well-treated nor valued in the places they inhabited during their stay abroad led the two participants to the conclusion that Spain is actually a better place to live. Therefore, when asked in what ways the

Spanish and the Finnish cultures are different, their answer is totally oriented towards the disappointment caused by the coldness of the Finnish people and their lack of ability in managing what they call “basic cultural level”:

CQ: *buah/ totalmente/ totalmente/ es que vamos a ver/ nosotros somos extrovertidos/ sonreímos por la calle/ decimos adiós/ por lo menos en Canarias/ en los pueblos/ (buah/ totally/ totally/ let’s see/ we are extroverted/ we smile on the street, we say bye, at least in Canarias, in villages/)*

JC: *cuéntale lo del paciente cuando estaba llorando con su mujer y...(tell her about the patient when he was crying with his wife and...)*

CQ: *ah/ sí/ sí/ es que yo sinceramente/ yo en los cuidados básicos me me fui muy decepcionada por parte de los fineses/ porque una cosa es que tú seas frío y otra cosa es ser hijo de puta/ (ah/ yes/ yes/ me sincerely/ I was very disappointed about the basic cures by the Finns/ because one thing is to be cold and the other one is to be a son of a bitch/)*

(...)

JC: *horrible/ horrible/ yo creo que en lo básico/ en lo básico... a nivel cultural/ (awful/ awful/ I think that on the basic/ on the basic... at a cultural level/)*

CQ: *es que los pacientes duermen en el/ en la habi – en el despacho de la directora porque no hay habitaciones/ o en el pasillo cambiando pañales cagados de diarrea/ e yo decía esto es/ esto no puede ser/ yo me cogía cada rebote con la enfermera o con el tutor/ digo/ es que vamos/ es que España dirán/ pero es que España es una reliquia/ porque agüita/ (patients sleep in the/ in the ro - in the office of the director because there are no rooms/ or on the corridor changing napkins with diarrhea/ and I said this is / this cannot be/ I got really angry with the nurse or with the supervisor/ I said/ let’s see/ they’ll speak about Spain/ but Spain is a gem/ because gosh/)*

It is hard to know if the situation in the hospital as described by the participants is the result of a crisis in the Finnish healthcare system at that time, if it is the usual situation of hospitals in Finland or a biased perspective on their part. However, no matter what, the participants seem to go back with the certainty that the Finns are close to inhumane and Spain is a much better place. As a matter of fact, they associate the poor conditions in the hospital with a cultural trait of the Finns which are cold and lacking empathy, even though, at some points they are presented as working under very adverse conditions which could trigger such lack of empathy towards their patients. Jennifer and Claudia are by far, the participants that show the biggest contrast between a considerably high degree of expectations at the beginning and a significant lack of enthusiasm at the end of the stay abroad. This might indicate that extremely high expectations, which are not based on

real facts, might lead to extreme disappointment when these expectations (often unrealistic) cannot be fulfilled.

Stefaan stresses the fact that he expected the experience to be different. Even though he is not able to name in what way, the participant emphasizes that he expected to end in the middle of nowhere and Oulu was quite a big city, and also the fact that the Finns were more introverted than he expected and the education was not as good as he initially thought:

SM: ah/ I expected it to be...different/ but it's hard to describe what I expected to be different/ ah I expected... yeah I don't know/ I really expected to end up in the middle of nowhere/ it was the middle of nowhere but still a quite big city/ ah/ Finnish people/ I already knew what they would be like/ sort of/ but still they were a bit more shy than I expected/ ah... and I expected the education to be a little bit better/

The coldness of the Finnish people is also mentioned by Diego even though he expresses a very positive feeling with regard to the treatment he received by the university staff. The only concern of the participant is that he could not make more than a couple of Finnish friends, which he attributes to the coldness of the locals:

DD: sí/ por la universidad la verdad es que sí/ muchísimo/ o sea/ todos los profesores/ la...todo el equipo de... de internacional/ no? de relaciones internacionales eran geniales la verdad/ y por el tema de la/ bueno de la residencia que teníamos/ los managers y eso/ también genial/ luego/ lo único que con la gente local de allí/ como allí son muy fríos la verdad/ no hicimos muchos amigos/ un par de amigos o amigas y...pero... (yes/ by the university actually yes/ a lot/ I mean/ all the teachers/ the...all the staff from the international/ right? from the international relations were great actually/ and regarding the issue/ well of the residence we had/ the managers and so/ also great/ then/ the only thing with the local people there/ since they are really very cold/ we didn't make many friends/ a couple of friends and...but...)

On a different note, Mila expresses she was expecting to have a great time in a country with a high quality of life and to find new friends, which she says it actually happened:

MJ: well/ I had expectations to have a really good time/ to live in a country with a higher quality of life/ to enjoy it/ this all happened/ to find new friends/ yes/

Further, the participant remarks that she had been very welcome by the society in Oulu, where she felt at home. Surprisingly, Mila mentions that everybody was willing to help her and every person she asked on the street for a favor offered help:

MJ: yes/ very much/ I didn't feel any/ anything against me/ or yeah/ nothing/ nothing maybe/ I felt/ I felt very welcome/ I felt at home and everybody was willing to help me/ very single person on the street that I asked something helped me/ so...

Finally, Meyer remarks that he did not have high expectations with regard to Oulu, and from the university he expected better grades than in Germany. Both things were accomplished and the experience is described as good overall:

ML: I was really looking forward to it/ like ah/ I'm/ I mean I knew I was going to Oulu which was in my expectation not the biggest city in the world and it/ it appeared to be true/ e:h/ but I/ I/ I always felt like as long as you are with the right people/ you can have a really good time and that's what actually ah/ what actually happened/ so we had really good friends there and ah yeah... yeah/ I/ I/ I thought/ I thought like university wise because I was there for studying actually/ ah/ I thought that I would have like better grades than I would get in Germany and this also turned out to be true/ like... way better grades/ (laughs)/ which is good for my/ for my grades but eh/ yeah/ yeah but overall a good experience/ what I expected and what turned out to be true/

Meyer also points out the fact that it is usually said that Finnish people are very introvert, which turned out to be true:

ML: yeah/ yeah definitely/ I mean a:h/ like there is this cliché that Finnish people are like super introverts/ not really outgoing/ I mean/ this is kind of true but I had the/ the experiences that when you like step towards somebody and like let it be the supermarket cashier/ let it be ah/ in the fast-food restaurants or some random people on the street/ they are always like really nice and their English like most of the times is like on point/ it's really good/ and yeah I never had the feeling like I couldn't ask something from anybody/ or like somebody wouldn't be wanting to talk to me or something/

However, like Mila, he also accentuates that people are really helpful and their English is very good, so he appears to be rather satisfied with how Finnish people have treated him.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Federica stresses out the fact that she changed her idea about Romanian people to the better and realized that they are very friendly and good students. She also brings to the fore Italian people's negative conception of Romanians:

FH: *ah/ I think Bucharest is a beautiful city/ and the people is very/ very good/ they help you if you have a problem/ in Italy often the Italian people have not good idea about Romanian people/*

VM: *mhm/ and has this idea changed?*

FH: *ah yes/ my idea changed because the Romanian people is very friendly/ and they have a good student/ a good people/*

Sami, who declares he had no expectations but hoped the experience was going to be a life-changing one declares his satisfaction with the overall experience:

SM: *my hopes/ I had absolutely no expectations/ in the culture and the country really but/ I I was hoping that it's gonna be a life-changing experience/ and it was/ in good/ always in good/*

The participant also seems to be happy with the treatment he received from the institution even though he said he had to struggle with the different ways to deal with time in Romania as compared to Finland:

SM: *ahm yes they/they welcomed us/ very warmly and/ well/ like I said the difference in in understanding of the time/ is different/ then it was difficult for me to understand at first/ but I got used to it/*

Similarly, Jussi affirms he felt welcome by the local society. In his words, though, being welcomed meant that the local people showed interest about where he was from, why he went to Romania, and how things work in Finland:

JN: *yeah/ for sure/*

(...)

JN: *well/ yeah/ many people were interested/ a:/ like/ why we came there/ where're we from/ what is like in Finland and stuff like that so/ we felt welcome/*

Jesús also seems to be quite satisfied with the place, which for him served, in fact, as a basis from where he could discover other places as well as to improve his English:

JO: *pues...la verda:d/ lo que te decía/ tenía la intención de viajar mucho/ aprender otros/ el inglés y mejorarlo/ o sea/ yo tenía ya/ sabía más o menos hablar y quería mejorarlo/ quería...bueno/ aprobar todas/ no quería liarla porque no podía yo/ que acabo ya la carrera/ y bueno yo creo que se cumplieron/ e incluso la de viajar se... la superé porque pensaba que iba a viajar menos de lo que lo hice/ bueno y dentro de esos viajes/ claro/ todo el...conocer otros/ otros entornos/ (well...actually/ what I was telling you/ I had the intention to travel a*

lot/ learn other/ English and improve it/ I already had/ I could speak more or less and I wanted to improve it/ I wanted...well/ to pass all subjects/ I didn't want to make a mess cause I couldn't/ I'm finishing my degree already/ and well I think they were accomplished/ also the one about travelling was... I overcame it cause I thought I would travel less than I did/ well and within those trips/ clearly/ all the...getting to know other/ other places/)

The participant also brings to the fore that he felt welcomed by the Romanian society and remarks he did not perceive any negative predisposition:

JO: *sí/ sí/ sí/ totalmente/ o sea/ nunca tuve ningún tipo de:/ no noté ningún tipo de predisposición negativa/ (yes/ yes/ yes(totally/ I mean/ I never had any type of/ I didn't notice any type of negative predisposition/)*

Finally, Kalina points out that she did not have any expectations with regard to her stay in Bucharest on purpose so that she would not be disappointed. Therefore, she describes the experience as unexpectedly good and interesting:

KN: *well/ I really had no expectations/ because I didn't want to be disappointed/ but when I went there a:h/ if I had any/ that was like way beyond them/ I definitely didn't expect this to be that good and that interesting/ and that new/ I definitely didn't expect that/*

The participant also declares having felt much more welcomed by the society in Bucharest than she expected she would be:

KN: *yes/ yeah/ a lot/ way more than I was thinking I would be/*

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Federico, in a similar way to Kalina explains that he did not have many expectations before coming to Lleida, even though he imagined the experience would be quite powerful:

FB: *mmm/ ehe/ bueno/ no sé/ no tenía muchísimas expectativas porque siempre intento de ir sin...sin expectativas/ pero... sí/ pensaba que sería estado una experiencia muy...muy fuerte/ y sobre todo por lo que*

afecta a la autonomía/ el vivir a solo/ y así/ (mmm/ ehe/ well/ I don't know/ I didn't have many expectations because I always try to go without...without expectations/ but...yes/ I thought it would be an experience very...very strong/ and especially regarding autonomy/ living alone/ and so on/)

Further, the participant states he has felt very welcome by the society in Lleida:

FB: *sí/ sí bastante bien/ (yes/ yes quite well/)*

On the same token, Mildri affirms she didn't have many expectations before coming because she did not have the time to think about them:

ML: *a:h to be honest I didn't have that much expectations/ it was a little bit like ah spontaneous because first I thought I couldn't go because/ yeah there was some problem with my subjects in my country/ to make them fit with my subjects in Lleida/ so it was kind of a little rush/ and at the end so I didn't have time to/ build that much expectations/ but it's nice because ... yeah/ (laughs)/*

Moreover, the participant brings to the fore she felt welcomed in Lleida, and emphasizes that her flatmates and people in general were nice:

ML: *yes/ for example/ in my apartment they were very nice to me and class people were nice/ maybe not everyone was so open to get to know me like after class/ but people were nice and yeah/*

However, when it comes to the treatment she received by the institutions in Lleida, Mildri highlights that some professors refused to speak Spanish and she was confronted with the question why she had chosen Lleida as a destination if she did not speak Catalan:

ML: *ah... usually yes/ but for example when the professors refused to speak Spanish/ or they asked me why I come to Lleida when I don't speak Catalan/ I didn't feel that welcome/ (laughs)/*

Mădălina reports that she did imagine how things would evolve but, as usual, things never go the expected way and she explains that she did not expect to miss her family and friends so little and to meet a lot of good people from which she received a lot of help:

MS: *creo que cada vez que estamos planeando un viaje o una movilidad siempre estamos pensando que/ estamos imaginando como van a evaluar las cosas/ y nunca es exactamente como lo imaginamos algo/ es normal/ no? yo pensaba que/ esperaba que/ yo pensaba me iban a pasar muchas cosas bonitas y eso sí fue cierto/ pero yo pensaba que iba a extrañar más a mi familia y a mis amigos y la verdad no fue tan XXX/ porque*

a lo mejor porque me lo pasé muy bien/ que sí que los extrañaba pero no: no tanto/ y no/ no esperaba/ la verdad no esperaba que iba a encontrar tantas personas con un corazón tan bueno y que me ayudaran tanto como lo hicieron/ y estoy muy agradecido/ agradecida por eso la verdad/ (I think each time we are planning a trip or a mobility we are always thinking that/ we are imagining how things will evolve/ and it is never exactly how we imagined it/ it's normal/ right? I thought/ I expected that/ I thought a lot of nice things will happen to me and that was true/ but I thought I would miss my family and my friends more and actually it was not so XXX/ because maybe I had a lot of fun/ I mean I missed them but no: not that much/ and no/ I didn't expect/ actually I didn't expect to find so many people with such a good heart and that they would help me as much as they did/ and I'm very thankful/ thankful for that to be honest/)

With regard to her stay in Lleida, Madalina is quite happy about how she was treated, even though she highlights that she did not have much contact with Catalan people:

MS: sí/ yo diría que sí/ bueno/ desde el principio nos dijeron que los catalanes en la universidad no iban a ser muy sociables desde el principio/ o sea no iban a venir y decirte “hola/ cómo estás? yo soy/ tu cómo te llamas? de dónde vienes?” sabes? e yo eso lo noté/ pero ya que hablé con ellos/ no me parecieron nada mala onda o así/ fue de muy buena onda/ y: y pero es que no tuve mucho contacto con ellos/ me entiendes? y sí/ me sentí bien recibida especialmente por la por la oficina de relaciones internacionales de Lleida que me ayudaron mucho/ pero no tuve mucho contacto con los catalanes/(yes/ I would say yes/ well/ from the beginning we were told Catalans in the university would not be very sociable from the beginning/ I mean they wouldn't come and tell you “hi/how are you/ I'm/ what's your name? where are you from?” you know/ and this I noticed/ but as soon as I talked to them/ I didn't find them weird or something like that/ it was very cool/ and...and but the thing is I didn't have much contact with them/ do you understand? and yes/ I felt very welcome by by the office of international relations in Lleida who helped me a lot/ but I didn't have much contact with Catalans/)

Petronela reports she felt scared because she heard Spanish people would not want to use English at all:

PT: all the experience/ I was so scared/ (laughs) because I knew it/ I heard before that Spanish people they don't want to use English at all/ so I was so scared/ and it was the first time when I was flying by plane/ (laughs)/ that's why/ (laughs)/

But she ultimately replies she felt welcome when she is asked about how she felt she was treated by the society in Lleida:

PT: yes/ yes/

Finally, Radka brings to the fore that she felt somehow ignored by her teachers since they did not seem to care about her being an Erasmus student, nor she received any material in English:

RT: well a:/ I expected a:/ that in the university...of course I didn't expect that/ that the classes would be in English/ I didn't expect it/ but I expected that teachers will/ would come to me and say “hi/ Radka/ you are an Erasmus student/ so:/ you will have this a:/ materials which are in English/ and you will have to: final test in English/ of course/ and if you have any questions/ feel free to ask and...” I/ I thought they would be more open for Erasmus students/ but actually they were not so: (laughs)/

However, despite the lack of warmth she perceived in her university, the participant seems to be quite satisfied with the treatment she received in Lleida: especially from the international relations office:

RT: *mmm/ yeah/ I would say so/ no/ nobody was mean to me or anything/ yeah/*

(...)

RT: *mmm/ yeah/ a:/ international students' office made really good job/ and they/ they prepared really/ really nice intros/ it/ it was mixed with intensive Catalan course and a:/ other small ones events when we were discovering Lleida/ and other people/ and yeah/ it was really nice/ then it was a little bit harder on my university/ at INEF/ because yeah/ as I said/ they really wasn't/ weren't that warm as ... (laughs)/ as I expected but...*

Synthesis

All in all, it seems that the context and its linguistic landscape play an important role when it comes to deciding what kind of Erasmus experience one would like to have, and most especially, what one is willing to invest in and what the expected benefits associated with each place are. However, the accounts given by the students at the end of their sojourn give the impression that the initially imagined context and what they eventually turn out to be could be considerably different, which could lead to both positive and negative feelings towards the respective settings and the people that inhabit them.

In the Oulu group, expectations are very high at the beginning. Finland is praised for its outstanding role in education, its social welfare, as well as the high level of English of Finnish people. In fact, it is described as an English-speaking country in some interviews, while the existence of the Finnish language is worryingly ignored. The lure of Finland is so high that just being a passive watcher and learning from that seems to be enough, and in some cases, the value of the home countries of the participants is undermined when compared to Finland. However, it is precisely the Finnish context that appears to have deceived the participants the most. The disappointment is so substantial that, in some cases, the participants criticize issues like darkness, high prices, lack of

places for coffee, adverse conditions at work, lack of empathy and coldness of the Finns, and even standards of education, which seem to be lower than expected. Certainly, there are different degrees of satisfaction among the participants, which go from very satisfied to very unsatisfied, but in general, it appears that the initial expectations by Oulu students are quite different from the actual experiences they have been through during their stay abroad.

Bucharest, on the other hand, appears to follow the opposite trend. At the beginning, it is generally described as an affordable city which might prove good for learning English and provides the chance to challenge oneself and get ready for unpleasant surprises in the future. In the accounts of the participants, Bucharest and Romania become an exotic destination where some participants declare going through culture shock at the beginning. Interestingly, while four of the five participants in Bucharest have chosen the destination for its exoticism and difference, the one who comes from Bulgaria declares having chosen Bucharest because the similarity between the city and her home city promised a comfortable stay. At the end of the experience, the sojourn is described as surprisingly positive, and the participants remark the friendliness and kindness of Romanian people, and even a change in their preconceived ideas about Romania. In fact, it seems that the stay in Bucharest has been beyond the students' expectations, which in fact was not that hard taking into account that the city was probably more feared than anything else at the beginning.

Finally, Lleida, which becomes Spain in the discourses of the students, is clearly imagined as a place that would offer a good opportunity to learn Spanish, and in some cases, as a place that is open to English-speaking students. The most significant expectation with regard to Lleida is probably its imagined linguistic landscape, whose description is adorned with fascination. At the end of the stay, it seems that the stay in Lleida has proved a quite positive one, exceptuating the significant presence of Catalan at the university and what is described as the refusal by some instructors to speak any other language but Catalan, and also the lack of English at the university and the reduced contact with local people. Interestingly, in this group, some participants declare they did

not have many expectations at the beginning, which in some cases was due to the conscious desire not to be disappointed.

Interestingly, some participants do not seem to be concerned about the context of the stay abroad because there are other important elements they give more importance to, such as for example, being able to share the experience with a friend. As previously mentioned, this is indicative of the fact that, in some cases, the Erasmus experience might be seen as an experience to be sought in itself, regardless of the context. However, this is rather an exception to the rule by which the vast majority of students pick up a context according to the objectives (often linguistic) they believe a certain context might satisfy.

The above results also reveal an interesting pattern. High expectations are correlated to rather disappointing results, while low expectations lead to surprising satisfaction, and an apparent lack of expectations might also be related to a positive outcome.

6.2.3. The role of imagined identities

In the following lines, I will focus on the investment and the expectations of the participants. In order to understand why the young sojourners in the present study are invested in certain types of learning, their expectations, and their fears, the way the participants represent their imagined identities will be examined. For this aim, the responses of the students to the interview questions “how do you see yourself in five years” and “where do you see yourself in five years”, at the onset and after concluding their stay abroad, will be examined.

Since many of the participants were aged between 21 and 24 at the time of their stay abroad, most of them were either in their third or fourth year in their undergraduate studies or finishing a master’s program at the time of their stay abroad. Therefore, the five years’ time perspective

involves, for many of them, a major change in life. It might be for this reason that some of the students struggle when they have to imagine themselves five years later. For some others, though, the answer comes easily. In both cases, the participants find a positive correlation between their sojourn abroad and how they imagine themselves in the future. The perspective to move away from home appears to be a rather direct consequence of the Erasmus experience and the one that may obtain the highest benefit from the experience.

6.2.3.1. Beginning of the stay

The Oulu group

In Oulu, Jennifer imagines herself finishing a master's degree and afterwards she declares being still undecided about enrolling in a PhD program or looking for a job. Yet, she immediately contradicts herself when she concludes that she is rather certain she will be working:

JC: a ver/ espérate/ dos años del máster/ e ya luego no se sí me voy a hacer el doctorado o/ mmm... o trabajaré/ pero me veo trabajando seguro/(let's see/ wait/ two years for the master's/ and then I don't know if I will do a PhD or/ mmm... or I will work/ but I surely see myself working/)

Furthermore, when it comes to the place where she imagines herself, Jennifer says she is not planning to be in Spain, but she has plans to come back to Finland or to go to the United Kingdom. Interestingly, in Jennifer's discourse, Finland and the UK appear constantly as places where she imagines herself. The participant, concerned with her level of English and very eager to improve it, contemplates these two locations as desirable settings. At certain points, her discourse gives the impression that for Jennifer, Finland and the UK merge in a single category of "English-speaking-desirable country".

VM: *en España?*(in Spain?)

JC: *no/ no/ la verdad es que no/ me estoy planteando/ (laughs)/(no/ no/ actually not/ I'm thinking about/ (laughs))*

(...)

VM: *aquí?*(here?)

JC: *sí*(yes)

VM: *wow*/

JC: *aquí/ o en Inglaterra*(here/ or in England)

Claudia, the other Spanish female participant in Finland, also sees herself finishing a master's, but when it comes to employment perspectives, she brings to the fore the fact that there is the possibility that her father might pull some strings to set her up in a job:

CQ: *yo no sé/ yo haré el máster también/ mm... el de emergencia y urgencia/ pero ya yo el doctorado...necesito un poco/ (laughs)/ de descanso/ (I don't know/ I will also do the master's/ mm...the emergencies one/ but then the PhD... I need a little bit/(laughs)/ of rest/)*

(...)

CQ: *(laughs)/ sí pero también soy muy gansa/ y realmente mm/ a mí a lo mejor si me...ahí voy a ser sincera/ sí mi padre me enchufa/ pues que me enchufe/ (laughs)/ ((laughs)/ (but I'm also very lazy/ and actually mm/ maybe if I'm... I'll be sincere at this point/ if my father sets me up in a job/ then let him set me up/ (laughs))*

JC: *(laughs)/ y a mí/ ((laughs)/ (and me too/ (laughs))*

CQ: *claro/ y a Jennifer también/ y...sabes porque... siempre que pides/ yo nunca he pedido nada/ (of course/ also Jennifer/ and... you know cause... whenever you ask for something/ I've never asked for anything/)*

Furthermore, when it comes to the perspective to move, while Jennifer seems to be sure she will go abroad, Claudia goes back to the possibility of the potential job set up for her by her father to become a long time employment, even though she states that she does not like the idea of receiving favors because she feels that they need to be given back:

JC: *lo que tenemos clarísimo es que estar un tiempo en España y... y tirar para otro lado y: empezar allí/ (what is clear is to remain in Spain for a while and...and then head somewhere else and: start there/)*

CQ: *hm/ depende de cómo surjan las cosas porque a lo mejor después te quedas en el enchufe/ no se sabe/ (hm/ it depends on how things go cause maybe then you stay in the set up job/ you never know/)*

JC: *pues sí* (actually yes/)

CQ: *porque a mí tampoco me gustan los enchufes porque después dependes de esos favores/ (cause I don't really like set up jobs cause then you depend on those favours/)*

JC: *sí/ (yes/)*

CQ: *y además los recibes y después los tienes que devolver/ (and also you receive them and then you have to give them back/)*

Even though it might be out of the scope of this project, it is important to see how the participants portray Spain as a country where things do not go the way they should go. In some instances, the participants align with the social conditions which might ease their achievement of a job, in a country where jobs are difficult to be achieved.

In a similar way, Diego states that he would like to be an engineer and that even though he would like to work in Spain, the current circumstances complicate the search for a job. He also highlights the fact that he would like to try other places, both inside and outside Europe. In this respect, Diego contemplates his stay abroad as a first step before embarking on more ambitious types of mobility:

DD: *hombre/ me gustaría ser/ trabajar de ingeniero/ (well/ I would like to be/ work as an engineer/)*

VM: *ingeniero/ muy bien/ (engineer/ very well/)*

DD: *y... a ver yo siempre digo/ me gustaría terminar trabajando en España la verdad/ porque creo que en España se vive muy bien y... pero como está la cosa ahora/ creo que no... ahora mismo no voy a poder en con/ bueno si encuentro trabajo allí genial/ pero aun así me gustaría probar otras/ otras zonas por ejemplo/ (and... let' say I always say/ I would like to end working in Spain in fact/ I think life is very good in Spain and... but judging from how things are at the moment/ I think that not... right now I won't be able to cope in with/ well if I find a job there, then great/ but even so I would like to try other/ other areas for instance/)*

(...)

DD: *de Europa y fuera de Europa si es posible también/(from Europe and also from outside Europe if possible/)*

(...)

DD: *es que esto es así como el primer paso/ el segundo paso ya sería irme fuera de Europa/(this is like the first step/ the second step would be going outside Europe/)*

Stefaan envisions himself working in the game industry which he situates in Western countries, most especially in Northern Europe:

SM: *in five years? (laughs)/ in five years I'm hoping I'm working at some/ big/ company/ where I'm doing like composing and stuff/ that would be cool/ ah not necessarily in The Netherlands/ but ah/ probably somewhere in the North of Europe since there's where the market's pretty big in it/*

(...)

SM: *well/ I do prefer/ some Western country since ah I've been to like Vietnam and all these kind of countries/ and I don't think I would fit in that well there/ so like XX places where the market is big enough for the game industry/ (laughs)/*

Meyer has a slightly different plan for his future. He wants to start his own business with the aim to raise enough money to be able to go to Africa and help people there:

ML: *I've thought about starting my own business/ I don't know what exactly but that I see a progress/ ah/ when I/ when I'll work a lot and I hope that I will have a lot of money then/ ah/ then I can give something back and ah/ for example ah/ I would really like to go to Africa and help there somehow/ money wise because they need money and yeah/*

On a different token, Mila states that she has not made up her mind to what she will do in the future or where she wants to work. She highlights the fact that maybe this is a consequence of the wide array of opportunities our world offers and she states that she does not like the idea that there is an expected future for her, as it is usually the case in Bulgaria:

MJ: *ah/ that's a really tough question because I don't/ I haven't made up my mind/ where do I want to work? what do I wanna study? because I have to do some master's degree...I don't really know/ maybe when I come back in Bulgaria I will graduate and maybe I will/ start a job as a teacher again/ but maybe I will try something else/ I can't really answer where I will be in 5 years/ I don't know where I will be next year so... maybe that's the thing with ah/ this world/ with so many opportunities/ you never know what will happen and how you will change your mind/ so yeah/ I don't like to think that my road ahead of me is written and prepared for me/ I know that at least in Bulgaria it's expected of you to graduate from higher education then maybe if you want do some master's degree/ marry/ get children/ find a job of course and that's all/ but I don't really know that/ I don't really want that for me/ but on the other hand I don't know what life I want/ (laughs)/*

To the above, Mila adds that even though she feels very attached to her family and friends, she does not like the situation in Bulgaria, since she believes people have no future there because there are no opportunities to succeed by working hard:

VM: *but do you imagine your life like in Bulgaria or somewhere else?*

MJ: *mmm/ I'm really attached to my family and my friends so sometimes it's very tough to be so far away from them/ but at the same time I don't like the situation in Bulgaria/*

VM: *the economic situation?*

MJ: *yeah/ the economic situation and/ I feel like people have no future there/ you can't succeed only through... you can succeed rarely by working hard/ and showing that you care/ most often/ just some people who... pay some money or do some stuff/ succeed in life... and I just wanna/ I don't want to be a rich person/ or I don't*

want to be a CEO of some firm or organization or whatever/ I just want my/ the effort that I put in some things to be repaid and not only by money/ but only by appreciation and I don't really see this in Bulgaria/ if I judge from the job I had and the job of many other people/ so...

Interestingly, Mila refers to the idea of her need to feel her effort is rewarded also in a symbolic way besides the material gains. This seems to be something she perceives the Bulgarian society might not be able to offer her.

The Bucharest group

In Bucharest, Jesús seems to be open to a very wide array of possibilities. However, as he advances in his discourse, he limits the possibilities to places that he defines as safe:

JO: yo la verdad/ salvo viviendo en mi ciudad/ yo me veo...o sea/ no es que me vea de todas formas/ es que no me veo de ninguna/ nunca me paro a pensar en...no sé/ lo que voy a estudiar el año que viene/ no sé si voy a estudiar el año que viene/ o sea/ nunca me paro a pensar en... sí/ habrá un momento en el que tenga que decidir si estudio un máster/ me voy a no sé dónde/ pero ni me cierro ni me:/ ni me ato a nada/ no:/ o sea/ no/ no me p/ nunca lo valoro dónde estaré dentro de más de dos meses/ (me actually/ except living in my city/ I don't see myself/ I don't see myself... I mean/ it's not that I see myself in all ways/ it's that I don't see myself in any/ I never wonder about...I don't know/ what I'll study next year/ I don't know if I'll study next year/ I mean/ I never wonder about... yes/ there'll be a moment when I'll have to decide if I study a master's/ I go I don't know where/ but I don't close myself nor I:/ tie myself to anything/ no:/ I mean/ no/ I don't/ I never consider where I will be in two months/)

(...)

JO: yo...respecto a eso/ lo único que que sé/ a ver/ luego igual cambio/ sé cómo soy y sé que al final me acaba llamando todo pero...lo único que querría es vivir en un sitio que yo considere seguro/ (...) pero yo mientras considere que...que voy a estar seguro/ de...en cuanto a mi integridad/ yo no...no me veo en ningún sitio en concreto/ (me/ in this respect/ the only thing that that I know/ let's see/ then maybe I change/ I know how I am and I know that in the end everything calls me but... the only thing I would like is living in a place that I consider safe/ (...) but maybe I consider that... that I am safe/ about... concerning my integrity/ I don't... I don't see myself in any concrete place/)

Jesús is in fact, the only participant who appears to have reflected on the issue of “safety” when it comes to picking up a place to live for some time. From my point of view, there is a direct relationship between his concerns with safety and the fact he chose Bucharest as a place to spend his Erasmus stay. My hypothesis is based on the fact that while I was collecting the data, many participants referred either to their own, or their families’s concern with lack of safety in Bucharest, whose recent past as the capital city of one of the last communist dictatorships to fall in Europe

seems to still be present in the common imaginary. This could also be related to what I would call “a missionary intention” of the participants in Bucharest, an intention to contribute to the society where their stay takes place that differentiate some of the students in Romania from the students in the other two groups, where the effects of the stay on their personal and professional growth rarely intermesh with an intention to contribute to the local society.

Kalina does not mention anything with regard to her plans to work or study in five years, but she states that she does not envision herself in Bulgaria, but somewhere on the seaside, in Italy or Spain:

KN: a: no no/ in the seaside/ in Italy more probably/or in Spain/one of those countries/

On a different token, Jussi and Sami are quite confident about the fact that they will probably spend a lot of time either in Tampere, or in Finland as a whole. Therefore, even though Sami seems to have plans to work in a place near Saint Petersburg, he says he will probably spend a lot of time in Finland because his heart belongs there:

JN: Tampere/

SM: (laughs)/ well... ah I have a plan/ there's this place near Saint Petersburg/ I'm gonna probably spend a lot of time there/ but also I'm gonna be a lot in Finland/

VM: mhm/

SM: because my heart belongs there/ (laughs)/ so...

Finally, Federica states that she hopes she will have a job:

FH: ah I don't know/ I hope I... will have a work/ a jobs/ and ah... I will realized my... realize my...

(...)

FH: my dreams/ I hope but I don't know/ (laughs)/

The participant also brings to the fore her expectations to realize her dreams, even though she does not expand on what these dreams are.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Mădălina envisions herself somewhere outside her home country, either in Europe or overseas:

MS: *mmm/ ah... mă vad... ah... probabil... făcând/ lucrând/ cu sigurantă/ construindu-mi o carieră/ XX cat mai mult/ nu mă vad in Moldova din păcate si nici nicăieri prin zona respectiva/ mmm... nu știu... e o întrebare destul de grea/ (mmm/ ah... I see... ah... probably...doing.../ working/ certainly/ building up a career/ X as much as possible/ I don't see myself in Moldova unfortunately nor anywhere in that area/ mmm... I don't know... it's quite a hard question/)*

VM: *unde te vezi? (where do you see yourself?)*

MS: *ah... sau fie in Europa/ la locație/ fie in Europa fie undeva peste ocean/ (ah... rather in Europe/ as a place/ either in Europe or somewhere overseas/)*

Federico states, on a rather humorous tone that he will be probably studying or working doing photocopies in a law office:

FB: *I will probably study for some statics or making photocopies for a law office/*

However, when it comes to the place, he affirms that for him it is not a matter of importance:

FB: *I don't...I think it's not important a: for me/*

Mildri expresses doubt when it comes to envisioning herself in five years' time:

ML:*that's a very good question/ I have no idea (laughs)/ because... if I/ if I go back to Norway I will probably/ in five years I will probably be in/ in the middle of a specialization/ if I don't go to Norway/ I will probably be working or be specializing in something/ but... I don't see myself anywhere because I have no idea where I will end up/ I am taking it as it comes a little bit/*

Similarly, Petronela imagines herself outside Poland, and travelling:

PT:*maybe mores travels... because experience from here: / and I want to travel a lot/*

Finally, Radka remarks that she foresees herself travelling and working in her home country:

RT: *hm/ well/ well/ I hope I will keep traveling/ because I think it give me much/ and well I guess I will be working in Czech because/ well/ I don't mind working abroad/ but because of my of my studying/ well I am studying to be a teacher and I actually can't imagine to do it abroad because... I don't know/ ah yeah biology and physical education I think I have to stay in Czech/ but yes/ that is fine/*

Even though she declares she does not mind working abroad, Radka thinks she has to remain in her country because she thinks her studies are not suitable for working abroad.

6.2.3.2. *End of the stay*

The Oulu group

At the end of their Erasmus experience, both Claudia and Jennifer see themselves with a job, and Jennifer also foresees the possibility to start her PhD:

CQ: *con trabajo/* (with a job/)

JC: *con trabajo/ sí/* (with a job/ yes/)

CQ: *sea donde sea/* (no matter where/)

JC: *esperemos que empezando el doctorado/ que yo quiero hacer un doctorado/ así que a ver dentro de cinco años/* (hopefully starting a PhD/ cause I want to do a PhD/ so let's see in five years/)

With regard to the place where they imagine themselves, Jennifer seems to be even more convinced than at the beginning that she wants to work in London because that would be a way she could make sure she speaks English once for all. Apparently, the experience in Oulu might not have been enough for that and a “real” English-speaking city is more desirable. Besides acquiring certain language skills, it also seems that Jennifer and Claudia want to go to a place where their job is valued, something that does not seem to happen in their home country:

JC: *u:/ dentro de eso/ a mí me gustaría trabajar en/ en los helicópteros/ en de emergencias/ pero no sé si en Canarias o en otro lado/ sí es cierto que... es una necesidad ir/ ir a trabajar a Londres/ es algo que tengo que*

hacer/ que lo tengo clarísimo/ no me voy a morir sin ir a trabajar a Londres/(u:f/ regarding that/ I would like to work in/ in the helicopters/ the emergency/ but I don't know if in Canarias or somewhere else/ it's true that...it is a must to go/ to go to work in London/ it's something I have to do/ it's clear/ I won't die before working in London)

VM: *y por qué quieres ir a trabajar a Londres/ Jennifer?*(and why do you want to work in London/ Jennifer?)

JC: *coño pues allí/ aparte de para decir "sé hablar inglés de una vez"/ aparte de por eso/ no sé/ porque allí la verdad que la vida es... todo el mundo dice que allí la enfermería está muy bien/ y me gustaría que/ ir a un sitio en el que valoren la enfermería/(damn cause there/ besides to say "I can speak English once for all"/ besides that/ I don't know/ because there actually life is...everybody says nursing there is very well/ and I would like to go to a place where nursing is valued/)*

CQ: *sí/ porque aquí estamos...*(yes/ cause here we are...)

JC: *sentirme valorada/ sabes?*(feeling valued/ you know?)

As a matter of fact, the way both Jennifer and Claudia imagine themselves in five years time when they are at the end of their experience does not differ much from the way they foresee their future at the beginning of their stay abroad. The only thing that changed in Jennifer's discourse is that while at the onset of her sojourn she declared imagining herself in Finland or in the UK in the future, at the end of her stay Finland does not seem to be an option anymore, and London becomes the unique option, a place where English can be learnt "once for all".

Diego's way to imagine himself in five years time appears to have changed from the beginning to the end of his stay: while at the onset of the experience he declared he would like to work in Spain but the circumstances were not the best, at the end of his sojourn, the desire of the participant seems that of being in other places. In fact, some countries in Asia are more desirable than Spain:

DD: *pues... ojalá me viese trabajando en Europa/ no en España/ o no sé/ o en Asia/ Japón/ Corea/ de eso que me atrae mucho también/ pero ya con la carrera acabada obviamente y con el... un máster que quiero hacer acabado/ y ya de ingeniero/ ojalá/ (well...I wish I saw myself working in Europe/ not in Spain/ I don't know/ or in Asia/ Japan/ Corea/ that attracts me a lot also/ but having graduated obviously and with the... a master's I want to do finished/ and already an engineer/ I wish/)*

Mila, who already seemed very keen on Finland at the beginning of her stay, appears to have decided to enroll in a master's degree in Finland, and therefore she imagines herself having graduated from the master's and working in the education sector:

MJ: *ah/ (laughs)/ that's such an interesting question/ like I can't see myself even in one or two years/ (laughs)/ but probably I would say that I would see myself graduated from my master's in Finland/ (laughs)/ and working with education/ I don't know if I will be a teacher or in the administration/ but I see myself probably working with the educational/ in the educational sphere/*

However, she is confused with regard to where she envisions herself:

MJ: *(laughs)/ well/ who knows? I don't really know/ I have no idea/*

From the account she gives, one gets the impression that Mila is still as confused as at the beginning about the places where she would like to be. In spite of this, one thing has changed: Mila has decided to enroll in a master's in Finland, the country where she spent her stay abroad. In this way, she becomes the only participant who has already taken a step towards returning to the host-country by the end of her stay.

Meyer imagines himself working somewhere, but he shows doubt with respect to what sort of job he is going to have:

ML: *working somewhere/ I think/ ahm... I don't know / (laughs)/ like ah XX/*

Concerning the place, the participant reports he sees himself in Germany even though he is open to going to other places for a limited time job. In this sense, Meyer's idea that he ultimately will remain in his country of origin does not seem to have changed much:

ML: *ahm... geographically or... ah no/ the only thing that I can say is that long/ for long term/ let it be/ I don't know/ not five years or anything longer/ I see/ I myself like living in Germany/ ah/ I feel like I'm/ I'm totally open for like going somewhere to work for/ for a period of time/ let/ let it be for a job or let it be for some voluntary/ whatever/ sabbatical/ whatever/ ah... I'm totally happy and open to go abroad but like long-termly seeing/ I will stay here/SV: I see myself... ah (laughs)/ alive/ (laughs)/ first part... I have no idea/ I'm graduating right now and I don't even know what I want to graduate in/ I just know I'm going to travel/ I'm just still on a journey of... and I'll see where I end up/*

Finally, Stefaan remarks that he had a sort of vision about what he wanted to achieve which is gone so the way he sees himself in five years has changed:

SM: *I had sort of a vision of what I wanted to accomplish/ but yeah the vision is kind of gone/ so yeah it changed/*

When he explains why his future plans have changed, the participant brings to the fore that he realized his identity was not something he chose by himself, but something that was expected from him, and he decided to live the way he wants, something that he discovered with the Erasmus experience:

SM: because before I had everything planned out/ it was sorted out/ and then I see that ah I'm actually just doing it because it's expected from me and well everyone thinks it's smart to do/ and then you come to a point like/ and you realise why would I do it? I'm living for my own/ I'm just gonna enjoy all the time I have/ I'm not going to work before I actually have to/ if I can survive with a bit less and not with a career/ so be it/

VM: so the Erasmus helped you to discover that?

SM: oh yeah/ it did/

Stefaan's account of his imagined identity in five years time at the end of his stay is radically different from the one at the beginning, where he envisioned himself working in the game industry, in some country he situated in the West, probably a Northern-European country. He now declares he has realized the value of enjoying life even if that means sacrificing his professional career.

The Bucharest group

In Bucharest, at the end of the stay, Federica sees herself working and probably living in France with her boyfriend:

FH: oh it's so long time/ I don't know/ I think in five years I maybe I will...work...I think in the bank/ I/ I hope/ not I think/ and maybe I live in France/ with my boyfriend/

From her words, it doesn't seem that Federica's way to imagine herself has changed much during her stay. She seems to have always envisioned herself with a job and at the end of her stay she mentions the possibility to move to France where her boyfriend lives, which she does not bring to the fore at the beginning.

Sami envisions himself working abroad and getting to know new people:

SL: *five years/ I hope that/ I will be: working somewhere abroad/ and ah learning new things about new people/*

The participant's imagined identity seems to have radically changed from the one at the beginning of his stay abroad when he envisioned himself being in Finland where he declared his heart belonged to. Actually, the only other place Sami could imagine he could be in five years time at the onset of his experience was the Russian city of Saint Petersburg, situated very close to Finland, but now the emphasis is on learning new things about new people.

Jussi imagines himself working and with a family, probably in Finland, even though he would also like to work abroad for a short time. He adds the word 'normal' as if he tried to emphasize the logical outcome and sensibleness of his expectations:

JN: *in five years... a: I think pretty normal/ like the life is going around with work/ mm/ hopefully family life/ so/ so pretty normal you know/ (laughs)/*

(...)

JN: *well/ I think I will live in Finland/ I want to go abroad/ to work/ but not like for all all the time/ maybe like a year or two abroad will be good/ but in the end I/ I like this place I'm living/*

Even though Jussi's imagined identity does not seem to have made a radical change, a certain evolution can be observed: while at the beginning of his stay he could only imagine himself being in Tampere, at the end he seems to be much more open towards going temporarily abroad. Yet, he does not appear to be as keen to change and new experiences as Sami.

Jesús also imagines himself outside his country of origin but he makes clear that it is not a matter of need but a matter of his desire to get to know other cultures:

JO: *cómo me veo dentro de cinco años? pues la verdad me veo fuera de España/ no por necesidad/ para mí no va a ser un problema irme/ sino que para mí es una motivación/ no porque no quieravolver/ sino porque a mí me motiva ver otras culturas/ trabajar en otros ambientes... y... bueno eso en el plano laboral/ y... la verdad/ en otros planos/ no lo sé/ haber leído mucho más aún/(how I see myself in five years/ well actually I see myself outside Spain/ not by need/ it won't be a problema for me to leave/ but because for me it is a motivation/ not because I wouldn't want to come back/ but because I'm motivated to see other cultures/ work in other environments...and...well that concerning work/ and...honestly/ in other senses/ I don't know/ having read much more/)*

The only change in Jesús' imagined identity is the fact that while at the beginning he seemed to give a lot of importance to safety, at the end of his stay he does not mention it anymore. This could be interpreted as an indicator of the fact that his stay in Bucharest might have determined Jesús to change his mind with respect to places he does not consider "safe", or it has diminished the importance he assigned to safety. So, he is now more able to face the world without concerns about how safe or unsafe a place may be.

Finally, Kalina imagines herself having graduated from her master's, with a good job, and based in Bulgaria but travelling around the world:

KN: a:h/ with a master degree/ and a good job/ definitely/ travel... a:h... travelling around the world/

(...)

KN: I hope to be in Bulgaria/ because I really like my country/ but I can't stay in one place for a long time/ so I really prefer travelling/

It seems that also Kalina's imagined identity in five years time has changed from the beginning to the conclusion of her stay abroad: while at her arrival in Bucharest she considered living in Italy or Spain but not in Bulgaria, at the end, her own country of origin appears as the most desirable option and she explicitly declares she likes it, even though she still refers to travelling as an element that will be present in her future life.

Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Federico initially appears to be doubtful, as five years probably appear to be a very long time ahead, but he remarks he would like to be in Spain or Latin America:

FB: e:h/ e:h/ no sé/ no sé/ espero vivo/(e:h/ e:h/ I don't know/ I hope alive/)

(...)

FB: *en España siempre/ también me gustaría/ o en América Latina/(in Spain always/ I would also like/ or in Latin America/)*

His imagined identity in five years time does not seem to have changed substantially. Probably the most outstanding modification is that he mentions Spain or Latin America as a future option, which might signal that his knowledge of the Spanish language has opened for him new imagined avenues for the future.

Mildri seems to be quite doubtful when it comes to imagine herself in five years' time, but she mentions both Norway and other places as possibilities for the future, pretty much in the same way as at the onset of her stay:

ML: *ahm/ ah I'm not sure/ I can't ah/ I can't really see myself in five years because I haven't decided yet what I wanna do/ where I wanna work/ or... yeah/ so/ actually I'm not sure/ I I could see myself really well in Norway/ but I could also see myself other places/*

Mădălina imagines herself being a journalist in Romania, which is not her country of origin but the country where she is studying her degree, or somewhere else travelling and getting to know other cultures:

MS: *ah hm/ haciendo periodismo/ en Rumania o en un país más lejano/ eh viajando/ eh siendo más independiente/ y conociendo otras/ seguir conociendo otras culturas/(ah hm/ doing journalism/ in Romania or in a further country/ eh travelling/ eh being more independent/ and getting to know other/ still getting to know other cultures/)*

From her account, it seems that for some reason the participant has chosen Romania as an option for her future life, a country which she did not mention at the beginning of her stay. Yet, she keeps with her idea of not living in her home country, Moldova, and Romania offers the closest cultural option, even sharing the same language.

Petronela imagines herself as a worker abroad since her home country is not good for finding a job:

PT: in five...oh my god/ (laughs)/ I really/ maybe like a worker abroad/ I think not in Poland because our country is not so good for job/ for find a job/

The participant's imagined identity in five years time seems to be outside Poland both at the beginning and at the end of her Erasmus experience.

Finally, Radka envisions herself being a teacher and maybe having a baby, probably in the Czech Republic:

RT: hm/ in five years you say/ oh well/ a: yeah/ I expect that I would finish my master study/ then I hope I will get/ I will have one or two years of working/ as a teacher/ well/ and in five years/ I guess I would have a baby/ but who knows? (laughs)/

(...)

RT: yeah/ in Czech I guess/

In a similar way as at the beginning, Radka still envisions herself in the Czech Republic, and she seems to portray herself as less mobile at the end of her stay than at its onset, where she declares she imagines herself travelling in five years time.

Synthesis

In general lines, it seems that at the onset of their experience, the participants in the study abroad program have some difficulties when they have to envision themselves in five years' time, and many of them express uncertainties, especially when it comes to the places where they imagine themselves. However, the most outstanding feature of their discourse in this respect appears to be a certain degree of openness, where mobility is an option more often than not. A few participants report a desire to remain in their countries, and a fewer more actually report on being open to live in other places but they straightly state their countries are not an option, either because of a perceived lack of opportunities or for the higher degree of attractiveness of other places. Important to mention is the fact that students from countries with a weaker economy tend to be rather sure about living

somewhere outside their countries in the future, while those who come from countries with a more stable economy either see themselves working at home, or working abroad due to pleasure or to other reasons that are not of an economic kind. Consequently, it might be that the Erasmus experience is seen as an opportunity to get ready for an imminent need to move in the future as perceived by some students, or as a cultural experience that would enable the participants to know how things work in different places, even though these students might have no, or very few intentions to work abroad.

At the end of their stay, the vast majority of students seem to be much more confident about the fact they will be mobile in the future. Actually, just one participant reports imagining herself living in her country, and this is due to her perception that her career limits her possibilities to move. All the other participants imagine themselves either living in different countries or travelling on a frequent basis. The reasons behind their imagined identities as mobile individuals are various. While for some students, the need to learn English would push them to a native English-speaking city like London, some others decide to move because getting to know other cultures and people has become a desire they need to fulfill. As previously mentioned, many of the participants already reported a certain inclination towards future mobility at the beginning of their stay abroad. However, the scale of this mobility is definitely higher at the end of their Erasmus experience. This seems to be due to the fact that, by showing themselves they could manage to live in a different culture, the students become more open to seeking opportunities outside their comfort zone. Furthermore, by expanding their linguistic repertoires, new avenues which were difficult to imagine before become available for them. Finally, the Erasmus experience, coinciding with the entrance into adulthood, seems to be in some cases some sort of rite of passage, where individuals have the chance to act according to their will while they take distance from the moral and social norms and expectations of their societies. This fact can also trigger major identity changes, or at least, it can become a catalyst for the destabilization of what seems to be fixed identities.

6.2.4. Expectations and outcomes

As previously observed, the imagined linguistic landscape of each setting is an important determinant when it comes to the choice of context. Furthermore, the imagined identities of the participants also play an important role when it comes both to the choice of context and to the practices they are willing to invest in. Similarly, imagined identities might have been a powerful determinant element in the decision to enroll in a sojourn abroad. So far, the general way the participants imagine themselves in five years time, both when they are at the beginning and at the end of their Erasmus experience has been examined. However, this analysis can only bring a general idea about how and where they foresee themselves. In the following lines, the linguistic, personal, and professional expectations, the investment the participants are eager to put in each of them, and the reported outcomes will be analyzed in order to shed light on the linguistic, personal, and professional purpose of the Erasmus programme as conceived by the students, the actual results they report, and what sort of social actors they think they may become as a consequence of the Erasmus experience.

6.2.4.1. Linguistic insights

6.2.4.1.1. Beginning of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, the three Spanish participants appear to be rather certain that their English proficiency will increase significantly. For instance, Diego states the following:

DD: *espero salir de aquí con el inglés prácticamente/ no perfecto/ pero...*(I hope to get out of here with practically / not perfect English/ but...)

In a similar way, Jennifer and Claudia affirm that they would like to be better prepared in the language (referring to English) for the future:

JC: *y: a nivel de idioma/ formarme mucho más para salir preparada y el día de mañana salir bien preparada/* (and: on a language level/ to train myself much more in order to get out from here being ready/ and being well prepared for the future/)

VM: *muy bien/* (very well/)

CQ: *es verdad/ lo del idioma también/* (it's true/ also the language issue/)

VM: *cuando decís idioma/ a que idioma os referís?*(when you say language/ to which language do you refer?)

CQ: *al inglés/ (laughs)/* (to English/ (laughs)/)

JC: *al inglés/* (to English/)

CQ: *sí/* (yes/)

Meyer does not mention language as a key factor in his choice of context, but when asked about the role of languages in his sojourn abroad, he states that his English might improve because the situation requires him to use the language:

VM: *OK/ and what about languages?*

ML: yeah/ I think they will improve a lot because I really don't have another opportunity than speaking English here/ of course to my German fellows I speak German/ but only when I'm alone with them/ and I'm not very often alone with Germans so ah/ of course you don't speak all the time with native English speakers/ but even though with English and ah/ yeah/ this is just learning by doing/ you know? and...

However, Meyer seems to be aware of the fact that his English is already very good, which could be one of the reasons why he does not mention learning English among the first determinants for his stay abroad. In spite of this fact, he states that even though he did not decide to go to Oulu because of his English, he thinks it can get better, and actually he seems quite confident about the outcome:

VM: OK right/ so maybe your English could improve anyways if...

ML: yeah/ absolutely/ yeah/ I/ I/ well/ I didn't decide to go here uh/ because of my English/ because I I think that it's/ good enough for studying here/ but ah/ yeah/ it always can be better/ and...

Similarly, Stefaan does not mention language learning at the beginning of the interview. However, when he is asked about languages, he reports that he will practice oral English and despite the fact that he does not appear to have a clear linguistic objective for his stay, he is invested in learning some other foreign languages for fun:

VM: OK/ and ah/ academically/ like languages/ do you think this will change something in this aspect?

SM: yeah/ yeah/ my English will get way better since I don't talk English this often normally/ and X I'm learning some Finnish/ and some Korean as well/

VM: OK/ you're learning both Finnish and Korean right now?

SM: yeah now I'm learning/ I'm hanging out with Korean guys/

VM: OK/

SM: and also Spanish guys and I'm trying to pick up ah/

VM: OK/ so you would like to learn their languages?

SM: yeah/ yeah/ the basics would be nice/

VM: OK/ was that one of your aims when you enrolled in this mobility program?

SM: no/ not at all since I don't like languages/ (laughs) but/ but it's fun to learn from them/

It seems that for Stefaan, his English might get better as a matter of speaking it on a more frequent basis than he usually does. However, he also mentions other languages he might be interested to learn through contact with L1 speakers, which he seems to enjoy. These languages are as diverse as Finnish, Korean, and Spanish. However, it is impossible to know for sure if he has an interest to engage in learning any of these languages or if he is just referring to getting very basic notions in each of them. It is interesting to notice that in spite of claiming that language learning *per se* was not one of his aims to enroll in the mobility program, he finds it fun to learn from his new friends. By alluding to the funny side of learning foreign languages because his friends speak them as their L1s, Stefaan is actually bringing to the fore the idea of a growing interest in multilingualism and learning foreign languages as a consequence of the Erasmus program. However, it is also true that at the beginning of the stay abroad, it is just him who mentions this aspect.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group Sami and Jussi do not initially mention language learning, but they refer to it later in their discourse:

JN: *and/ of course we learn their/ about their lives and learn English and how/ how to deal with problems we haven't probably dealt with before/*

(...)

SM: *and/ and maybe learn some Romanian/ too/*

In their account, learning English intermeshes with many other sorts of learning, such as learning about their (Romanian people's) lives, learning how to deal with problems and finally learning some Romanian, too. It is in their discourse, more than in the one of any of the other

participants, where language learning seems to be deeply engrained in the process of gaining knowledge in a very wide variety of aspects.

In a different way, Kalina refers to learning Romanian as one of her aims, but very soon after, she acknowledges that this might not actually happen:

KN: *ah...I want to meet Romanian people/ and to be close to home and to learn Romanian/*

(...)

VM: *and in which ways do you think that this mobility program will influence your lives?*

KN: *well I... I believed that I will learn Romanian but this won't happen so... I believe I will... meet more... more interesting people than there in Bulgaria/ as Bulgarians are not very good people/ I don't know if you know that/ (laughs)/ but I am/ I am/ yeah/*

It is rather complicated to understand why Kalina's discourse changes from stating that she wants to learn Romanian, to actually acknowledging that she believed she would learn it, but it will not happen in a short time. In fact, one of the interpretations of her change of discourse could be that, in fact, at the beginning, Kalina is recalling her expectation to learn Romanian before her arrival in Bucharest. It is possible that, just a few days after arriving in the host country, the social experience in which she had been immersed already prompted her to change her mind with regard to how much Romanian she might be able to learn. Among other things, Kalina shared her flat with another two Erasmus students (Italian and French) and she seemed to spend much of her time with them.

Jesús appears to have a set of expectations with regard to language learning that we could define as rather relaxed:

JO: *e:/ yo...simplemente perfeccionar el inglés todo lo que pueda y aprender rumano a:/ a nivel/ no me voy a comer la cabeza/ en el sentido de... no me voy a estar estudiando por las noches/ pero sí el poder hablar con la gente si tengo que volver aquí o... pues yo que sé/ serle útil a alguien/ en ese sentido/ sí que me gustaría y luego/ más allá de esos dos idiomas/ no tengo ni... a día de hoy aprender aquí dentro de este... del Erasmus y el programa de movilidad... no/ no tengo... no digo que no quiero/ pero no es mi... mi objetivo principal aprender francés o italiano/ y tal... yo al volver sí que... tengo... de hecho voy a ir a sacarme el B1 de francés pero aquí no/ (e:/ me... simply perfecting English as much as I can and learn Romanian to:/ on a level/ I'm not going to rack my brain/ in the sense that... I will not be studying at night/ but for being able to talk to people if I have to come back here or... well I don't know/ being useful to someone/ in that sense/ I would like it and then/ beyond those two languages/ I do not even have... at this very moment to learn here within this... within the Erasmus and the mobility program... I don't / I don't have... I'm not saying that I do not want / but it's not my... my main*

objective learning French or Italian/ and such... on my return yes... I have... in fact I will try to get the French B1 but not here/)

The only language that Jesús seems to be concerned about perfecting as much as he can is English. With respect to Romanian, there are some traces of a desire to rather become a user of the language, at a basic level, but he does not seem to be eager to invest much in that. Apart from these two languages, Jesús reports not being interested in learning any other for the time being, but he expresses his intention to get an official certificate in French after his return from Bucharest.

In a much more straightforward way, Federica, the Italian participant in Bucharest, states clearly that she came to the city to learn English because it is very important for her future:

FH: I come in Bucharest because I want to learn English/ because for my future is very important/

This is, in fact, the first reason she mentions when she explains the determinants for her decision to study abroad, and in fact, she alludes to Spain as a possible option for her sojourn, which she refused because she predicted it would not be a good context to learn English. In Federica's imagination, Bucharest is a good place to learn English. She does not mention with whom she expects to communicate in this language, or by what means she imagines this learning will happen, but she seems to have an intuitive idea of the opportunities for using ELF and learning English

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, the presence of Spanish creates important divergences with respect to the language expectations in the Oulu and the Bucharest group. Similarly to the results from the questionnaires, the participants seem to be much more concerned with learning Spanish than English,

or any other language. In fact, Spanish appears as one of the main attractions when it comes to choosing this context.

For instance, Federico sees his stay abroad as an opportunity to know a new language, certainly referring to Spanish:

FB: because it's an opportunity to know/ to... know a new language/ in... for trying to live independent/

Similarly, Petronela, when asked about the languages she would like to learn or improve in Lleida, states that she expects to learn Spanish, but she also adds that her English might improve because the Erasmus provides the chance to meet a lot of people and talk to them:

PT: Spanish/

VM: Spanish? OK / e: what about English?

PT: (laughs)/ here we can improve/ we can practice

Mildri reports on a long relationship with Spanish that played an important role when she decided to enroll in a stay abroad in Lleida:

ML: ah... first of all I/ I learned some Spanish and I was a lot/ a lot of times in Spain when I was little/ and I learned a little Spanish at school/ so I've always wanted to: get better at Spanish/ so the language was maybe the first ah motivation/ and also I/ I'm studying for six years in the same place and I/ and I'm a little restless/

Apart from reporting Spanish as her first motivation for studying abroad, Mildri also stresses the fact that she has always wanted to get better at Spanish, since she visited the country many times as a child and she also learnt the language at school. From her account, it seems that Mildri's desire to go to Spain was born much before her decision to enroll in the Erasmus program. However, her relationship with the languages she encounters in Lleida is far from being straightforward. In fact, her desire to learn Spanish, which actually pushed her to unsuccessfully apply for her semester abroad in Santiago de Compostela is truncated both by the presence of Catalan in Lleida and by her fear to lose opportunities to learn in her classes because of her limited Spanish level:

ML: I hope I will feel more secure about my Spanish/ when I leave/ and I hope I/ I'll get the time to travel a little bit around in Spain/ and I hope that the courses I take here/ even if I take it in Spanish or Catalan/ that I will learn as much as I would if I studied it in English/ that I'm not missing anything from my career either/

With regard to Catalan, the participant says that even though she wants to learn it a little bit, she does not have the time to do any course, but she expects to learn it somehow passively from her lessons in Catalan. Therefore, Mildri is not too invested in learning Catalan, or at least, not to the same extent she is in learning Spanish, for which she is actually taking a B2 course:

ML: ah/ yes/ I'm doing the language course here in Rectorado/ the B2 Spanish course/ and also I want to learn a little bit Catalan/ but right now I don't have time to do any course/ but I have my classes in Catalan so I learn maybe a little bit every day/ but not systematically/

In fact, Mildri's account of her relationship with Catalan is a constant in the discourse of many other participants in Lleida. At the beginning of their stay abroad, and after being offered a short Catalan course, the students who had recently arrived in Lleida seem to keep their high expectations with regard to their learning of Spanish besides the unexpectedly high presence of Catalan in Lleida. This is the reason why, most of the times, the participants keep what I would call a neutral position towards Catalan at the beginning, one that does not express highly negative feelings but does not show any special interest in learning the language. As they get immersed in their stay abroad, their relationship to the Catalan language will also be reformulated.

6.2.4.1.2. End of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Claudia and Jennifer seem to perceive that their stay in Oulu has contributed somehow to improving their level of English, which they exemplify by explaining that

during their practicum, they were able to communicate in English with foreign patients and they even became a reference for the other nurses who called them when they needed some translation:

JC: *pues...a nivel profesional/ eh yo creo que te abre muchas puertas/ como dijo Claudia/ aparte del idioma que...es que yo llegué y llegué nula de inglés/ y al regresar me tocó en un centro de salud en el que vienen bastantes turistas/ y la verdad es que me sentido súper bien porque me puedo comunicar con ellos/ y es que ellos se sienten bien/ (so...at a professional level/ eh/ I think it opens you many doors/ as Claudia said/apart from the language that...I mean I arrived and my English was non-existent/ and on my return I was assigned a hospital where many tourists come/ and certainly I felt super well because I can communicate with them/ and then they feel well/)*

CQ: *si/ y además vienen las enfermeras a buscarte...(yes/ and also the nurses come to look for you/)*

JC: *“me puedes traducir?” (“can you translate?”)*

CQ: *“ay/ por favor/ tradúceme/ que yo no me entero de nada/ no sé qué/” y tú vas allí con tu/ con tu English y...(laughs)/(“ay/ please/ translate for me/ cause I don’t understand anything/ and so on/” and you go there/ with your English and...(laughs/)*

JC: *e ya luego/ cuando termine la carrera y si nos vamos no sé a Inglaterra o a otro sitio/ pues ya más o menos tenemos una base/ que ya es algo/ (and then after/ when I graduate and we’ll go I don’t know in England or somewhere else/ then more or less we’ll have a basis/ which is already something/)*

From their discourse, one has the feeling that the two participants understand that their stay has contributed to opening them many doors at a professional level, but the only reason they bring to the fore is that this happened through an increase in their level of English. The relationship between professional growth and learning English seems to be so strong that there is no need for them to explain it. It just opens doors. Surprisingly enough, while at the beginning learning from the Finnish culture and ways to do was perceived as a means to improve at a professional level, at the end of their stay, the English language appears as the highest asset of their stay. However, Jennifer’s closing sentence, in which she refers to having acquired a basis in English which will serve when they will go to England or somewhere else gives the impression that they still feel their English level is not enough. However Finland has helped them progress and reach a level from which to continue learning in the UK, which seems to be regarded as a place that will enable them to learn more.

Concerning the Finnish language, none of the two participants seemed to have learnt much. However, their attitudes towards the language point in different directions. While both of them agree that it is a complicated language, Jennifer expresses she would like to learn it. Claudia, on the other

hand, brings to the fore the fact that Finnish is useless and she remarks she would have liked to learn another type of language. Actually, the participant stresses that Finnish has no value since it is useful only in Finland and she highlights the fact that it limits the Finns because it is not spoken anywhere else and it does not resemble any other languages. As an argument, Claudia explains that Spanish can be used in many places.

JC: *el finés es más de escribir es más de hablar/ es de practicarlo/ porque es bastante complicado/ no? pero después...a mí la verdad me gustaría aprender más finés/ es muy complicado para mí pienso yo pero/ pero sí es un idioma que me gustaría aprenderlo/ la verdad que sí/ me gusta/ (Finnish is more for writing it's more for speaking/ it is for practicing/ because it's quite complicated/ right? but then...I would surely like to learn more Finnish/ it's very complicated for me I think but/ but it's a language I would like to learn/ to say the truth yes/ I like it/)*

CQ: *ay pues a mí no/ yo lo que aprendí/ lo aprendí/ mi madre siempre me dice "guárdatelo"/ sí es verdad/ lo que aprendí/ lo aprendí/ pero tampoco sirve para nada/ sabes? me quedará con lo básico e ya está/ pero me gustaría haber aprendido otro tipo de idioma/ pero el finés es que solo te sirve para Finlandia/ es que es lo que dicen ellos/ yo tenía un paciente que me decía "ay qué suerte porque yo no puedo viajar porque solamente sé hablar finés"/ sabes? y no sabe hablar inglés/ entonces eso es una cosa que delimita mucho a los fineses porque nosotros somos españoles/ hablamos español pero podemos irnos a Sudamérica que hablan español/ a Italia más o menos entendemos/ pero es que finés es finés y no hay más/ (ay I wouldn't/ what I learnt/ it's learnt/ my mother always says "keep it"/ yeah it's true/ what I learnt/ I learnt/ but it doesn't serve for anything/ you know? I will keep the basics and that's it/ but I would have liked to learn another type of language/ but Finnish is just useful in Finland/ it is what they say/ I had a patient who told me "ay what a fortune cause I can't travel cause I can just speak Finnish"/ you know? and he can't speak English/ so that's something that limits the Finns a lot because we are Spanish/ we speak Spanish but we can go to South America where they speak Spanish/ in Italy we can more or less understand/ but Finnish is Finnish and there's nothing else/)*

In a similar way, Meyer, who does not remark having learnt English in Oulu, brings to the fore the fact that he did only learn Finnish at a very basic level because it is very complex and the effort is "not worth it":

ML: *ah/ ah/ I learnt Finnish/ I do/ I took the basic Finnish I / but that was like really basic/ basic because it was Finnish/ it was like...ah and then/ not really/ not really anything else/*

VM: *mhm/ alright/ and why would you say you didn't learn Finnish better?*

ML: *ahh... cause it was extremely hard and then I compared like OK there are five million people in this world speaking like this fucking hard language/ so the effort is maybe not really worth it/ it's maybe not so OK to say/ but it's just like how I felt/*

Diego, on the other hand seems to have improved his English in Oulu and remarks that he gained better knowledge of everyday English:

DD: *sí/ yo/ yo creo que sí porque cuando llegué tenía un nivel normal/ básico/ tirando para bajo/ pero más sobretodo de academia/ no hablaba/ no tenía yo nivel de inglés de hablar con los amigos y tal/ y allí*

prácticamente ocho meses hablando todo con inglés/ es que tenía que mejorar sí o sí/ y a lo m... (yes/ I think I did cause when I arrived I had a regular level/ basic/ rather low/ but mostly from academia/ I didn't speak/ I didn't have an English level to talk with friends and so on/ and there practically eight months speaking everything in English/ I had to improve yes or yes/ and may...)

With regard to Finnish, the participant also expresses he has not learnt it besides the basic language course offered by the university.

DD: no/ no porque hice el cursillo/ un cursillo básico que daba la universidad y... genial/ no? pero eran dos meses/ y después los otros meses pues casi que no lo volví a utilizar/ porque es que realmente no llegué a aprender a/ a comunicarme sino a decir pues las cuatro cosas/ no? que si no si/ a lo mejor estoy allí más tiempo y conozco más finlandeses y eso/ entonces sí hubiese mejorado/ pero/ al no tener gente con quien hablar... (no/ no cause I took the course/ a basic course offered by the university and...great/ right? but it was two months/ and then the other months I almost never used it again/ cause actually I didn't learn to/ to communicate but to say a couple of things/ right/ if not yes/ maybe if I stay there longer and I meet more Finns and so/ then I would have improved/ but/ since I didn't have people to speak with...)

As a reason, Diego mentions his little contact with Finnish people and a lack of need due to the good level of English among the locals:

DD: yo creo que básicamente porqué tuve poco contacto con los finlandeses/ yyyy... mmm... no me hacía falta realmente/ allí todo el mundo hablaba inglés desde... bueno desde la universidad hasta una persona que vendía chicles en la calle/ (I think basically cause I had little contact with the Finns/ and...mmm...I didn't really need it/ there everybody spoke English from...well from the university to someone selling chewing gum in the street/)

Mila, whose undergraduate studies are in English teaching, does not mention having improved her level of English. However, despite the fact she has not managed to learn Finnish well, she seems to have been considerably invested in learning the local language. Mila explains that this was due to her desire to fit in the Finnish society:

MJ: ah...maybe because ah/ like everybody was speaking so well English that I/ you didn't need to strive so much learning Finnish/ and most of the exchange students didn't learn Finnish/ I studied it because I/ I enjoy learning languages and especially when I'm living in this country/ I want somehow to fit in the society/ so maybe if they didn't spo/ speak any English/ I would learn it better/ but it was so convenient that they were so educated in English so...

Finally, Stefaan, who does not stress having learnt English in Finland, brings to the fore very similar reasons:

SM: *because it's impossible to learn/ it's it's there's nothing in the language that I can recognise/ and next to it all Finnish people speak excellent English/ so I didn't really see why I would/*

The participant also remarks that Finnish is complex and so different that he cannot recognize any words in the language. This, together with the excellent English level of the Finns, made him conclude there was no reason to learn the local language.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Federica, who declares her English got better, explains that she also learnt some Romanian, even though she mentions that she prefers French to Romanian:

FH: *ah/ yes/ I did some Romanian courses in Bucharest/ in my university and I:/ I have a level A2 of Romanian/ but I want learn before French/ and after Romanian/*

VM: *mhm/ OK/*

FH: *if I can/*

Sami, who at the beginning did not show much interest in improving his English while in Bucharest, now explains that in fact his English became different because he developed some strategies for conversation in English with Spanish and French speakers. Therefore, the participant declares that, through this adaptation strategy, he has learnt to see through the eyes of Spanish and French people and he is able to adapt his English naturally for them and to shift to the regular English he speaks with the rest of speakers:

SM: *oh/ well I've been working on my own/ English/ a lot/ I'm I'm trying to sound like some/ native speaker but I I don't think I do/ enough/ but in Romania there were so many Spanish and French...that/ and for them/ it might be a little difficult to to speak the/ native-like English/ and I think/ it changed my English too a little bit/ I started talking a little bit/ I don't wanna say worse English but/ different English/*

VM: *mhm/*

SM: *I think they speak very good English but/ it's difficult difficult X/*

VM: *so it changed your yours as well?*

SM: *a little bit (laughs)/*

VM: *towards what/*

SM: *towards the/ the Spanish French-like English/ but not so much/ not so mu/ only with like grammar/ but/ only with them/ you know/ when I speak to: other people/ I still speak this one/*

VM: *so you developed strategies in another kind of English/ or in speaking English with a certain group of people right?*

SM: *yeah yeah/ kind of/ so it's kind of part of the adaptation/ I think it's easier to see through their eyes/ when when I speak the same way it comes naturally for me/ I don't know why/*

Concerning Romanian, Sami explains he learnt very little and the reason he gives is that the Romanian lessons coincided with his party time:

SM: *we we would have had this language course and I I was gonna go there but/ ah/ it took place on Thursday evenings and and you know it's not the perfect time/ because we had all the parties then/*

Jussi, who does not directly refer to having improved his English level, explains a similar story. According to the participant, he developed listening strategies when he did not understand some people who were not speaking clearly enough:

JN: *ah/ some/ especially French people they have so strange accent/ it's/ at first it was difficult to/ understand/ but a:/ in the beginning more difficult than in the end/ because everyone improved their English/ and you/ you know a:/ kind of like got used to it/ easier to listen/*

VM: *mhm/ got used to English in general? or got used to this kind of different English? or very personal English?*

JN: *different English/ yeah/ like their accents and/ stuff like that/ if someone is not speaking very clearly/ you can still understand them/ you kind of fill in/ fill in the gaps/ you can't understand/*

Similarly to Sami, Jussi also explains it was not possible to learn more Romanian because of the language courses coinciding with other courses and because they were mostly in contact with other Erasmus students with whom English was used:

JN: *and a:/ I would have wanted to learn more more Romanian/ but the/ courses were not/ kind of like not possible/ because of the other courses and stuff like that/*

(...)

JN: *a:/ I think first of all that the:/ that we couldn't/ well/ it could have been possible to go on their language course/ from X/ Romania/ but we thought that it was/ you know/ how to say it/ it could difficult things too much/*

VM: *mhm/*

JN: *and a:/ the other reason is that we were hanging around a lot of/ time with the:/ Erasmus people/ so the English was the: main thing/*

Jesús, who explains having used mostly English in his daily life in Bucharest, remarks he has not learnt much Romanian because of laziness and also because the people he related to spoke English:

JO: *pues porque...la primera...bueno/ vamos a ser sinceros/ lo primero es vagancia/ e:/ y porque no tenía tanto contacto con gente con la que necesitara el rumano/ por ejemplo yo con todo/ en el ámbito académico/ prácticamente dos tres personas no sabían hablar inglés/ y... claro/ para... tanto para ellos como para mí/ es más cómodo hablar en un idioma en el que ellos me van a entender porque no...bueno porque voy a saber hablarlo/ y ellos también/ y claro/ la no necesidad hizo/ hizo bastante en este sentido/ no aprender/ (well because...firstly...well/ let's be honest/ firstly is laziness/ e:/ and because I didn't have much contact with people with whom I needed Romanian/ for instance me with everything/ in the academic environments/ practically two three people couldn't speak English/ and...clearly/ for...both for them and for me/ it's more comfortable to speak a language they will understand me cause if not...well cause I would be able to speak it/ and clearly/ the lack of need did/ did a lot in this sense/ not learning/)*

Finally, Kalina, who declares having used English most of the time but does not refer to it as one of the highest assets of her experience, explains the following:

KN: *a:h/ well for me it was easier to communicate with a:h/ Italian people and with Romanian people/ with their language/ because Italian people in general they speak slower/ so they are easier to understand when they pronounce words and a:h/ Romanian people they have the s... exactly the same sounds as we have in Bulgaria/ so they were saying base to the words as I was saying them with some very few exceptions/ a:h/ for Spanish and Greek people/ I have a little bit of difficulties understanding them/ but after like three hours and two beers XXX/ I get used to them/ one people were annoying until the end for me/ they were really difficult to understand them/*

On a similar token to Jussi and Sami, it seems that Kalina has developed certain communication strategies for conversation with speakers of English with different linguistic backgrounds. In fact, she can identify different accents in English and she states that Romanian and Italian people were easy to understand when they spoke in English, while more patience was needed for Greeks and Spaniards.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, similarly to the accounts of the participants regarding their language-related expectations, the outcomes they report are also different from those in the other two groups. In fact, one has the feeling that the overall linguistic experience they have been through is substantially different from the ones in Oulu and Bucharest.

For instance, Federico remarks that he learnt very little English in Lleida since the majority of the people he talked to were Spanish. However, immediately after, he realizes that in fact, he did not talk to Spanish people but to Spanish speakers. In Lleida, many of the participants return having learnt or improved their Spanish upon their return. However, it is mesmerizing to hear that the Spanish they speak is closer to a Latin-American variety than to the peninsular Spanish one would expect to learn in Lleida. In his account about the way he learnt Spanish, Federico sheds light on what actually happened. It is through the international students from Mexico that he actually learnt the language:

FB: *poco porqué por...la mayoría/ la mayoría de la personas con la...que hablaba eran español/ español hablantes/(little cause for...the majority/ the majority of people that I...that I spoke were Spanish/ Spanish speakers/)*

(...)

FB: *e:h/ fue también una coincidencia porque me encontré a vivir con cuatro mejicanos/ entonces/ (laughs)/ he tenido que aprender/(e:h/ it was also a coincidence because I found myself living with four Mexicans/ so/ (laughs)/ I had to learn/)*

Concerning Catalan, Federico reports having only taken the initial introductory course upon arrival, because he thought that learning Catalan alongside Spanish was difficult and confusing and remarks that he also likes Spanish better. When asked about the reasons behind his statement, the participant affirms he likes how Spanish sounds:

FB: *(laughs)/ catalán...he hecho el curso A1 pero...luego...era un poco difícil aprender también el catalán además del español/ y hacia un poco de confusión/ y además/ me gusta más el español/ (laughs)/ Catalan...I did the A1 course but...then...it was a little bit difficult to learn also Catalan besides Spanish/ and it was a little bit confusing/ and also/ I like Spanish better/)*

VM: *mhm/ vale/ y por qué te gusta más el español?(mhm/OK/ and why do you like Spanish better?)*

FB: *no sé/ (I don't know/)*

VM: *Federico/*

FB: *come suena/ no?(how it sounds/ right?)*

On a similar token, Mildri explains she thinks her English got worse because she started thinking in Spanish:

ML: *a:h/ no/ I don't think so/ (laughs)/ maybe it got worse because I started thinking in Spanish X/ (laughs)/*

With regard to Spanish, which is the language she initially wanted to learn, the participant explains that she could not learn much Spanish from her lessons because teachers spoke Catalan and some of them refused to speak Spanish. Mildri also explains that even if she lived with some Spanish people, and she tried to speak Spanish with them, they still spoke a lot of Catalan:

ML: *a:h/ there were a few problems because/ ah/ because the teachers would speak in Catalan/ and some of them would change if you aske/d but some of them refused to change so I didn' t learn that much Spanish from classes/ ah but I lived with some Spanish people/ they also spoke a lot of Catalan but I try/ I got to speak some with them but I/ I should have probably practiced more because when I was out with my friends/ we were speaking English/ so/ (laughs)...*

Regarding Catalan, the participant remarks she improved her Spanish and learnt some Catalan even though declares not really being able to speak this language. She adds that she was focused on Spanish because it is a language she may use later in her life:

ML: *I improved Spanish/ and since I didn't know any Catalan/ I probably improved my Catalan also/ (laughs)/ but yeah/ I don't really speak Catalan/ but I can understand and I can read and...*

(...)

ML: *ah... it was mainly because I was focusing on Spanish/ because that's the one I can use later/ and also... if I learn a language/ I want to know/ I/ I like the grammar of the languages so I would have to go to a class to take it from the beginning/ I/ I'm not good at learning like just from... picking up random/ so I would really have to put more effort into it if I wanted to learn it so...*

Mădălina, who speaks Spanish with a strong Mexican accent at the end of her stay, brings to the fore that she did not improve her English but she learnt Spanish from her Mexican flatmate and bestfriend:

MS: *sí/ yo espero mucho que he mejorado mi español/ eso porque/ ay no no no/ eso se debe porque/ (laughs)/ no no no porque he vivido con una mexicana/ no? entonces como era mi mejor amiga pues hablábamos siempre en español/ y me ayudaba/ mi inglés no ha mejorado/ yo creo/ porque no sé porque/ porque no he comunicado a lo mejor tanto con tantas personas en inglés/ pero también he aprendido algunas palabras en catalán y por lo menos he empezado a entender lo que me dicen los profesores en las/ en los/ cómo se dice? clases/ en las clases/sí?(yes/ I hope very much that I improved my Spanish/ that is because/ ay no no no/ that is due because/ (laughs) no no no because I lived with a Mexican/ no? so since she was my best friend then we always spoke Spanish/ and she helped me/ I didn't improve my English/ I think/ because I don't know why/ because I didn't communicate maybe with so many people in English/ but I also learnt some words in Catalan and at least I started to understand what teachers tell me in the/ in the/ how do you say? classes/ in the classes/ right?)*

Regarding Catalan, the participant explains that despite willing to learn Catalan better, she did not learn much because she was not integrated in any group of Catalan people. Her group of friends was all within the Erasmus group:

MS: *porque estando en el grupo Erasmus/ bueno en el grupo Erasmus no se habla mucho el catalán/ se habla más como el inglés y el español/ no? y entonces el catalán solo lo lo lo escuchaba a la universidad y... me hubiera gustado conocer más/ pero era el único/ mi único contacto con el catalán porque no me he integrado tanto en un grupo de catalanes/ sino más que en el grupo Erasmus/ (because being in the Erasmus group/ well in the Erasmus group Catalan is not spoken much/ English and Spanish are more spoken/ right? and then Catalan I just hear it it in the university and...I would have liked to learn more/ but it was my only/ my only contact with Catalan cause I did not integrate much in a group of Catalans/ but more in the Erasmus group/)*

Petronela remarks that she believes she has improved her English but that the presence of Spanish in Lleida was bigger than the presence of English:

PT: *yes (laughs)/ I think yes but there were...there was more...Spanish/*

With regard to Catalan, the participant declares she can say some words but not many because it is difficult:

PT: *(laughs)/ I can say some words but not a lot/*

VM: *how...*

PT: *because it's difficult/*

Furthermore, when she reflects upon the reasons why she did not learn Catalan better, the participant explains that straight from the beginning, she knew about the presence of Catalan in

Lleida but did not care much about it and she believes that Spanish was more useful than Catalan, and easier to learn:

PT: *I knew it/ yes/ of course/ I had this knowledge but I didn't care at all about this language /(laughs)/ (...)*

PT: *because for me I think was more useful Spanish than Catalan/ and maybe more also easy to learn/ yes/ it's more easy/*

Finally, Radka brings to the fore what seems to be a slightly different relationship with the languages she encountered in Lleida. While she says she improved her English, she also learnt Spanish and also the basics of Catalan:

RT: *yeah/ I think actually I improved even my English because I had to work with many English/ English material so at least reading/ reading texts I/ I/ I saw I did some improvement in this/ and then I learnt also Spanish/ I/ I had only some basis before I came to Spain and I enrolled to a Spanish course/ it was really useful/ and I also got some basis of Catalan language because I didn't have a clue about Catalan before/ so/ yeah (laughs)/*

Concerning Catalan, the participant explains that she was surprised by the fact that Spanish was not the first language in Catalonia:

RT: *mhm/ yeah/ of course/ I did but...I was actually surprised because I/ I...for example/ I thought that a: Catalan language would be something a:/ which would use old people or...I don't know/ but I thought that Spanish would/ would be the first language in Catalonia/ whi: which is not/ so I was quite surprised by this (laughs)/*

(...)

RT: *well for me it was...it was more difficult because I don't speak Catalan/ well/ I can understand a little/ but I don't speak really good/ so for me it was quite difficult/ but...in general I don't think it's bad/ well/ it's OK for me/ and now/ actually when I/ well/ yeah/ you mentioned this that I/ I don't feel Catalan people are Spanish people/ I just saw it like any cul/ culture in within Spa/ within Spain/*

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that Catalan made Radka's stay more difficult, she does not think the presence of Catalan was a bad thing and explains that she understood that Catalan people are different from Spanish people.

Synthesis

The linguistic expectations of the participants at the beginning of their stay are closely related to the contexts they had chosen for the Erasmus experience. In Oulu, English seems to be expected to significantly improve by those students whose English level is low or intermediate, while those who already have a good level expect to refine it by using it more often. English is also mentioned as a possible aim of the stay by those students who chose Bucharest. However, they do not refer to this objective as straightforwardly as the participants in Finland and linguistic and cultural learning seem to become sometimes one and the same thing. A very different scenario is found in Lleida, where the participants refer to Spanish as the language they would like to learn, and also their biggest fear seems to stem from the fact they might not be able to learn it enough or to cope with the language in their lessons at the university. None of the other local languages (Finnish, Romanian, or Catalan) is given the same importance. However, the attitudes towards the local languages Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan, which are very similar, seem to be rather neutral at the beginning of the stay abroad.

At the end of the sojourn, it seems that the participants in Oulu improved their English. However, in some cases, they are not satisfied yet by the level they acquired. In spite of this, some participants are able to report their English level has opened some professional doors for them. On the other hand, Bucharest seems to have provided a good environment for improving competences in English as a lingua franca. Many participants mention their English improved because they were able to develop communication strategies that enable them to cope with the use of the language among non-native speakers.

Students who chose Lleida seem to have improved their Spanish. However, they did so by communicating with international students from Latin-America, which constitutes a rather unexpected element. It seems that the limited contact with the local community in Lleida did not impede the participants to pursue their linguistic aim thanks to the presence of a great number of

Latin-American students. Finally, the attitudes towards the local languages also appear to have changed, especially in relation to Finnish and Catalan. More negative feelings are displayed towards Finnish, which is described as a language that is too difficult, not worth the effort, and useless. Similarly, Catalan is defined as difficult, and as a limitation to learning Spanish, which appears to be “easier to learn” and which is “better sounding”. The attitudes towards Romanian are not as negative as the ones towards Finnish and Catalan. However, no interest at all is showed for this local language.

6.2.4.2. Personal insights

The vast majority of the participants in the present study report on personal gains as one of the most highly expected assets of their experience. However, personal expectations are related to different identities the participants imagine for themselves, and therefore, even if they are all related to personal growth, they sometimes point in different directions.

6.2.4.2.1. Beginning of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Jennifer and Claudia report on their expectation to overcome their fear to move by participating in the Erasmus program. Since both students seem to foresee an imminent need to consider mobility for job reasons, they enroll in the stay abroad with the understanding that it is an opportunity for them to experience uncomfortable feelings, like feeling down, being on yourself when it comes to communicating in a foreign language, etc., and doing so as students, which means

they can change their mind if they feel they need to go home, something they would not be able to do if they had a job:

JC: *pues a nivel de independencia/ no porque ya la tenemos/ vivimos fuera de casa de nuestros padres/ pero sí un poco más alejadas/ no? y es como más/ con más independencia/ a valerte por ti misma en el idioma/ porque claro vas a hablar un idioma que realmente no tienes mucha ... experiencia/ entonces...* (so with regards to independence/ no because we already have it/ we live outside our parents' home/ but we are a little bit further/ right? it's like more/ with more independence/ being on oneself with respect to the language/ because surely you will speak a language you don't really have much... experience/ so...)

CQ: *sí/ y a la hora de la verdad/ pues es como un paso para prepararnos para cuando realmente tengamos que irnos de casa para buscar trabajo/(yes/ so when the time comes/ then it's a step to get ready for the time when we'll have to leave from home to look for a job/)*

JC: *es la vida/ es la vida/(it's life/ it's life/)*

CQ: *entonces tarde o temprano esto lo teníamos que pasar/ y dijimos vale que te pase ahora que todavía tienes tiempo para decir pues si me da la bajona/ bajona/ bajona/ pues me puedo ir a casa/ que no que estar en trabajando/ te dé la bajona/ bajona/ bajona y no poderte ir a casa/ (so sooner or later we would have had to go through this/ and we said OK so let it happen now that you still have time to say if you are down/ down/ down/ then you can go home/ instead of being working/ feeling down/ down/ down and not being able to go home/)*

JC: *sí/ exacto/ (yes/ exactly/)*

CQ: *entonces es como una superación/ (laughs)/(then it's like a self-improvement (laughs)/)*

Diego mentions personal growth as a way to challenge himself in order to eventually be able to tell himself that he has achieved something:

DD: *sí/ personalmente también/ / lo mismo que... o sea crecer como persona creo yo/ de decir vale/ lo he conseguido/ no?* (and also personally/ t/ the same that... I mean growing as a person I believe/ and say OK/ I got it/ right?)

Another expected personal outcome is overcoming timidity and becoming more open to meeting new people. Meyer expects that this experience will help him be more relaxed in his life and feel comfortable with everyone:

ML: *yeah/ I I think that people who/ ah/ travel a lot and are fine with meeting new people are just more relaxed in their whole/ life/ style of life/ ah/ it's just/ you're comfortable with everyone and you are not afraid to say/ "hi"/ to anybody or/ those things/*

Contact with other people is also seen as a good source of personal growth. By way of example, Stefaan, who even though he thinks his ethical values are already shaped, admits a possibility to change by learning from other people:

SM: a: h/ well actually/ a:h/ I think of myself that I'm already pretty/ ah:/ how do you say? my morals are already pretty shaped/ but I think it's really interesting to learn from other people/ and maybe you will change/ but I don't know yet/

In a similar way, Mila reports the Erasmus program will enable her to explore a different culture which she thinks is a unique opportunity the average person in her home country does not have:

MJ:well/ I de/ I just thought that ah that doing this Erasmus program is a great opportunity to explore ah some culture/ some other culture than mine/ and I don't think that ah:/ in life I will have another opportunity again to live half a year in another country and ah from my university they will send me some money to live/ here/ so I don't think that ah the average Bulgarian person can afford that/ ah...if there weren't such mobility programs/ so:/ and of course ah I wanted to/ visit some other country/ to explore the culture... yes/ (laughs)/

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Jesús refers to the need to overcome fear when you go to a certain kind of places. At that point he probably regards Bucharest as a place that might raise safety concerns when it comes to spending some months there, but he does not refer to it explicitly. What he envisions is that the program will enable him to gain awareness of the fact that he will not always be in his comfort zone, protected by his beloved ones. In Jesús' words, this personal asset will improve his professional chances because he believes that employers seek people who can operate in different places:

JO: yo/ cómo me va a influir? yo creo que lo que más me va a ayudar es a... que realmente era consciente pero nunca lo aplicas/ a que no todo es tu zona de confort/ no vas a estar siempre donde es fácil/ donde tienes a tus amigos/ donde... e:/ tienes si quieres a x horas de distancia pero siempre tienes a tu familia para solucionarte los problemas que tú no quieres solucionar/ y sobre todo yo también creo que profesionalmente a mí me va a ayudar porque hasta...por lo menos mi visión es que lo que busca...lo que se busca al día de hoy es gente que

pueda desenvolverse en todos los lados/ (...) pero sobretodo yo...es la autonomía/ el sentir ese miedo y que a mi realmente es un miedo que me gusta/ pero eso sí que creo que me va a ayudar en...dejar de tenerlo cuando te vas a sitios así/ (me/ how it will influence me? I think mostly it will help me to...something I was actually aware about but one never applies it/ that not everything is your comfort zone/ that you won't always be where it's easy/ where you have your friends/ where...e:/ you always have if you want at x hours of distance but you always have your family to solve the problems you don't want to solve/ and especially because I also think that professionally it will help me to...because my vision is that what people look nowadays for is people that can operate everywhere/ (...) but mostly me...it's the autonomy/ feeling that fear which is a fear that I actually like/ but I think it will help me in...not having it when you go to this kind of places/)

From Jesús' words, one can grasp a certain desire to get out of his comfort zone, and to experience fear, and Bucharest seems to provide a good environment for overcoming the fear to which he refers to as "fear to go to places like this one".

Sami and Jussi expect the experience to affect them by way of changing their social skills:

JN: yeah/ I'm sure of that/ ah/ I'm sure that I will be perhaps/ perhaps not an entirely different person/ but it will affect me in some way/

VM: mhm/

JN: I'm sure/ we/ we will see it when we go back to Finland/

VM: what do you think/ Sami?

SM: I think there will be a development in some social skills maybe and/ and the way/ the way we talk to people will be different/

VM: mhm/

SM: and...well social skills mainly/ I guess/

On a different token, Federica remarks that this Erasmus experience is the first opportunity she has of living by herself:

FH: and for me it's same but it is important this experience for me to learn English/ learn another/ another language and a/ to live alone/ because in my my town I live with my family and this is the first experience to live alone/ and to do everything in my way/ (laughs)/

This is a key differential aspect of the Erasmus experience for some students, in particular those who live on their own for the first time in their life. They gain a sense of independence that is rather new to them. Federica experiences for the first time the empowering feeling of doing everything in her own way. This feeling of empowerment is naturally not shared by students who

had already been living on their own before the Erasmus experience and so it may not be considered a consequence of it, as much as a result of the separation from family and home, but yet the Erasmus mobility necessarily carries along such separation, which therefore needs to be considered as one of the effects of the stay abroad among students.

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Federico refers to the usefulness (though he actually says ‘useless’, it is obvious from the context that he means ‘useful’) of having the opportunity to self-reflect. It seems that for Federico, being by themselves in a new place enables individuals to get to know themselves better:

FA: yes/ I think it's very useless to be independent and to reflect about your life/ and...

On a different note, Mildri points out the feeling of uneasiness as a kind of challenge one needs in order to grow as a person:

ML: a:h... I think/ (laughs)/ it's a very classical answer/ but I think I will grow as a person because when you/ when you/ have to go to a place all by yourself and you have to/ I don't know/ you have to take a lot of initiative yourself because you don't know anyone/ and you have to speak a language that you are not hundred percent sure about/ so I think there are many situations that are a bit/ uncomfortable maybe because/ for example when I have my practicals here/ I don't always understand what the professors say/ and it's/ yeah/ it's a lot of situations where you maybe have to go a little bit out of your comfort zone/ and I think that's/ you need this kind of ah challenges to...

Similarly to Jesús, Mildri seems to feel a certain predisposition and a need to challenge herself by getting out of her comfort zone, being by herself and taking the initiative. It seems that the participant imagines Lleida, with its linguistic landscape, as a place that could provide a good amount of challenges and uneasiness.

Mădălina refers to the contact with people with a different mindset which is already having an impact on her own mindset as an Erasmus student. In fact, it is possible that by the time of the

interview, the participant had spent around three weeks in Lleida. This is a variable that may change slightly from one participant to the other because some of them arrived to the city some days before the semester started, during the holidays. Mădălina is actually experiencing the differences between what she calls a soviet mentality, which she defines as closed, and a more open mindset which she believes is benefiting her and helping her develop a new vision of life:

MS: cred că deja îi simt impactul/ sunt de mai mult sau mai puțin o lună aici și sunt în fiecare zi uimită de schimbările care au loc în... în mintea mea pentru că aici lumea are altă mentalitate/ eu încep să cunosc pur și simplu parcă o altă viață/ nu știu... e atât de diferit de mentalitatea aceea închisă/ sovietică din Moldova/ aici toată lumea cumva e mai deschisă către oportunități/ către... și cred că lucrul ăsta îmi face bine/ să văd/ să fac o diferență între ce există în viața asta/ (I think I already feel its impact/ I've been here for more or less one month and everyday I'm mesmerized by the changes that happen in... my mind because here people have another mindset/ I'm already starting to get to know, downright, kind of another life/ I don't know...it is so different from that closed mindset/ soviet from Moldova/ here everyone is somehow more open to opportunities/ to... and I believe this is good for me/ to see/ to make a difference between what exists in this life/)

Radka expects to enhance her personal growth through contact with other people which she connects with previous mobility experiences that already gave her the feeling she is more open-minded:

RT: mmm/ well/ I really like to travel and every time I am returning from from some journey I feel like I am more open-minded/ I know more opinions/ so I think it is a really good experience to live the life of a/ in another country for half of year and yeah/ see how people are doing there/

The participant refers to the fact that every time she returns from some journey she feels more open-minded because of contact with other people. Radka connects her previous travel experiences with her Erasmus stay and, therefore, she identifies it as a really good experience straight from the beginning.

6.2.4.2.2. End of the stay

At the end of their stay abroad, the participants were asked what they thought the personal impact of the program, if any, was, or would eventually be in their lives, and how they saw themselves at the end of the Erasmus experience.

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Jennifer and Claudia, who saw the stay abroad as an opportunity to get prepared for an imminent migration in search of a job, declare they came back with a completely different mindset, more relaxed and seeing life in a different way, which, according to them, contrasts with the stress experienced by those who remained in their home country:

JC: *ah/ sí/ sí/ además yo vengo de: con otra mentalidad completamente/ la verdad/* (ah/ yes/ yes/also I return of: with another complete mindset/ certainly/)

CQ: *sí/* (yes/)

JC: *más relajada/ más tranquila/ ves la vida de... no sé/ de otra manera/* (more relaxed/ more quiet/ you see life...I don't know/ in another way/)

CQ: *de otra manera/ aquí llegamos/ y se nota un montón la gente que se quedó estancada/* (in another way/ here we arrived/ and it's very clear the people who stayed static/)

JC: *agobiada/ están todos agobiados/ viven... no sé/ es que no sé/* (overwhelmed/ they are all overwhelmed/ they live...I don't know/ the thing is I don't know/)

Moreover, the participants explain that the experience, which they call “a trip” has given them knowledge, which can be understood as cultural, even though they do not directly refer to cultural knowledge. However, at a personal level, they agree that they are still the same persons and seem to see their stay abroad as an opportunity to disconnect from the bad vibrations in their country and understand that the most important thing in life is to live life in their own way without taking into account the opinion of other people:

JC: *a nivel de conocimientos yo me considero que/ a ver que un viaje siempre te aporta...* (regarding knowledge I consider myself that/ let's see a trip always brings you...)

CQ: *siempre es enriquecedor/ siempre/* (it's always enriching/ always/)

JC: *es que te aporta conocimientos/ cultura/ y de todo/ sabes?* (it gives you knowledge/ culture/ and everything/ you know?)

CQ: *sí/* (yes/)

JC: *así que a nivel de eso/ sí/ pero ya luego como persona/ pienso que sigo siendo la misma/* (so concerning that/ yes/ then after as a person/ I think I'm still the same/)

CQ: *como personas yo creo que seguimos siendo las mismas/ lo que pasa que sí que es verdad que gracias a ese viaje pudimos desconectar de la mala vibra que hay aquí adentro/* (as persons I think we're still the same/ what happens is that actually thanks to this trip we could disconnect from the bad vibes inside here/)

JC: *sí/* (yes/)

CQ: *entonces sí es verdad que es algo que ya necesitábamos/* (so it's true that's something we already needed/)

JC: *aprendí/ que la rivalidad que genera estudiar en España/ allí no lo hay/ la competencia esa no la hay/* (I learnt/ that the rivalry generated by studying in Spain/ doesn't exist there/ that competence is not there/)

CQ: *no/* (no/)

JC: *es/ es que es increíble/ para mí/ eso es lo más importante/* (it's/ it's incredible/ for me/ that's the most important/)

CQ: *creo que además tenemos otra mentalidad/ ya la teníamos/ no? pero que por lo menos yo/ por lo menos yo/ por lo menos yo te recuerdas lo que realmente es importante en la vida y lo que no/ lo realmente importante es disfrutar sin importar lo que vaya a decir la gente/ sí es verdad que tengo algún día en el que me jode algún comentario que otro/ claro porque soy persona pero...* (I think we also have another aim/ we already have it/ right? at least myself/ at least myself you remember what is really important in life and what is not/ what is really important is enjoying without taking into account what people'll say/ yeah it's true there's some day when some comment pisses me out more than another/ of course cause I'm a person but...)

On a different token, Diego, who expected his stay abroad to be a challenge and a way to achieve something big, and to show himself he was able to do it, remarks that he has achieved his goal:

DD: *pues/ yo creo que... personalmente me ha ayudado mucho porque yo jamás había salido de casa... bueno sí/ de Ceuta a Granada pero/ a otro país/ y solo/ y yo allí me fui totalmente solo/ estaba al principio muy perdido y tal... pero bueno al tiempo me di cuenta que...o sea pasé adelante no... no me:/ que pude hacerlo/ vaya/ entonces ya he ganado mucha confianza en mí mismo/ en plan si me he ido a Finlandia solo y he podido hacerlo/ puedo hacer lo que sea/* (so/ I believe that...personally it helped me a lot cause I would have never left home...well yes/ from Ceuta to Granada but/ to another country/ by myself/ and there I went totally alone/ I was very lost at the beginning and so...but well after a while I realized that...well I went on...I didn't/ I didn't/ I could do it/ damn/ so I gained a lot of confidence in myself/ in the sense that if I could go to Finland by myself/ I can do whatever/)

Furthermore, the participant explains that he has become much more open. He also brings to the fore that he is much more willing to travel and get to know new things. Further, Diego explains that while before his stay he would conform to getting a job and remaining in his city, his Erasmus experience has transformed him into a much more non-conformist person:

DD: *(laughs)/ pues yo creo que me he convertido pues en mucho más abierto con todo el mundo/ mi forma de pensar yo creo que es más abierta/ no? de... y... con muchas más ganas de viajar/ y de conocer/ y...y sí/ de eso/ y de no estarme quieto/ y no conformarme con... que si me dan a lo mejor ahora un trabajo aquí en Granada pues si me lo dan pues... antes decía pues de puta madre/ ahora digo no/ no me voy a conformar quedándome aquí/ sabes? en eso yo creo que he mejorado/ mejorado para mí/ a lo mejor otro me dice que no/ ((laughs)/ so I believe I became much more open with everyone/ my way to think I believe is more open/ right? for...and...much more willing to travel/ and to know/ and...and yes/ for that/ and for not being quiet/ and not feeling conformed with...if they give me maybe now a job here in Granada well if they give it to me...before I said that's great/ now I say no/ I won't conform to stay here/ you know? in that I think I got better/ better for me/ maybe some other will come and say no/)*

On a similar token, Mila talks about how her world and her mind became broader and the impossibility of being static that came along with her stay abroad:

MJ: *well/ first of all/ ah... it mmm/ made me meet so many people/ from every single continent of the world/ from ah so many countries... like I feel that somehow it expanded my... view for the world and just changed my/ changed my way of thinking somehow/ it broadened it/ make it/ made it bigger/*

(...)

MJ: *ah/ yeah/ I think I changed/ like I think that I look inside myself more and I try to ah/ change something/ to do some moves in my life/ since before that I had quite like a static life/ ah I didn't really go out a lot/ outside of Bulgaria/ ah yeah it was quiet like I was/ I thought like I was sitting in one place/ but now that I saw a different way of life and I was outside for some months/ and I don't think that I can remain static as before/*

Meyer, who expected to become more relaxed in life and feel more comfortable with everyone, affirms that despite his impossibility to name concrete things, the Erasmus stay has brought him more life experience and maturity:

ML:*ah/ I think I got like/ that's just what I just meant/ I/ I can't point out certain things that I learnt/ but I think you just like get like life experience and you get more mature/ I don't/ I don't think that I as a person I changed a lot but ah yeah/*

Finally, Stefaan, who expected to change personally by learning from other people seems to be facing the reality of his life in the Netherlands, but with a new perspective after the experience abroad:

SM: (laughs)/ that's a really good question...I just see myself...it just feels like/ the year that passed by in Finland feels like/ a week afterwards/ and I just dropped back to reality/ and I have to graduate and after I'll see again...

VM: and would you say you are a changed person?

SM: ah/ yeah/ I'd say I am/

VM: in which way? like/ what happened with Stefaan?

SM: I'd say...in what way? in a good way/ ah/ I just...yeah/ I don't know how to describe it/ I think that's something that other people can probably describe better/

The participant declares that he believes he is a different and a better person, but he does not seem to be able to determine in what exact way he has changed, and simply says that other people can describe the change better than himself.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Federica, who believed the stay would impact her on a personal level because it would be her first opportunity to live by herself, now explains that she can live autonomously and manage her economy after her stay in Bucharest:

FH: yes/ this mobility opportunity influence my life because I know a new friend/ now I ah/ I feel them/ and I lived alone without my parents/ because in my city I live with my parents/ and this is important for me/ because I live only with myself/ and so I can try to/ to live with my money/ and without my parents/

Furthermore, the participant remarks she has been changed by the experience and now she is able to share more with foreign people:

FH: ah/ because now I can ah/ share more experience with abroad/ with person of other countries/ I live alone for six months/ and this is very important for me because myself now is better/ I can live in the future alone/

Sami, who expected changes at the level of social skills to happen, declares that his stay abroad has changed his life forever, and that from now on he will always feel he has a home in Romania:

SL: my life/ it changed it/ forever (laughs)/ so/ I I get to see different cultures and different different people and I will always feel like I have a different home in Romania from now on/

Moreover, the participant explains that he is a different person. His social skills also improved, as he expected and, besides, he got a different perspective and he has clear goals for his future. Sami declares he has changed to the better and he seems to be willing to work abroad at the end of his stay:

SL: yeah/ I think I'm a different person/ I'm more social/ I I see things differently/ I even have quite clear goals for my future/ I want to work abroad/ and I I think/ I changed into better/

Similarly, Jussi, who at the beginning of his stay also expected to become more social, brings to the fore the fact that he has gained perspective by learning from the behavior of other people, and, also that he has grown a little due to the experience:

JN: well/ first of all/ like I gained per/ perspective/ for/ other cultures/ not only Romanian/ because there were so many exchange students/ I learnt... a bit like a: more of the behavior of other people/ and a:/ I think I grew up/ a little bit/

The participant declares that he saw the change when he encountered Finnish people again and he realized he now was more social, open, and happier:

JN: mm/ a little bit/ yeah/ and kind of like/ in the end of the exchange/ I wasn't thinking that/ I I changed much/ but then when I came back here/ I started you know when the contrast is/ when I come with Finnish people here/ I felt like/ yeah/ something has changed/

VM: mhm/

JN: I'm not the same as I don't know/ as I was in/ in September/

VM: *and what would you say has changed?*

JN: *mm/ I don't know/ I think I fell more/ a bit more/ social/ open/ and/ happier/*

Jesús, who expected to get out of his comfort zone and experience uneasiness in Bucharest, explains the experience has enabled him to get new perspectives through contact with people from different countries, which has made him understand that his society has positive things he could not see before:

JO: *a ver/ yo creo que te... ayuda a ver dos cosas/ lo primero que no todo se ve desde el punto de vista en el que lo ve tu sociedad/ luego también te das cuenta de las cosas positivas que puede tener tu sociedad/ en el tema/ por ejemplo me di cuenta en el tema de... socialmente hablando/ yo pensaba que no/ pero resulta que somos uno de los países más respetuosos que hay con cosas como la homosexualidad o la inmigración/ y claro yo pensaba que no/ porque tú ves a una persona homofoba y dices "esto no puede ser"/ pero otros países parece ser que es lo más habitual/ y bueno también me ayudó a ver otras cosas/ aprender de otras culturas/ yo vivía con una persona turca/ entonces aprendía mucho/ era kurdo/ de hecho/ entonces me contaba la... el conflicto que tenían ellos/ y te ayudaba a ver las otras cosas/ él por ejemplo se quejaba de que no tenían ningún tipo de... de voz/ los atentados que por ejemplo mientras yo estuve allí hubo 80 muertos en Ankara/ y él decía "yo no me alegro de que maten a 120 personas en París pero no sé por qué no se preocupan de los 80 que han muerto nuestros"/ (let's see/ I think it...helps you see two things/ firstly that not everything is seen from the point of view your society sees it/ then you also realize the positive things your society could have/ concerning/ for instance I realized with regard to...socially speaking/ I didn't think that/ but it appears that we are one of the most respectful countries out there with things like homosexuality or immigration/ and clearly I thought we weren't/ because you see a homophobic person and you say "it can't be"/ but other countries it seem to be the most usual thing/ and then it also helped me to see other things/ learn from other cultures/ I lived with a Turkish person/ then I learnt a lot/ he was Kurdish/ in fact/ so he explained me the...the conflict they had/ and he helped you see the other things/ he for instance complained about them not having any type of...of voice/ the attacks that for example while I was there there were 80 deaths in Ankara/ and he said "I'm not happy they killed 120 people in Paris but I don't know why they don't care about the 80 ours that died"/)*

Incidentally, the close relationship with his Kurdish flatmate made Jesús open his mind to see things that happened outside his immediate environment.

Finally, Kalina asserts that her participation in the program has enabled her to get knowledge about different people, nations, habits and languages:

KN: *a:/ in the ways of meeting new people/ learning a:/ lot of new stuffs about different people/ different nations/ different habits/ different languages...*

All in all, it seems that the Erasmus experience has transformed the participant in a more tolerant and open minded person:

KN: *as a more tolerant and open people/ open-minded people/*

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Federico, who expected his Erasmus stay to be an opportunity to self-reflect and be with himself, declares that he has not yet seen any change and that he is looking for an Erasmus trainship in order to get further experiences:

FB: *no sé/ tal vez/ hasta ahora/ no pero/ quién puede decirlo? sí...por ejemplo estoy viendo ahora por el Erasmus for trainship para hacer otro Erasmus/ también con más práctica/ (I don't know/ maybe/ until now/ no but/ who can predict it? yeah...for example I'm looking now for the Erasmus for trainship to do another Erasmus/ also with more practice/)*

However, the participant explains that in fact people tell him he is a little bit different even though he cannot perceive it, but he finally admits that he sees some things in a different way and that he is now more independent:

FB: *mmm/ sobretodo me lo dicen que un poco soy diferente porque de mi mismo no me doy cuenta muy bien/ pero...(mmm/ mostly I'm told that I'm different cause about myself I can't see it that well/)*

VM: *vale/ y qué ha cambiado? qué crees que ha cambiado?(OK/ and what has changed? what would you say has changed?)*

FB: *mmm/ mmm/ no sé...e:h/ por ejemplo e:h/ la manera de ver algunas cosas/ y el hecho de ser un poco más independiente/ (mmm/ mmm/ I don't know...e:h/ for example e:h/ the way to see some things/ and the fact I'm a little bit more independent/)*

Similarly, Mildri remarks she has grown a lot as a person, she has become more independent, self-confident, and has realized everything is possible. Noteworthy is her example that she realized everything is possible even if it is in Catalan, and “Catalan” here almost becomes a synonym of impossibility:

ML: (...) like personally/ I think I grew a lot as a person/ I become more independent/ maybe more ah... sure of myself/ my possibilities/ and I think also I realized that everything is/ possible/ like if you... if you just want to do something/ it's possible/ even if it's in...Catalan/ (laughs)/

Mildri also highlights that even though she was very open before her stay abroad, now she feels even more eager to travel and live in other places:

ML: ah... actually like I said I/ I was very open to/ to the world as I said before I went also/ but I think maybe I became more eager to travel and eager to live other places/ and ah... see other cultures/ like I was also this before I went but I think even more/ like now I just want to travel and live for periods some place/ for a period another place/ and yeah/

Mădălina, who expected to grow through contact with people with a different mindset, explains that she was influenced by the experience she had been through and the people she had met:

MS: *la ha tenido seguramente porque bueno/ después de regresar de la movilidad por un tiempo/ tuve un poco el síndrome de post – Erasmus/ sabes? cuando extrañas a todo el mundo y eso/ pero lo que me extrañó en mi caso es que no fui tan tan no sé cómo no fui tan impactada como pensé que iba a estar/ sí/ que sí extraño mucho a mis compañeros/ pero pero creo que regresé en un momento en el que tuve que regresar/ como que todo pasó y fue como un cuento pero ya se terminó/ y lo que me preguntaste lo de influ/ influ/ bueno/ influenciar sí/ creo que se trata de las experiencias que he vivido y de las personas que he conocido/ porque ahora puedo decir que tengo amigos en todo el mundo/ y eso es una cosa no sé/ muy linda/ no sé cómo explicar/ bueno/ (it certainly had it because well/ after returning from the mobility for some time/ I had a little bit of the post-Erasmus syndrome/ you know/ when you miss everyone and so on/ but what surprised me in my case is that I wasn't so so I don't know like I wasn't as impacted as I thought I would be/ yeah/ I do miss my friends a lot/ but but I think I returned in a moment that I had to return/ like everything went by and it was like a tale but it's over/ and what you asked me about the influ/ influ/ well/ influencing yeah/ I think it's about the experiences I lived and the people I met/ cause now I can say I have friends all over the world/ and that's something I don't know/ very beautiful/ I don't know how to explain/ well/)*

Moreover, Mădălina affirms that she feels more mature, more tolerant, and more resilient:

MS: *me veo un poco más madura/ con más lecciones/ he aprendido algunas lecciones de vida/ me veo más tolerante/ más sociable/ más eh/ eh/ acepto ah con más facilidad algunos cambios que vienen en mi vida/ intento no ilusionarme tanto...creo que eso/ sí/ (I see myself as a little more mature/ with more lessons/ I learnt some life lessons/ I see myself more tolerant/ more sociable/ more eh/ eh/ I accept ah more easily some changes that come to my life/ I try not to make so many illusions...I think that/ yeah/)*

On a similar token, Petronela also remarks her Erasmus experience transformed her into a more tolerant person, and she is now more willing to travel and get to know new people and things:

PT: *ways...oh my god/ I think more travelling/ and I want to meet more people/ and I discover culture/ (laughs)/ so I'm more tolerant/ (laughs)/for this news/ I think/*

Furthermore, the participant also declares she is more creative, social, and less shy:

PT: *(laughs) I think yes/ yes/ I'm more/ how to say maybe more creative/ more social person as I said before/ and I think I'm not so shy maybe after this/*

Radka brings to the fore that she has made really good friends with whom she is still in touch:

RT: *yeah/ aahh yeah/ I found there really good friends / really good a: flatshares/ flatmates/ and we are still in touch/ a:/ so yeah I think this could be the personal way (laughs)/*

Finally, she also stresses out that she sees herself as being more tolerant than before:

RT: *mmm/ yeah/ mmm/ well not extremely but yeah/ I think I'm more tolerant / at least I would/ I would like to say that/ I'm not sure I am but I see myself like more tolerant/*

Synthesis

All in all, different themes seem to arise with concern to personally related expectations in study abroad. Certainly, this is closely related to the fact that the participants, by the time of the interview, were in their early twenties, which is a period of important personal changes. For some students, their Erasmus experience is also the first time they live outside their homes and far away from their family. In this sense, one of the personal expected assets of the sojourn is an increase in independence and autonomy. Similarly, some other participants report that they will improve at a personal level by overcoming the fear to move. In fact, fear is an element that appears in the participants' discourses at the beginning of their stay, but is hardly ever seen as a negative aspect. Actually, fear, in the words of the students, appears as something desirable, which takes the form of a challenge, a unique chance to experience uneasiness while one is still in a position of comfort and they expect it to prepare them for harder times when they will embark on "more serious types of mobility", such as work-related migration. Experiencing uneasiness and challenging themselves is also among the most expected personal outcomes of the program. Individual growth is also expected

to arise from the achievement of social skills by means of getting in contact with other mindsets and experiencing different cultures.

Finally, it is important to mention that personal and professional expectations sometimes become one and the same thing, and the participants seem to struggle when it comes to separating what outcomes they will get from the sojourn on a personal level and what others will be obtained in relation to professional skills. Certainly, this leads to the conclusion that an identity approach to study abroad is necessary because, in fact, one cannot consider what personal outcomes are expected from the experience without taking into account the final aim of these personal outcomes which might well be becoming the sort of individuals the employment market seems to be looking for. This is related to the idea that the new globalized economy looks for individuals who are able to cope with different cultures, languages, and realities.

Altogether, from the accounts the participants give with regard to the impact of the Erasmus experience at a personal level, it seems that the stay abroad does affect the self of the young sojourners. On the one hand, probably the most outstanding impact is an increased willingness to travel, and not just to travel, but also to live in foreign places for an extended period of time. This is connected to another important outcome which is the impossibility to be static, which comes together with clearer objectives and an enhanced need for change, both on a personal and on a professional level. Furthermore, it seems that the previously mentioned outcomes are deeply related to the amplification of the participants' horizons and a more open mindset, which is sometimes described as a changed perspective of the world, which appears to have been brought by sharing time and space, getting to know, and learning from the behavior of other people. This also seems to lead to heightened tolerance towards other cultures and people, and an important increment in social skills. Finally, equally linked to the above is a reported sense of knowing oneself better due to the unique chance to look inside oneself that the stay abroad offers. This seems to lead to a general feeling of being a more open, self-confident, happy, social, and also resilient person. All in all, students appear

to return from their sojourn as more mature, resilient and accompanied by the feeling that everything is possible.

6.2.4.3. Professional insights: the role of employability

Professional development is also another of the aspects on which the stay abroad may in principle be expected to have a deep impact. In the participants' discourses, academic improvements tend to appear closely related to professional expectations. Therefore, both aspects will be jointly approached in this subsection.

Becoming more "employable" seems to be one of the highest assets of the sojourn abroad, as reported by the participants at the beginning of their stay. In this respect, the young sojourners report on a myriad of aspects in which investing in their stay abroad is perceived to be beneficial and well-considered by the employment market.

6.2.4.3.1. Beginning of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Claudia and Jennifer explain that having participated in an Erasmus experience, as well as knowing foreign languages, looks good in any CV. Even though they are doubtful when it comes to voicing the professional aspects that may be affected by the stay abroad, the two students seem to be confident that the impact will be positive, and that even if it does not lead to better job opportunities, it might still give them the skills to look for opportunities, to which they refer with the term "desparpajo", which has no negative connotation and may be translated as "ease of manner":

JC: *probablemente/ siempre se dice que un Erasmus queda bien en un currículum/ y que ah sabes/ conocer idiomas y demás también/ entonces me imagino que sí/ la verdad/ no lo sé/ la verdad/ yo cro que sí/ que tendrá un efecto positivo/ que...* (probably/ it's always said that an Erasmus looks good in a CV/ and that ah you know/ you know languages and so on also/ so I imagine it helps/ actually/ I don't know/ actually/ I think it will/ it will have a positive effect/ that...)

CQ: *sí/ (yes/)*

JC: *pero no se/ profesionalmente...* (but I don't know/ professionally/)

VM: *creéis que tendréis más oportunidades laborales que vuestros compañeros que se han quedado en casa?* (do you think you'll have more employment opportunities that your classmates that stayed at home?)

CQ: *mm a lo mejor no más oportunidades laborales sí puede que tengamos más desparpajo a la hora de ir a buscarlas/* (mm maybe not more employment opportunities but we might have more ease of manner when it comes to look for them/)

Mila emphasizes the fact that she is sure the stay abroad will help her professionally because the Erasmus experience provides a good environment for making friends from which you can learn and also because she will be able to learn the language (probably referring to Finnish, in which she seems to be interested) better:

MJ: *yes of course/ because you make a lot of friends here/ you... I I will be able to learn the language better/ so/ and communicating with different people who also learn and want to succeed in life/ like inspires me in some way and I want to learn more and to do better so yeah/ I think that this will affect me/*

Similarly, Diego states that having participated in the Erasmus program helps very much. In fact, he envisions a job interview where people are asked if any of them has been an Erasmus student and answering affirmatively means that you are a person who knows how to manage in life. He continues saying that in fact having participated in the Erasmus program actually distinguishes you from someone who stayed at home because you have taken part in an experience where you have to socialize and manage yourself. Finally, he mentions the importance of speaking a foreign language:

DD: *sí/ sí/ sí/ muchísimo/ o sea creo que... hoy en día un Erasmus tiene/ ayuda muchísimo para el tema de... que me abre la mente a irse a un... no sé si en una entrevista de trabajo o lo que sea van a preguntar: "alguno se ha ido de Erasmus?" y si/ y si dices que/ o sea si tú te has ido de Erasmus/ eso quiere decir que tú has podido decir venga pues iré por mi cuenta a otro país y sé mejorar/ sabes lo que te digo? (yes/ yes/ yes/ a lot/ I mean I believe that... nowadays an Erasmus has/ it helps a lot with respect to... that it opens my mind to go to... I don't know if in a job interview or whatever they will ask "has anyone participated in an Erasmus program?" and if/ if you say that/ I mean if you've participated in an Erasmus/ it means that you were able to say well I'm going on my own to a foreign country and I know how to improve/ you know what I mean?)*

(...)

DD: *que no es/ no sería lo mismo una persona que se ha quedado en su casa/ a estudiar en su casa y... y ya está/ no ha hecho nada más/ esto es una experiencia muy sociable/ tienes que manejarte/ tienes que hacer las cosas tú solo/(that it's not/ it wouldn't be the same a person who stayed at home/ who studied home and... and that's it/ he (or she) didn't do anything else/ this is a very sociable experience/ you have to manage yourself/ do things by yourself/)*

VM: *muy bien/ muy bien/ vale/(very well/ very well/ right/)*

DD: *y hablar otro idioma/(and speaking another language/)*

Meyer gives a similar account when he states that companies look for people who have experience dealing with different cultures:

ML: *yeah/ for me I hope so/ because I will have a double degree after that and ah/ but anyways/ even just for one semester/ I think every company is looking for somebody who has ah experience in a foreign country/ or experience dealing with different cultures/ and for that way I'm pretty sure that/ mm/ such a program can only be an advantage for oneself/*

Furthermore, the participant remarks that even though he has not decided yet about what exactly he wants to reach in his life, he thinks his participation in the Erasmus program will be positive in itself:

ML: *I hope so/ ah/ I haven't... yeah/ of course I have thought about it but ah/ but I haven't decided yet what I want to be in my life and what exactly I want to reach/ I don't have that big picture of how this is going to influence me/ but yeah/ as I already said I think that in any kind of view that can only be an advantage/*

Stefaan also mentions employment benefits, but he approaches the issue of language learning, especially English, and the idea of creating a network of professional connections:

SM: *a: h/ yeah/ yeah of course/ because ah/ the better my English gets/ the more chance I got of a better job/ also internationally/ since it's a requirement to have good English... so yeah/*

VM: *OK/ and what about the training? like this ah...not just English but your/ the training you're receiving here/*

SM: *a:h/ I'm/ not/ sure in which way it will affect ah/ my career/ but I'm pretty sure ah/ I'm learning a lot there and/ yeah/ I don't know if it adds extra X for the subject I'm in/ but ah/ it does for the connection/*

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Sami and Jussi report not expecting big academic benefits because they are not in Bucharest for studying. This is actually quite a recurrent fact the participants refer to, especially in Bucharest, but also in the other two contexts, which may sound rather puzzling given the fact that the Erasmus experience is eventually academic and it is compulsory for them to enroll in a certain number of credits at the university.

Jussi states that when you look for a job, they will recognize you are a former Erasmus student and that will have a positive influence because it tells you are a courageous and international person. Sami adds that the sojourn abroad is a big thing for him because he is actually planning to work abroad:

SM: to be honest ah I...don't think it's gonna affect too much because we are not really here to study/ right? well/ we had to pick some courses/ of course some in/ interesting courses but it's not the main thing/ really/

VM: mhm/ OK/ and professionally?

JN: professionally I think when you are applying for jobs/ they will recognize you have been an exchange student/

VM: mhm/

JN: and I think that will have a positive influence because you had/ had the courage to go there/ they know you can ah ... be international/

SM: yeah/ yeah/ it's true/

VM: OK/ that's very good/

SM: and I'm actually planning to work abroad/ so this is a big thing for me/ yeah/

In a similar way, Jesús does not foresee an important impact with regard to the academic benefit of the Erasmus stay but he acknowledges that professionally the stay will bring him skills that companies look for, such as knowing how things are done in different places and being open to different perspectives:

JN: *yo profesionalmente no creo que vaya a aprender más física aquí que en España/ tampoco menos/ o sea/ no ...a día de hoy para lo que me queda...no voy a... si me dan el título hoy o me lo dan en tres-seis meses/ yo voy a tener el mismo conocimiento pero yo creo eso que... que profesionalmente sí que te ayuda el haber visto como se hacen las cosas en otros sitios y eso/ que... cuando tú vas a una empresa/ esa empresa sepa que eres una persona que está abierta a/ a diferentes... a diferentes formas de ver las cosas/ (me professionally I don't think I will learn more physics here than in Spain/ nor less/ I mean/ no... at this very moment for what remains to be done... I won't... if they give me the diploma today or in three-six months/ I will have the same knowledge but I think that... that professionally it helps that you've seen how things are done in other places and so/ that... when you go to a company/ that company will know you are a person open to/ to different... to different ways to see things/)*

The Lleida group

In Lleida, Mildri is among the few who emphasizes the importance of languages in the CV, as well as knowing how things work in different places as an asset for getting employed:

ML: I think so too/ actually/ especially about the languages when I apply for a job I think it's nice to have on your CV that you speak another language/ and... and also I think it's/ it's good to have seen how things work in other countries/ now I've seen it both in Norway and Poland/ and now I see how things work in Spain/ so you have some kind of idea about the differences/ and also the classes are really good here/ and...

The participant also highlights the fact that the lessons are also really good in Lleida, as a way of conveying the idea the teaching part of the experience is going to have an impact on her professional development.

6.2.4.3.2. End of the stay

The Oulu group

In the Oulu group, Claudia and Jennifer remark, similarly to the beginning, that the Erasmus experience opens many doors to someone who is looking for a job. Furthermore, it is also seen as training for life, a sort of comfortable version of migration, by which one is abroad with all the things it implies but the commitment is less than when having a job:

CQ: *porque se te abren muchas puertas después a la hora de buscar trabajo/ o ya no de trabajo sino de la vida misma/ que: es una enseñanza/ y y... desde mi punto de vista/ vale más ir de Erasmus y conocer otro país pudiendo regresar a casa sin tener ningún tipo de compromiso/ que el único compromiso es que no te den la beca/ pues bueno/ pues mira/ pues bueno/ te fuiste de Erasmus y a que vayas a buscar trabajo/ consigas trabajo/ y después veas que no te guste y...*(because many doors open after when you look for a job/ or not even for a job but for life itself/ that: it is a lesson/ and and...from my point of view/ it's easier to go on Erasmus and know another country being able to return home without any type of commitment/ that the only commitment is that they won't give you the scholarship/ so well/ so well/ you went on Erasmus and then if you go to look for a job/ get a job/ and then you see you don't like it and...)

JC: *no te guste/ y te tengas que quedar porque tienes un contrato/* (you don't like it/ and you must stay cause you have a contract/)

CQ: *y te tengas que quedar/ sí/ y entonces es mejor siempre probar de Erasmus que no que te tires al agua/ pues/*(and you have to stay/ yeah/ and so it's always better to try the Erasmus and not that you jump in the deep/ so/)

On a similar note, Diego affirms that the Erasmus stay, even if it looks insignificant, might make a real difference for him, especially because he is determined to go abroad:

DD: *sí/ sí/ o sea/ como he dicho antes/ primero a lo mejor me ayuda para/ pues...o sea imagínate que estoy de prácticas en una empresa y la empresa le sale un trabajo en Finlandia/ a quién va a llevar? a alguien que no sabe nada o al chico que ha estado en Finlandia? pues al chico que ha estado en Finlandia/*(yes/ yes/ as I said beofre/ firstly it may help me for/ so...I mean imagine I'm doing practices in a corporation and the corporation has an offer in Finland/ who will they take there?someone who doesn't know anything or the guy who's been in Finland? The guy who's been in Finland/)

VM: *vale/*(OK/)

DD: *que es una tontería/ no? un grano allí en la arena que/ que parece no pero bueno/ ya está eso allí/ y también a decidirme a irme y esas cosas/ sabes? que me dicen "te vas a Dubái"/ pues bueno/ me voy/ venga/* (which is a small thing/ right? a drop there in the ocean that/ it seems right but well/ it's already there/ and also to decide to go abroad and these things/ you know? If they tell me "you go to Dubai"/ then well/ I go/ let's go/)

Mila also believes that the fact that she has studied education in Finland, a country with a much praised education system, will be a big asset in her CV in the future:

MJ: *yes/ definitely/ especially that I studied education in Finland/ and even if it was only for four months/ I think that this is ah highly-praised in other countries/ like you know that there was/ there was so much noise about the Finnish educational system so I think that this will be a huge plus in my CV/*

VM: *mhm/*

MJ: *for the future/*

Despite not considering that his stay will have a deep impact in his professional life *strictu sensu*, Meyer asserts that the skills he got through the program enable him to manage people and things, which will help him professionally:

ML: yes/ ah/ because/ maybe/ maybe not like ahm... super professionally seen/ probably not/ ah but just like in the way you learn to handle with people and like or to to to do/ to deal with people/ ah/ or to handle things/ ahm/ I think you just get a lot life experience which is gonna help you/ let it be in marketing but also let it be in any other kind of job/

Finally, Stefaan mentions that although, according to him, education in Finland was not as good as he imagined, he learnt a lot on a professional level and improved his chances of getting a job later in his life:

SM: ah/ well/ I think the education in Finland was not as great as I hoped it to be/ but on the other hand I did learn a lot professionally and it's great XX/ I also improved my chance of a job later on/ personally it also made some pretty big changes because I already knew that the Netherlands is not the place where I want to stay for the rest of my life/ this confirmed it even more more/ and it also confirmed that I don't want to live in Finland/ it's way too cold... but yeah now I also have a Czech girlfriend/ ah for almost ten months already/ so/ we XX/

The participant also reports that on a personal level, some substantial changes have also occurred, which might also change his professional choices. The interrelationship between personal changes and professional perspectives is something that has not been studied here but which needs not be neglected. The Erasmus experience, in addition to being an academic activity, is also a great event in the life of a university student which shapes his personal experiences and also determines the choices he may eventually make in his or her professional life.

The Bucharest group

In the Bucharest group, Federica does not appear to be sure about the impact of the program on her professional life, but she is hopeful in this respect:

FH: *I don't know/ I hope that this/ this experience ah/ can ah/ could be a new opportunity for...for work/ for jobs/*

On a much more positive note, Sami highlights that even though he did not focus much on his studies in Bucharest, he feels the stay abroad enhanced his willingness to work abroad and stresses that he sees more possibilities around the world, and not just in Russia, as his initial intention was:

SM: *mhm/I think academically not so much/mhm well I didn't focus on my studies too much there but/but maybe in a way that I I learnt to take more responsibility of myself now/ in this way/ and can you can you repeat the question?*

VM: *yes/ from the professional point of view/*

SM: *professional/ professional I have have this dream for a long time that I'm gonna work abroad and this only made it stronger/ but maybe now I have/ more more possibilities around the world not just in let's say Russia/*

Jussi also seems to be quite confident about the positive contribution of the stay to his possibilities to get a job but he does not mention how:

JN: *mm...yeah/ (laughs)/ I think so/*

Similarly, Jesús points out that he believes certain corporations value the fact of knowing how to deal with people and having a global vision which enhances the ability to solve problems:

JO: *pues yo creo que sí porque si... o sea/ yo sé eso/ que en las empresas de este tipo se valora el hecho de saber tratar con más gente/ y el hecho de:/ o sea más allá de saber tratar/ de haber tratado/ por el hecho de que te genera una visión más global/ y no todos los problemas o situaciones se resuelven con lo que tú ya sabes/ sino con otras cosas que hayas visto y que piensas que no pueden ser útiles/ pero pueden serlo/ (well I believe it does because if...I mean/ I know that/ that in the corporations of this type it is valued the fact that you know how to deal with other people/ and the fact that/ I mean besides knowing how to deal/ of having dealt/ for the reason that it gives you a more global visión/and not all problems or situations are solved with what you already know/ but with other things you might have seen and you think they can't be useful/ but they can/)*

Finally, Kalina also believes the experience has had a positive impact on her future chances to get a job:

KN: *oh yes/ definitely/ (laughs)/*

VM: *in which ways/ Kalina?*

KN: *a:h/ because you speak with different people that are doing politics also/*

The Lleida group

In the Lleida group, Federico seems confident about the contribution of his Erasmus experience to the enhancement of his employability and mentions that just the fact of having learnt an additional language is already a good contribution:

FB: *sí/ bueno seguramente ya solo por/ por el hecho de haber aprendido una lengua más...* (yes/ well surely already just for/ for the fact of having learnt another language/)

On a different note, Mildri explains that the stay abroad confused her with respect to the decision to get a job:

ML: *maybe it confused me more because I/ I'm not sure after this Erasmus where I want to be/ because ah I'm sure that I'm open to be other places than the: standard places so maybe yes/ I'm more confused/ (laughs)/*

Mădălina remarks that her sojourn abroad will help her not only to get a job but also in general in life:

MS: *sí/ me va a ayudar en general en la vida/ lo que creo que es también muy importante/ pero también creo que esta experiencia como ha despertado un poco mi espíritu periodista/ porque como periodista tienes que ser siempre muy/ cómo se dice? curioso/ (yes/ it will help me in general in life/ I think it's also very important/ but I also think this experience somehow awakened a little my journalist spirit/ cause as a journalist you always have to be/ how do you say? curious/)*

The participant stresses out that her stay in Lleida has transformed her into a more curious person which is an important asset for her future job as a journalist.

Likewise, Petronela points out the fact that gaining language skills is necessary in order to think about the possibility to work abroad:

PT: *yes/ of course/ because if I want to work abroad I have to have skills/ languages skills/*

Finally, Radka brings out a different point of view. She remarks that the only impact on her employability skills could be the fact that she got a new perspective of a different education system, but she appears to be rather skeptical with regard to any improvement in her potential employability:

RT: mmmm/ not really/ maybe just a little but maybe... maybe... well another/ another point of view of education system so: yeah/ I/ I think now I have more knowledges about that/ but no...

Synthesis

From the accounts that the participants give at the end of their stay abroad concerning the impact of the experience on their professional life, it can be concluded that the students perceive almost unanimously that their participation in the program has enabled them to become more employable. However, differences arise when it comes to the perceived reasons behind the outcomes. In the first place, it seems that in fact, it is the global vision and the ability to deal with different people and new situations gained through the program (a type of capital that is in its essence, symbolic) that is perceived to bring material gains in the future, either when they are looking for a job or when they are already working. The second reason is having learnt an additional language, most of the times English but also Spanish in the case of the students in Lleida. Managing foreign languages is perceived both as a skill that makes you more employable for corporations and as a determinant element in the CV when one is looking for jobs, because it triggers willingness to go abroad, and therefore, it expands the target market. Thirdly, it seems that the possibilities to get a job are also enhanced by the fact that the experience provides a great environment for making connections and establishing friendships with people alike from different places. However, and despite the fact that the participants perceive they are more employable due to their participation in the Erasmus program, it is rather puzzling to see that it is rarely the formal education received that is mentioned as a catalyst for this outcome. In fact, in some cases the participants mention that they do not feel they have improved much on an academic level. This is particularly obvious in the case of

students in Bucharest, and a possible reason for it might be that their initial motivation for studying during their stay abroad may have been rather low. One participant in Lleida does mention the finality of teaching though.

Students in Bucharest do not seem to have chosen their destination with an academic goal in mind, but rather with a desire to live in that particular environment. Therefore, their sojourn is positively valued when it brings them a new perspective and life-experiences that help them become different from what they were like at the beginning of their stay abroad. This is also visible in the other two contexts. A rather general trend that may be observed is the impact of the intercultural experience obtained from living in a different environment, and a non-negligible aspect here is the perception that future employers may highly value such personally challenging intercultural experience.

All in all, it seems that it is the students in Oulu, and especially at the beginning of their stay, the ones who believe that their stay abroad will positively impact on their future employment possibilities. There is an important connection, therefore, between their expectations and their choice of context.

Chapter 7. Discussion of the research findings

Chapter 7 includes the synthesis and discussion of the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The chapter is structured around the same broad sections that appear in both the quantitative and the qualitative results chapters, which are related to the two main topics of this thesis: 1) identity, sense of belonging, capacity to adapt to other cultures, and representations of Europe and European identity, with a special focus on the role played by languages in the process of identification and 2) investment and expectations, with the focus on the role language attitudes and language learning plays in study abroad. Furthermore, the connection between the stay abroad, language learning, and the concept of employability will also be explored with the aim to understand how language competences are expected to be transformed into human capital by the students and what purposes this capital is expected to serve.

7.1. Identity, sense of belonging, and capacity to adapt to other cultures

To begin with, it is important to recall the fact that the vast majority of participants in this study declare belonging to the low-middle or high-middle class, and mostly come from families where at least one of the parents attained a university degree. This is not the case for the majority of the population, which shows that the Erasmus student population has an upper and middle class bias. Therefore, this seems to be a first contradiction between the results of the present study and one of the key objectives of the Erasmus program, which is “promoting the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants” (European Commission, 2017c: 75).

In fact, the characteristics of the program appear to limit the participation to a sector of the population who can afford the expenses of living in a foreign country for one or two semesters, since

more often than not the funding the students receive is far less than the amount needed for living decently abroad. In some cases, participants allegedly report they did not receive any money for their stay until the last weeks of the sojourn, which means they had to face all the expenses of their stay abroad before their scholarship arrived. This is a clear filter that prevents lower classes from participating in the Erasmus program.

These results parallel Heger's (2013) hypothesis claiming that:

existing structural weaknesses mean that the current ERASMUS programme is not a programme for everyone. The two reasons identified in this article are the intra- and international differences regarding selection criteria, and the funding of mobility. These inequalities reduce the likelihood of participation for certain groups of students, either those studying a "non-priority subject" at the "wrong" university, or those coming from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds" (p.74).

Furthermore, these results sustain the hypothesis of Salajan & Chiper (2012), who after conducting a study with former Romanian Erasmus students affirm that, in spite of the fact that they are not able to infer the socio-economic status of their respondents, "some comments do point to the very same notion that students from a more affluent background tend to be favored in mobility studies, even though they may not be the best qualified academically" (p. 419). The present study, therefore, contributes to sustain this hypothesis by showing that even in a European country where the cost of life is not as expensive as in the rest of the EU such as Romania, the participants in the Erasmus program mostly claim to come from the middle class in their countries.

If we bring to the fore another key objective of the Erasmus+ program (European Commission, 2017c: 75) which is "encouraging the development of well-performing education and training systems and youth policies which can provide people with the skills required by the labor market and the economy, while allowing them to play an active role in society and achieve personal fulfillment", one might conclude that an Erasmus stay can be contemplated as a way to respond to the precariousness of employment and new career requirements which demand that "young people invent innovative strategies in order to succeed" and "one of the strategies becomes an intensive

investment in heterogeneous forms of learning, for example through study abroad” (Krzkalowska, 2013: 79). Additionally, the results of a study with Erasmus students conducted by Jacobone & Moro (2014) point to the fact that mobility programs foster European identity, confers a European dimension to its users, and contributes to forming professionals “more capable of responding to the increasing challenges of internationalization and globalization” (p. 326), leading to a benefit for the society in general. In this respect, I would rather disagree with the benefits for the whole society of the participation in an Erasmus stay abroad of a rather selected group of students.

In fact, the results of the present study imply that those students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds who cannot afford to cover the expenses of a part of their stay will have to compete on the job market with their colleagues who, in principle had the chance to become more employable through the program in one way or another. It is therefore, one way of handicapping the handicapped, as mentioned by Mehan *et al.* (1986) in their study on inequality in the education selection process.

As a matter of fact, the results of a study with former Erasmus students and employers (Engle, 2010) point out that “(t)he self assessment of former Erasmus students is supported by the feedback of the surveyed employers, who similarly rate the competences of mobile graduates as being superior as compared to those of non-mobile graduates in all asked aspects” (p. 10).

On this note, Beelen *et al.* (2016) make the point that “(t)he vast majority of students do not take part in mobility experiences so internationalization of the curriculum at home is required, in order that they may achieve similar learning outcomes as their mobile counter-parts” (p. 167). This could be regarded as a solution to what I consider a way to increase inequality through a program that has promoting equity at its cornerstone.

With regard to the sense of belonging of the participants, the quantitative results point out to a possible impact of the Erasmus stay in this respect. What these results indicate is a significantly

higher perception among students that their identity is more complex and contradictory at the end of the stay abroad, where distinctions between places, languages, and cultures are more blurred. Therefore, it can be stated that the Erasmus experience triggers a more pluralistic and hybrid identity, in the same way as suggested by Duff (2015), who defines mobility as a complex phenomenon that can lead to different outcomes, which might include the retention of primary languages or the expansion of linguistic repertoires with new languages or new varieties of already-known languages, language shift to new languages, and ‘cosmopolitan, multifaceted, and multilingual or syncretic’, or more assimilated identities within society.

In this respect, the qualitative results are quite illuminating. From the participants’ accounts on their sense of belonging at the end of the stay abroad, overall, an increased willingness and ease to become mobile in the future is expressed in the three groups. Furthermore, while at the beginning the students appear to be able to express with considerable clarity the places they belong to and what elements keep them rooted in these places, at the end of the stay, many of them seem to have the conviction that they can feel at home in more than one place. Some participants report on a loss of a sense of home and some others bring to the fore a reduced concern about their sense of belonging. These results diverge from the ones of Osler’s (1998) study with student teachers abroad suggesting the sojourn led students to a clear sense of self-identity which is a previous step for accepting others, even though for some students the experience abroad led to a critical examination of their national identities while for some others it meant an enhanced sense of national identity.

All in all, what these results signal is that participating in an Erasmus stay, independently of the context, triggers a destabilization and hybridization of identity. Therefore, it can be stated that spending at least one semester studying in a foreign university through the Erasmus program provides an environment where individuals are confronted with cultural, symbolic, and material difference which gives them awareness about the way things work in different places, and which

finally might blur or change the idea of the participants with regard to their sense of belonging and their position in the world.

These results coincide with Block's (2014) theory on second language identities which claims that crossing geographical and cultural borders often triggers certain ambivalence and hybridization of the identity of individuals. However, Block does not seem to be convinced about the fact that study abroad might bring such hybridization. In this respect, the present study shows that study abroad for as short as one semester does trigger more ambivalent and hybrid identities, in line with Benson *et al.* (2013) who assert that study abroad is an experience that challenges imagined identities for it requires students to negotiate them under new cultural circumstances.

Similarly, these results correlate to the ones in Pellegrino Aveni (2005) who states that study abroad gives rise to a 'deprivation and/or alteration' of the self because of the use of a second language, and therefore "(t)he learner's self becomes trapped behind the communication barrier that results, and only an altered picture of the self, one filtered through this new, incomplete language, is projected by the learner" (p. 14).

However, it seems that while confrontation with difference for a prolonged period could lead to the feeling that differences are not as big as expected, and might therefore trigger increased tolerance, openness, and an ultimate expansion of the horizons with respect to the places the participants could belong to, it could also prompt in certain cases an increased sense of belonging to the national state and higher pride for one's origins. The possibility for this result has also been revealed by Billig (1995), Smith (2004), and Llurda *et al.* (2016).

Moreover, according to Block (2014), research in this domain appears to point to an enhancement of national identity during the SA experience: "while study abroad contexts seem to hold great potential for the emergence of intercultural competence and even TL-mediated subject positions, they often become the site of intense comparisons of the home culture with the host culture

that often lead individuals to a heightened and reinforced sense of national identity” (p. 8). Finally, these results are comparable to the ones in Jackson’s (2008) study, where Niki, a Chinese born female living in Hong Kong who participated in a short-term SA experience, highlights the need to value some elements of the Chinese culture at the end of the sojourn. This is also the case of the student teachers studying abroad in Osler’s investigation (1998) in which it appears that the stay abroad allows the participants to observe another culture, thus encouraging some of them to adopt a critical stance towards their own values and ways of thought, but in some cases it has the opposite effect, giving the individuals a new feeling of pride in their national identity.

In spite of all of the above, the general tendency in the present study seems to be a destabilization of what were initially relatively clear identities, and a subsequent acquisition of a more open identity which integrates the local one, but which looks beyond the horizons of it. This is expressed by the participants through the verbalization of having lost the fear to be mobile, living autonomously, and feeling they can easily be accepted in many places.

These results coincide with those in Klose’s (2013) study on the Erasmus program, who concludes that despite participation in a mobility program does not entail a higher income, "(f)ormerly mobile students tend to stay mobile or oriented on the international level in their future careers" (p. 46).

All in all, the study abroad experience brings to mind a rite of passage, where fears are overcome through exposure and through a time of introspection, which leads to an understanding of who one wants to be, what places one wants to inhabit, and with what community one would like to feel identified. It is, in fact, a hybridization of one’s sense of belonging and a subsequent openness to and adoption of multiple identities, which does not necessarily imply leaving aside national or more local affiliations.

Once more, these results show that in fact, study abroad is a critical experience that leads to the situation in which in Block's (2002: 4; cited in Block 2014) words: "there is, in a sense, an element of before and after critical experiences as the individual's sociohistorical, cultural, and linguistic environment, once well defined and delimited, becomes relatively ill defined and open-ended". Similarly, the results of the present study connect well to the ones obtained by Van Mol (2013: 172) with Erasmus students:

Through interaction processes, students draw new group boundaries based on perceived similarity and difference. Since the context they live in abroad is international, they encounter people from different countries, and all increase their supranational feelings. Categorisation and self-identification play a crucial role in this process so that this supranational identification is moulded by the classifications of who others are, and the classification of the self by others. It is thus in this dialectical process between self and other that supranational identification is strengthened.

This has considerable implications regarding the future behavior of the participants. It could be, in fact, a form of symbolic capital which students envision and hope to transform into material capital. Actually, it is possible that the reported sense of belonging of the participants to developed countries is related to their desire to be accepted as members of a transnational community formed by university educated, multilingual westerners. This is correlated to Garrido (2018:117) who claims that "(y)ou retell your past experiences to meet the person-types and the moral values that are legitimate among established members in order to become one" as well as to Esteban-Guitart (2008), who affirms that we construct our personal identities through a narrative story which portrays our life project, including the people we want to be with, the job we want to do, and the place where we want to live. Furthermore, a connection could be made between these results and those obtained by Pavlenko & Norton (2007), who affirm learning or resisting learning English is shaped by present and future possible memberships to certain imagined communities.

In relation to their capacity to adapt to other cultures, similar profiles can be observed among the students in the three contexts at the beginning of the sojourn, where they assign generally high scores to their intercultural competence. At the end of the Erasmus period, it seems that overall the

stay has triggered a significantly higher sense of being able to deal with cultural difference and an increase in the multiplicity of viewpoints of the students. These results partially coincide with the ones in the study by Cots *et al.* (2016) with Catalan Erasmus students. On the one hand, the study by Cots *et al.* (ibid.) shows that “the students’ experience of academic mobility only has a clear-cut impact on their (intercultural) knowledge” (p. 317), on the same line with what the participants in the present study report. However, the respondents of the present study also claim to be able to deal better with cultural difference after the stay abroad, which would be a component of behavior towards cultural difference that is reported not to be enhanced by the students in Cots *et al.*’s (2016) project.

However, Bucharest seems to provide an environment that enables for expanding one’s points of view to a significantly further extent than Oulu. Interestingly, the Bucharest group also scores slightly higher than the other two groups with regard to their attitudes concerning cultural difference.

In fact, straight from the beginning, those participants who chose Bucharest as a destination may have been more open towards cultural differences. The Bucharest group is also the one that shows higher gains in this respect, which are significantly higher than the ones of the Oulu group in certain cases. However, an increase in the awareness of difference as a result of the Erasmus stay can be observed in the three groups. Therefore, it can be stated that an Erasmus study abroad period might raise the cultural awareness of the students, no matter the place they choose as a destination. This appears to be the consequence of becoming transnational; transnationalism is defined by Duff (2015) as “the crossing of cultural, ideological, linguistic, and geopolitical borders and boundaries of all types but especially those of nation states” (p. 57). It seems that participating in an Erasmus stay of one or two semesters in Finland, Romania, or Catalonia (and therefore one may reasonably claim that anywhere in Europe) could enhance a transnational identity among the participants. A particularly interesting finding is the evidence that spending one or two semesters studying at a

university in Bucharest increases the appreciation and willingness to live among cultural differences to a higher extent than spending an Erasmus stay in Oulu, which shows that the place of destination does have some impact on the outcomes of the stay abroad.

Similarly, Ong (2003) sustains that transnational mobility has given place to a new way to construct identity, one that cuts across political borders, an imagined identity reported by many of the participants in this study. On the same note, Duff (2015) suggests the connection between transnationalism, multilingualism, and identity is a very clear one, since the latter is deeply affected by the way people see themselves, the way they relate to the social world, the way they are positioned by others, and their sense of belonging.

On a similar token, straight from the beginning, those students who chose Bucharest as a destination relate to the category of immigrant with respect to the context of their stay to a lower extent than those who chose Oulu. Two explanations could be given to this. On the one hand, Finland is a country that receives immigrants while Romania mostly sends migrants abroad. The second explanation could be that those students who chose Bucharest as a destination were inclined to feeling at home in the world to a higher extent than those who chose Oulu. This could indicate that students who choose an Eastern European country for their Erasmus stay may have more facility to feel at home in foreign places than those who choose a Northern European country.

However, at the end of the stay abroad, this difference has disappeared, which might point out to a homogenization among the three groups in this respect as an effect of the stay abroad. Furthermore, there is an overall tendency among the three groups to feel to a significantly lower extent as a stranger and to a significantly higher extent as a local at the end of their sojourn. A connection could be made, therefore, between the destabilization of the students' identities and the subsequent openness and adoption of multiple identities at the end of the sojourn. This is connected to Norton's (2016: 476) statement claiming that "(p)articularly important with regard to access to

social networks and target language speakers is the intriguing way in which learners can reframe their relationship with others in order to claim more powerful identities from which to speak.”

This is also related to the perspective of being mobile or not in the future. In this respect, the idea of living in any European country surpasses the idea of living anywhere else both at the beginning and at the end of the stay and this perception does not seem to be significantly affected by the Erasmus experience. In fact, the expectancy to live in any European country is even higher than the one of living in one’s own country both at the onset and at the offset of the sojourn.

At the onset of the sojourn, significant differences have been found with respect to the idea of living in any Western country, with the Oulu group scoring significantly lower than the Bucharest group and almost significantly lower than the Lleida group. This indicates that the group who had the lowest predisposition towards living in any Western country straight from the beginning was more inclined to choose Finland as a destination. These results suggest that students with certain orientations might choose a particular context for their stay abroad. Therefore, participants who chose Finland as a destination are less inclined to living in any Western country in the future than those who chose Bucharest, reinstating the higher willingness to feel at ease in any place of the world of the Bucharest group, and reinforcing the hypothesis that students who choose Romania as a destination might be already more open towards living in any place of the world than those who choose Finland.

At the offset, however, the differences between the students in Oulu and those in Lleida, and between the ones in Lleida and those in Bucharest increase to a significantly higher extent. First of all, when it comes to the idea of living in their own countries, those students who had Oulu as a destination seem to foresee this possibility to a significantly higher extent than those in Bucharest and Lleida. Secondly, the Oulu group envision themselves living in any occidental country to a significantly lower extent than those who had Lleida and Bucharest as a destination. Finally, the

Oulu group also assigns significantly lower scores to the idea of living in any country of the world in the future when compared to the Lleida group.

These results signal that the possibility to live in any occidental country is increased to a higher extent if Bucharest or Lleida are chosen as a destination for an Erasmus stay, while the possibility to live in any country of the world at the end of the stay abroad is foreseen to a lower extent if the Erasmus stay was spent in Oulu than if it was spent in Lleida. Finally, those students who spent their sojourn in Oulu seem to anticipate to a higher extent living in their own countries at the end of the stay abroad than those who went to Bucharest or Lleida.

These results connect well with Norton's (2013:45) theory that defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" and suggest that in fact, the stay abroad changes the way individuals understand their relationship to the world, how they structure this relationship across time and space, and the possibilities they understand for the future, while the context chosen for the stay does play a role.

Once more, the qualitative results are clarifying in this respect. It appears that the context and its linguistic landscape are important when it comes to deciding what kind of Erasmus experience one would like to have, what one is willing to invest in and what the expected benefits associated with each place are. A look at the differences, which at times were rather monumental clashes between expectations and outcomes with regard to the context of the stay, could partially explain the above mentioned results. On the one hand, in the Oulu group, expectations are substantially high. Finland is portrayed as a place with an exquisite education, good social welfare, and high level of English, to the extent that it sometimes becomes an English-speaking country in the discourses of the participants, which means that the presence of Finnish is deeply ignored. The seduction of Finland is high enough to undermine the value of the home country of some participants

at the beginning of their stay abroad. And it is also Finland that brings the most colossal disappointment at the end of the stay for some participants. Darkness, high prices, lack of social life, lack of empathy and coldness of the Finnish people, and adverse working conditions are brought to the fore.

Despite the fact that different degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are reported by the participants, it seems that in general, the Oulu group is the one that signals a higher degree of disappointment at the end of the stay. These results contradict those in Mutlu's (2011) content analysis based on 502 Erasmus students' experiences published on the website www.20Erasmus.eu, where participants seldom mention the problems they might have encountered during their stay abroad, a fact which suggests that when the students have to make their experiences public on the internet, they might let aside the negative part of them, or at least more than if the data were collected through interviews and questionnaires.

On this note, I would say that the fact that some of the participants felt alienated in the Oulu society, especially if they had to relate to local people during their practicum, is related to what Norton (2013) defines as relations of power between language learners and the local community and it connects well to the marginalization one of the participants (Eva) in Norton's (2013) study goes through at her workplace. However, Eva finds a way to have access to the social network at her workplace and gains her right to speak, while this is seldom the case of certain participants in Oulu, who prefer to keep the position of an outsider while praising their nation states over Finland.

These results are also connected to the ones by Pellegrino Aveni (2005), who claims that, when an individual uses a given language, he or she needs to make sure that their self is "enhanced, or at least, protected" (p. 16). However, second languages and different cultures lessen the amount of control learners have on self-presentation. Thus, a conflict is created between the wish to communicate in the L2 and the need to protect one's self. According to the author, this conflict can

be resolved in different ways. One of them is encountering situations in which the learners perceive that their intellectual and linguistic abilities are given legitimacy. Naturally, autonomy and control are achieved through experiencing situations in which the worth of the SL speaker is validated and their efforts are appreciated by the interlocutors or, conversely, by experimenting with frightening situations that seem to menace the self to a certain extent and finally show to be better than expected.

However, an important role is played by the attitudes and beliefs that the learner holds with regard to him or herself and others, the foreign language, and the foreign culture as well as their own language and the language learning process. It seems that in the case of some students in Oulu, the almost total refusal to learn Finnish could have brought the feeling of alienation and subsequent adversity towards the local language and culture. In fact, a situation is reported where two participants feel they are mocked by some colleagues since they need them to translate for them from Finnish and they perceive the translation is not loyal to the reality. Had they been more invested in Finnish, this situation could have been reversed. This might have created a bond between them and the locals in Oulu, which is described by Pellegrino Aveni (2005) in the concept of ‘familiarity’, which seems to be at “the basis of trust between individuals, helping students to relax, lower inhibitions, and take risks in the language to test new linguistic features in their speaking” (p. 99).

The reversed trend is found in the Bucharest group. The Romanian capital is described at the beginning as an affordable city with possibilities for learning English, which provides a good place to challenge oneself and get ready for unexpected surprises in the future. Bucharest is exotic enough to provide some culture shock. And it also seems to be able to go beyond the participants’ expectations. The friendliness and kindness of Romanians and the surprise of a better than expected experience determine the students to characterize their stay in Bucharest as quite positive.

Finally, Lleida (Spain in the discourses of the students) is imagined as a place that would enable the participants to learn Spanish, and in some cases, as a place that is open to English-

speaking students. Lleida's imagined linguistic landscape is adorned with fascination and expectancy for the Spanish language. The stay in Lleida seems to prove more or less as expected, with the exception of the significant presence of Catalan at the university and what is described as the refusal by some instructors to speak any other language but Catalan, together with the reduced use of English at the university and the limited contact with local people. These results diverge from those of Jacobone & Moro's (2014) study with Erasmus students affirming that "(w)hen engaging in academic study in a foreign culture, the individual is fully immersed within that society and, therefore, encouraged to function as other citizens" (p. 326). Some participants declare they did not have many expectations at the beginning, which in some cases was due to the conscious desire not to be disappointed.

Hence, it can be stated that high expectations in study abroad are correlated to rather disappointing results, while low expectations lead to surprising satisfaction, and an apparent lack of expectations might also be related to a positive outcome. These results confirm the suspicion by Jackson (2008) who suggests that unrealistic expectations might diminish the outcomes of the stay abroad, whereas realistic ones contribute to the enhancement of the outcomes. Jackson alludes to the fact that the expectations of four international students from Hong Kong in the UK could have contributed to their reactions regarding the culture shock they had to undergo, to which they respond in different ways. Furthermore, their decision to resist or accept the target language and culture might have had an impact on the actual outcomes of the experience.

7.1.1. Representations of Europe and European identity

Concerning the participants' sense of belonging to Europe, this does not seem to be especially high. In fact, the students across the three contexts report feeling more attached to their

towns, cities, provinces, countries, and the world than to Europe. Sense of belonging to Europe is the lowest both at the beginning and at the end of the stay, which contrasts with the participants' high perspective to live in Europe in the future. On this note, Osler (1998) suggests that some of the student teachers abroad in his study related their European citizenship to the ability to move freely around Europe, even though for some participants being European did not provoke any emotional response comparable to the response elicited by their national identities. These findings are not very encouraging when taking into account that the Erasmus+ program is "one of the cornerstones of the European project and a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity" (European Commission, 2017c: 11).

Furthermore, these results contrast with the ones of the 2017 Eurobarometer, whose results show that EU citizens increasingly identify with Europe with regard to both their personal attachment and their sense of citizenship. According to the European Commission (2017) the number of individuals who feel attached to the EU and Europe is growing, which might mean that the European identity is both factual and emerging. However, the participants in the present study declare not feeling significantly more attached to Europe at the end of their stay, and report feeling more connected to their cities and countries.

Moreover, my own results coincide with those of Van Mol (2018: 456) where "the analysis clearly shows no relationship between participation in student exchanges and changes in identification with Europe, as a European and as a European citizen for our sample". Similarly, Llurda *et al.* (2016) in a study with Catalan Erasmus students in the UK, Italy, and Denmark found

that some of the students “became more skeptical about the European project” (p. 341) after their stay abroad and some others reported a strong sense of belonging to their home area and to their receiving nation in some instances, while none of them reported greater identification with Europe as a whole. This is in line with Smith’s (1992) argument that, in the era of capitalism, people feel attached to their national identities besides other possible identifications. However, Smith (ibid.) also makes the point that in spite of the power of the nation, individuals seem to possess multiple identities which “may reinforce national identities or cross-cut them” (p. 59). According to the author, it is usual that people live with a multiplicity of allegiances, shifting among them depending on the situation, but at some points identity conflicts might arise. In order to understand the reason behind these frictions, Smith (1992) introduces the notions of ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ identifications. It appears that for many individuals their identity depends on the context, it is ‘situational’, and therefore, people identify themselves and are identified in various ways according to the situation.

In this respect, Osler’s (1998) study with student teachers abroad shows that many participants identified themselves as European citizens, even though some of them highlighted the fact that such identification depends on the situation. On the other hand, collective identities are “pervasive and persistent (...), less subject to rapid changes and tend to be more intense and durable, even when quite large numbers of individuals no longer feel their power” (Smith, 1992: 59), a fact that seems to characterize national identities in our times.

This is also an argument to believe that Bakke's (1998) hypothesis stating that the multiplicity of our identities and their difference in strength, durability, and complexity is an argument for believing a European identity could "provide an extra identity layer rather than replace national our local identities" (p.4), is far from being a reality 20 years after.

A possible hypothesis to the fact that students foresee themselves moving and living around Europe but do not feel a strong identification with Europe could be that there might exist certain divergence between the participants' sense of belonging and the possibilities of the social structures through which they navigate, or those they foresee that they might be able to navigate in the future, where moving around Europe looks quite feasible and does not necessarily entail feeling identified with it.

Another explanation could rely on the fact that the development of the EU had brought to the fore a redefinition of the political status of 'foreigner', since the EU citizenship situates people somewhere between nationals and foreigners, with the right to live freely in other member states, as reported by Murphy-Lejeune (2004). The author wonders about the social, cultural, and symbolic status of Europeans who reside in another member state for a limited period of time, as well as about the ambiguous condition between strangers and a new, yet to define, way of being in Europe that European mobile students have.

The fact that there are no significant differences after the stay abroad in this respect suggests that participating in an Erasmus stay does not increase the feeling of belonging to Europe. If we recall the discourse of the European Commission (European Commission, 2017c) which declares that one of the key features of the Erasmus program is "promoting common European values, foster social integration, enhance intercultural understanding and a sense of belonging to a community, and preventing violent radicalization" (p.75), the impact of the stay on sense of belonging to Europe at

the end of the Erasmus experience is very weak. These results contrast with Risse's (2003) work which seems to indicate a progress in people's sense of belonging to Europe, "while exclusive loyalties to the nation-state are in decline" (p. 26).

Furthermore, in relation to identification with different groups of people according to the languages they speak, the participants feel identified firstly with those individuals who speak the same first language, and secondly with people who speak English. These results signal that for the Erasmus students in the three contexts, being able to speak English was more important for identifying with a group of people than being European, and the Erasmus stay has no effect in this respect.

Results are similar when it comes to having as neighbors people from the same country, Europe, or the whole world. The students display a very similar willingness to live side by side with people belonging to any of the three groups and their perception is not affected by the sojourn. These results could indicate, on one side, that young university students from European background who decide to enroll in a stay abroad are already quite open towards living side by side with different groups of people.

Furthermore, in relation to the news and affairs students follow, after the Erasmus experience, an increased interest for local news and affairs is shown, contrary to what might have been expected, which would entail a higher interest in European news and affairs. If we take into account that newspapers and broadcasting have been mentioned as possible constituting elements for the formation of a European identity (e.g. Bakke, 1998), these results are, again, pointing to a lack of involvement in the idea of a collective European identity.

Moreover, in relation to voting, the participants seem to be more likely to vote in national elections than in any other type of election, both at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad.

Regional and local elections follow the national ones, and European elections are the ones in which the students seem to be the least likely to vote.

On the same token, pride for being European is significantly lower at the end of the stay, an overall tendency among the three groups. Again, the results of this study, which coincide with the previous ones, are not very encouraging when it comes to the idea of fostering European identity through the Erasmus program. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting these results since the data were collected at a time when the EU was starting to face the refugees' crisis which triggered negative reactions from many European citizens and this could have negatively impacted on the students' attitudes. At the same time, the difficult circumstances Europe was going through at that time contributed to the general unsatisfactory idea students have about Europe. Therefore, the results could signal that despite investing in the Erasmus program, young individuals studying abroad through the program will not feel more identified with Europe at the end of their stay if the EU strategy for dealing with social and humanitarian problems does not change.

Similarly, pride for Europe with regard to different aspects show overall lower scores at the end of the stay abroad. A significantly lower sense of pride for European history and the contribution of Europe to the formation of modern civilization, European human rights, European shared heritage, and even European sports competitions are deployed at the end of the stay. In general, the participants show less pride for Europe in all the aspects related to it with the only exception of the political influence of Europe in the world and the euro. The euro is, in fact, most of the times, the first element the students mention in their interviews when they report possible unifying elements in the EU. On this note, Smith (1992) makes the point that the project of European unity requires some characteristics that would define it, besides the mere sum of the populations that constitute it. Again, these results do not seem to be too promising when it comes to promoting European identity through the Erasmus program.

The qualitative results show a similar pattern. Firstly, an overall difficulty to express what elements could conform European identity suggests a scarcity of acquaintance of the students with Europe and an infrequent identification with it, in line with some of the participants in Osler's (1998) study with student teachers abroad, where almost a quarter of the participants were unable to identify any shared European value or they declared there was none. This could be interpreted as an indicator of the fact that in the common imaginary of the students, the conforming elements that constitute European identity do not exist, which leads to the impossibility to identify with Europe, since it is not feasible to identify with something you struggle to give meaning to.

Interestingly, practical issues such as residence in Europe, freedom of movement, and the common currency are among the elements the participants are able to name. Certainly, remarking these unifying elements indicates a certain sense of identification with Europe in the students' minds. However, it is hard for the euro to become a symbol of identification since it seems to me it is a rather distant element from the emotional experiences and ties the students describe as circumscribing their sense of belonging.

Furthermore, many participants report on differences rather than similarities between European countries, both at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn. This could signal that identification with Europe does not seem to have a fertile terrain to grow. On the other hand, the fact that some students find elements that are common to all Western or developed countries and that they bring to the fore common elements such as the common good education of Europeans might signal the fact that when the students imagine Europeans, what they have in mind is middle-class, university-educated students from different European (and not just European) countries. In this sense, middle-class, well educated, and Western could be more powerful unifying elements in the common imaginary of Erasmus students than an alleged European identity. These results point in the same direction as the ones in Llurda *et al.*'s (2016) study, in which the only occasion when a sense of European identity came out was when the students "positioned themselves in contrast with other

supranational entities, such as Asia or countries seen to be outside the ‘Western bloc’” (p. 342), leading to the conclusion that one of the outcomes of the Erasmus experience on the participants in this study was an enhanced identity as a ‘Westerner’ rather than as a European. The views of these participants were significantly influenced by languages, and in particular, by the importance of English.

Further, some of the interviewed students claimed that EU history is too short for all the people to identify with the others and that unification will take longer, if it is ever going to happen. This supports the findings in Osler’s (1998) study in which while for some respondents European citizenship was identified as a feeling of shared experience that could be exploited with positive outcomes, for some others, European unity was defined as more of an ideal than a reality. And this is certainly not pointing to the image of a unified Europe in the near future. Moreover, with regard to the future of the EU, many participants showed a forward-looking but skeptical attitude. At the end of the stay, some of the students were able to find optimism besides everything, and they expressed hope that the EU would learn from mistakes, and eventually become a better place to live.

7.2. Language investment, expectations, and the role of imagined identities

The people with whom the participants expect to spend most of the time of their stay abroad and the people with whom they actually do spend their sojourn are relevant for the language learning related outcomes of the Erasmus experience. Overall, it seems that the students think they will spend most of the time of their stay with other international students, followed by local people, and native speakers of English. Paradoxically, the wish to spend their stay with other international students and with local people is considerably high, while the desire to learn the local languages (Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan) is rather low. Finally, the desire of the participants to spend their stay with

people from their own countries is quite low. The wish of the participants to spend their time abroad with native speakers of English is higher than the wish to spend time with people from their own countries, even though none of the host institutions were in a country where English is the native language. The only significant difference among the groups at the beginning concerns the desire to spend most of the stay with international students, significantly lower among the Oulu students than among both the Bucharest and the Lleida groups.

Expectations and outcomes are also different in this respect. At the end of their sojourn, the participants report having spent significantly less time with local people, as well as with native speakers of English and significantly more time with people from their own countries. With regard to the latter, the Bucharest group seems to have spent significantly lower time with native speakers of English than both the Lleida and the Oulu groups. In this respect, Hornberger (2007), in an attempt to connect transnationalism and identity, introduces the concepts of ‘transnational spaces’ which are created and maintained by youth and adult individuals who move or have moved across national borders and maintain affinity ties in more than one place. These spaces can be pedagogical, social, or online spaces which “afford opportunities for the construction and narration of self and identity through transnational literacies” (p. 325). Therefore, the transnational spaces created by the students in this project are mostly formed by other international students. This fact could have implications for both the personal and the professional future of the participants, since they enable the individuals to feel connected to multiple spaces, be them social, online, or of any other type.

These networks, together with the hybridization of identity reported above could contribute to the creation of what Ong (1999) has called ‘flexible citizenship’ to refer to “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (p. 6). In this respect, being tied to different spaces could be understood by the participants as a facilitator when times to respond in an opportunistic way to the flux of markets and politics brought by late capitalism will come. This

correlates also to the way Blommaert & Varis (2015) describe the lives of people under the superdiversity brought by late modernity in which the individual life-project assumes the form of “dynamic (i.e. perpetually adjustable) complex within which subjects situate their practices and behavior.” (p. 5). The participants in this study give reasons to believe the Erasmus stay could open the fore towards dynamic types of identities.

With regard to the expectations about the stay abroad, in general the participants display high expectations and seem to be invested in the experience. Participants foresee the highest hopes as concerning personal aspirations, with no initial differences among the three groups. At the end of the stay, personal benefits are the only ones that show no significant difference between the degree of expectation and the degree of accomplishment. Professional and academic benefits are overall lower than expected, contrary to the results of Dolga *et al.*'s (2015) study with Romanian Erasmus students. Dolga *et al.*(2015). The authors affirm that “70.8% of the inquired students consider that the Erasmus program has had a positive influence on their career, and 62.5% appreciate that the exchange has had a significant influence on their personal life” (p. 1013).

On the same token, the highest expectations are related to knowledge of other cultures and knowledge of English. Personal goals like improvements in autonomy and self-confidence follow shortly after. Finally, there are considerable expectations for improvements in relation to acceptance of other cultures and knowledge of other languages.

However, the expectations for the three groups are different straight from the beginning of the Erasmus experience, which indicates that the choice of the context for spending the stay is made according to the expectations of the participants and to their degree of investment in different practices. For instance, improvements in knowledge of English are significantly lower in the Lleida group than in both the Oulu and the Bucharest groups. Furthermore, enhancement of knowledge of other languages is significantly lower in the Oulu group when compared to both the Bucharest and

the Lleida groups. Finally, the students in the Oulu group expect to a significantly lower extent to progress in their acceptance of other cultures as a result of their stay abroad than the students in the Bucharest group. These differences signal certain disparity between the three groups in terms of who is expecting and what, and in what practices the students in each group feel more eager to invest.

Discrepancies are encountered also at the linguistic level. While the Oulu and the Bucharest groups have English at the top of their desires, the Lleida group shows a lower expectancy with regard to their prospective improvement in English. Furthermore, the Lleida group has higher expectations when it comes to gains of other languages, probably having Spanish in their mind. Therefore, the Lleida group has divergent linguistic goals from the Oulu and the Bucharest groups. Finally, the significantly lower score to the possibility to improve their degree of acceptance of other cultures in the Oulu group when compared to the Bucharest group suggests a lower interest for cultural learning as an asset to be obtained from the experience of those students who chose Finland as a destination than of those who chose Bucharest.

In relation to the fulfillment of the expectations, it seems that overall the outcomes are more modest than the expectations. However, the results in each group are different. On the one hand, in correlation with the expectations in this respect, knowledge of English improved to a significantly lower extent among the Lleida students than among the ones in both Oulu and Bucharest, while knowledge of other languages was significantly higher in Lleida than in the other two groups. Moreover, betterment in knowledge of other cultures is significantly higher in the Lleida group than in the Oulu group. These results partially correlate with those of Durán Martínez *et al.* (2016) who conducted a PRE-POST questionnaire among Nottingham Trent University and University of Salamanca students on their placement abroad and concluded that “(t)he most salient increase at the end of their placement abroad is the one regarding the awareness dimension which is proportionally similar in both groups” (p. 14)

Autonomy also seems to have increased to a significantly lower extent among the students in Oulu than the ones in both Lleida and Bucharest. Similarly, the Bucharest group show significantly higher progress in self-confidence when compared to the Oulu group. Finally, the Lleida group show significantly higher advancement regarding acceptance of other cultures than the Oulu group. In fact, the Oulu group already showed lower expectations of improvement with regard to acceptance of other cultures, from the beginning, which shows a high degree of correspondence between expectations, investment, and outcomes in study abroad. These results show that the general claims which report intercultural gains, such as for example Engle & Engle (2004) who found out that more than fifty per cent of the study abroad participants in his study showed improvements in intercultural gains, or Jackson (2008) who also revealed that her participants significantly improved in this domain, are only partially true and dependent on both the expectations and investment of the participants, as well as on the context of their stay and probably on their imagined identities if we take into account the fact that the Oulu group who shows the lowest expectations and gains in acceptance of other cultures is also the one where significantly more students envision themselves in their home countries in the future.

Regarding the role of languages in Europe, at the onset of the stay the respondents value the importance for every European citizen to manage at least 2 foreign languages. However, the Oulu group assigns less importance to this issue than both the Lleida and the Bucharest groups at the beginning. The Bucharest group also values to a significantly higher extent than the Oulu group the possibility to offer official status to all languages in Europe. The stay does not seem to have any effect on the attitudes of the participants towards languages in Europe.

However, it seems that the stay convinces students in the Bucharest group to a significantly higher extent about the fact that English is a tool for bringing Europeans together. These results indicate that a stay abroad in Bucharest increases the perception on the value of English as a unifying tool among European citizens.

In relation to English, the significantly higher scores assigned to the importance of communication over imitating native speaker rules in the POST test might signal that the sojourn abroad increased the participants' belief that communication matters more than native-likeness when it comes to the English language. This tendency is even more accentuated in the Bucharest group, although no significant differences were found within any particular group. These results are consistent with Llurda's (2008) findings of a positive impact of stays abroad on teachers' openness to English variation and its use as a lingua franca. Furthermore, these results coincide with those by Kural & Bayyurt (2016) who found out that study abroad increased awareness about English as a lingua franca.

As for language expectations in relation to the stay abroad, the local languages Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan are given similar importance, while Spanish clearly stands out at the beginning of the stay abroad. These results indicate that the perceived economic value of each language has an outstanding role in Erasmus sojourns, of which the participants are aware, similar to what is claimed by Flubacher *et al.* (2018) who state that "(t)he decision to invest (in language, in this case) is always made with the idea that it will pay off in the future and refigures the object of investment as something – or someone – with a certain potential." (p. 4). The experience seems to have some effect in this sense too, determining the Oulu group to feel significant less motivation for the local language at the end of the stay abroad than at the beginning, and the participants in the two other groups to report less motivation for Catalan and Romanian, and significantly higher motivation for Spanish among students in Lleida, which points out to the fact that a stay abroad can contribute to decreasing the motivation of the students in relation to local languages that are not perceived to have much importance on the market and to increasing the admiration for languages whose economic value is perceived to be high.

This hierarchy is also reflected with regard to language use, as Spanish definitely was the language that was most extensively used among the Erasmus students in Lleida. Romanian also

appears to have been used to a considerably higher extent than Finnish in Oulu. On the other hand, English was used to a lower extent in Lleida than in the other two groups. Despite this fact, there is a tendency towards a significantly lower reported use of both English and the local languages and a significantly higher reported use of their own languages at the end of the stay.

Concerning language attitudes, once more, Spanish plays a role that is substantially different from the role played by all the other local languages. In fact, the power of Spanish seems to equal or even top the power of English in the Lleida group. This may explain why, in some cases, Catalan is assigned significantly lower scores than Finnish and Romanian. This animosity towards Catalan can be perceived most especially when it comes to a possible wish to learn Catalan, and even the mere fact of listening to people speaking Catalan. However, the perceived need to learn Catalan, which is higher at the end than at the beginning of the sojourn, might suggest that the Catalan language had a considerable weight for the local people in Lleida, and therefore it was more important than they initially thought. However, this situation may, in fact, have led to an increased animosity towards the Catalan language. In this respect, DuFon & Churchill (2006) affirm that feelings of being rejected by the host culture or a certain degree of superficiality in the relationship with the host members can lead to withdrawal and reduce success in second language acquisition. They also claim that the positions that the learners adopt when encountering sociocultural and linguistic differences may play a role in restricting or facilitating their access to the target communities.

These findings correlate to those encountered by Garrett & Gallego-Balsà (2014) in the context of the same university. The authors claim that:

The polarisation between the home and international students at UdL might be viewed in terms of two kinds of 'psychological reactance' (Brehm and Brehm 1981). The home students tend to react against the language threat they perceive to Catalan from Spanish, pointing to the opportunities for additional speakers of the minority language. In contrast, the international students' reactions are more in alignment with those of majority language speakers, and indeed, given De Bres' (2008: 476) claim that 'the umbrella category of "majority language speakers" can be defined in different ways at different times', they might arguably be seen as a part of that category. They tend to react against the 'constraints' of the minority language at the university, suggesting an appeal for freedom of choice (...). They appeal for example to its inappropriateness in an international university and, perhaps,

perceive a threat to their academic success arising from the restrictions on which languages they can use in their studies. (p. 374).

In fact, more negative feelings towards the local languages Finnish and Romanian also become apparent at the offset of the sojourn, a fact which recall Darvin & Norton's (2015) model of investment based on the deterritorialization, dynamicity, and diversity of the spaces learners occupy, due to increased freedom of movement, which might "diffuse and even reconfigure power, allowing learners to choose not only to invest but also to purposefully divest from particular language and literary practices." (Darvin & Norton, *ibid.*:47). Similarly, it also relates to the more economical idea of investment in Flubacher *et al.* (2018), who establish the relationship between investment and employability and according to whom:

(t)he decision to invest (in language, in this case) is always made with the idea that it will pay off in the future and refigures the object of investment as something – or someone – with a certain potential. This is also central to human capital theory, according to which cost and benefit of investment is a fixed component in education policies (...). From this perspective, language competences become human capital per se, that is, "individual knowledge components or skills. (p. 4)

Regarding the perceived language-related outcomes of the stay abroad, overall, the low level of improvement of Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan is similar in the respective three contexts. This is analogous to what Kinginger (2009) emphasizes: assuming a direct relationship between study abroad and linguistic immersion is unrealistic. Similarly, Block (2014) is skeptical about any dramatic language learning occurring in SA. The author points to the importance of individual and contextual diversity which might lead to less remarkable outcomes than expected. On this note, the present study shows there is room to believe language learning in study abroad is a reality. However, it is seldom related to local languages whose economic value is perceived to be low. These results also recall Murphy-Lejeune's (2004) connection between mobile students and travelers from the international elite, whose return home is already scheduled and for whom language and culture are left to their choice.

As concerning communicative skills, there is a significantly higher perception among the participants in Bucharest that the mobility stay impacted positively on their communicative skills than in the case of the participants in Oulu.

Furthermore, in relation to the impact of the stay abroad on the willingness to learn other languages, there is significantly lower motivation to learn foreign languages as a result of the stay abroad among students who had Finland as a destination than among those who were in Lleida and Bucharest, which connects well to Flubacher *et al.* (2018: 2), citing Duchêne (2016) who affirms that: “(l)anguage learning and language competences are thus reconfigured in terms of “investment”, that is, individual, institutional, or societal investments in terms of financial resources, time, and energy for the development of language competences that (ideally) can be turned into economic profit”.

The interviews show that the linguistic expectations of the participants at the beginning of their stay are closely related to the contexts they had chosen for the Erasmus experience. In Oulu, English is expected to significantly improve by those students whose English level is low or intermediate, while those who already have a good level expect to refine it by using it more often. English is also mentioned by those students who chose Bucharest. However, in Bucharest, linguistic and cultural learning sometimes seem to become one and the same thing. On a different token, in Lleida, the participants refer to Spanish as the language they would like to learn. Instead, attitudes towards Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan are very similar, and they seem to be rather neutral at the beginning of the stay abroad.

At the end of the sojourn, participants in Oulu improved their English, but in some cases they are less than satisfied by the acquired level, even though some participants do affirm their English level has opened some professional doors for them. On the other hand, Bucharest provided a good environment for improving competences in English as a lingua franca. Many participants mention

their English progressed because they were able to develop communication strategies that enable them to manage in situations when English is used among non-native speakers. The outcomes correlate with the ones in Kalocsái's (2014) study in which the Erasmus students in the Hungarian city of Széged aimed to and achieved the goal of creating an Erasmus family, based on having fun and developing self-confidence, a common aspiration that was attained both by social and linguistic means which implied the use of English as a lingua franca, and always in a cooperative and supportive manner.

Further, this study is a response to the model of competence based on multilingualism and dialogic models of communication demanded by Kinginger (2009), who laments the fact that the research to the moment has often taken the native speaker as a model, thus relying on a monologic frame.

Students in Lleida declare having improved their Spanish. Interestingly, their Spanish has improved mostly due to communicating with students from Mexico. Therefore, limited contact with the local community in Lleida did not impede the participants to pursue their linguistic aim. Attitudes towards the local languages also appeared to have changed, especially in relation to Finnish and Catalan: more negative feelings were displayed towards Finnish and Catalan while the attitudes towards Romanian were not as negative, even though no real interest was shown for Romanian.

In a nutshell, participants mentioned different themes with regard to their personal expectations about the Erasmus experience which could be related to their particular realities as young adults, a period of life with intense personal changes. For some participants, the stay abroad was the first time they lived outside their homes and at a relatively big distance from their families and their comfort zone. It is therefore not surprising that one of the personal expected assets of the sojourn was an increase in independence and autonomy.

Similarly, some other participants reported that they would improve at a personal level by overcoming the fear to become mobile in the future. Fear is an element that appears in the participants' discourses at the beginning of their stay, but it is hardly ever seen as a negative aspect, but as something desirable, a challenge, and a special opportunity to go through uneasiness while one is still in a position of relative comfort. This endurance is expected to lay the foundations for harder times when the participants will take steps on more serious types of mobility, often related to work. As mentioned above, the students reported expecting to improve social skills by means of getting in contact with other mindsets and experiencing different cultures.

On a less straightforward note than in the questionnaires, in the interviews personal and professional expectations sometimes seemed to be one and the same thing, and the participants struggled when it came to separating what outcomes they would get from the sojourn on a personal level and what others would be obtained in relation to professional skills. This fact suggests that an identity approach to study abroad is necessary since one cannot consider what personal outcomes are expected from the experience without taking into account what is the final aim of these personal outcomes, which could be becoming the sort of individuals the employment market seems to be looking for. This is related to the idea that the new globalized economy looks for individuals who are able to cope with different cultures, languages, and realities, and this could be the type of imagined identity the participants envision for themselves, and have in their minds when they enroll in an Erasmus stay abroad.

And in actual fact, the stay abroad does affect the self of the young sojourners. Probably the most outstanding impact is an increased willingness to travel, and also to live in foreign places for an extended period of time, which comes with the easiness to feel at home in multiple places. This is connected to an uneasiness to be static, which comes together with clearer objectives and an improved need for change, both on a personal and on a professional level. These are profoundly related to the expansion of the participants' horizons and a more open mindset, which they express as

a changed perspective of the world, brought along by sharing time and space, getting to know, and learning from other people. Cohabiting with different people also result in higher tolerance towards other cultures and people, and an enhancement in social skills. Finally, the participants reported knowing themselves better due to the unique chance to look inside oneself that the stay abroad offers which brings the feeling of being a more open, self-confident, social, and also resilient person. In sum and substance, students appeared to return from their sojourn as more mature, resilient and accompanied by the feeling that everything is possible.

Concerning professional expectations and outcomes, the vast majority of students thought their participation in the program had enabled them to become more employable. This connects well to Murphy-Lejeune's (2004) assertion that since migration and mobility are two faces of the same phenomena, and given the changes of the forms of migration that came with globalization, new migrant profiles have arisen, among which there is the highly skilled worker, whose migration might be only temporary, and who is in search of professional added value or moves for study reasons. The European mobile student seems to prepare the way for this new type of migrant, for whom migration, rather than a single act, becomes a continuous, progressive process .

However, differences arise when it comes to the perceived reasons behind the outcomes. For some, it is the global vision and the ability to deal with different people and new situations gained through the program (a type of capital that is in its essence, symbolic) that is perceived to bring material gains in the future, either when they are looking for a job or when they are already working. Managing a foreign language(s), often English but also Spanish in the case of the students in Lleida, is perceived both as a skill for being more employable for corporations and as a determinant element in the CV when one is searching for jobs, because it triggers willingness to go abroad, and therefore, it expands the target market. These results reinforce those in Klose (2013), who affirms that "(in) sum, the effect of ERASMUS becomes stronger where the former ERASMUS student seeks (or is offered) employment in a job that has an international feature, be it located abroad or domestically;

in these jobs, a former Erasmus student normally has the best opportunity to make use of the knowledge gained abroad” (p.47).

The experience also provides a rich environment for making connections and establishing friendships with people alike from different places. However, and despite the fact that the participants perceive they are more employable due to their participation in the Erasmus program, it is rather puzzling to see that it is rarely the formal education received that is mentioned as a catalyst for this outcome. In some cases the participants mention not having improved much on an academic level. This is particularly evident among students in Bucharest, and a possible reason for it could be that their initial motivation for studying during their stay abroad, and therefore their investment in it, may have been rather low. Students in Bucharest do not seem to have chosen their destination with an academic goal in mind, but rather with a desire to live in that particular environment. In this respect, Benson *et al.* (2013) established that one of the key features of study abroad relevant to second language identity development is the fact that “formal study is one, but often not the only, purpose” (p. 34).

For this reason, their Erasmus experience is positively valued when it brings them a new perspective and life-experiences that help them become different from what they were like at the beginning of their stay abroad. This is also observable in the other two contexts, but more accentuated in the Bucharest group. A rather general trend that may be observed is the impact of the intercultural experience obtained from living in a different environment, and in this respect, there is a perception that future employers may highly value such personally challenging intercultural experience.

In general lines, it seems that at the onset of their experience, the participants in the study abroad program have some difficulties when they have to envision themselves in five years’ time, and many of them express uncertainties, especially when it comes to the places where they imagine

themselves. However, the most outstanding feature of their discourse in this respect seems to be a certain degree of openness, where mobility is an option more often than not. This is correlated to what Murphy-Lejeune (2004) called ‘the travel bug’ which seems to be a common characteristic of the Erasmus students which consists in previous mobility to the stay abroad and desire to travel.

A few participants report a desire to remain in their countries, and a fewer more actually report being open to live in other places and openly state their countries are not an option, either because of a perceived lack of opportunities or for the higher degree of attractiveness of other places. It is rather important to mention the fact that students from countries with a weaker economy tend to be rather sure about living somewhere outside their countries in the future, while those who come from countries with a more stable economy either see themselves working at home, or working abroad due to personal reasons that are not of an economic kind. Consequently, it might be that the Erasmus experience is seen as an opportunity to get ready for an imminent need to move in the future as perceived by some students, or as a cultural experience that would enable the participants to know how things work in different places, even though these students might have no, or very few, intentions to work abroad.

At the end of their stay, the vast majority of students seem to be much more confident about being mobile in the future. The reasons behind their imagined identities as mobile individuals are various. While for some students, the need to learn English would push them to a native English-speaking country, some others decide to move because getting to know other cultures and people has become a desire they need to fulfill. As previously mentioned, many of the participants already reported a certain inclination towards future mobility at the beginning of their stay abroad. However, the scale of this mobility is definitely higher at the end of their Erasmus experience, probably as a consequence of having shown to themselves they could manage to live in a different culture, and becoming more open to seeking opportunities outside their comfort zone. Similarly, by expanding

their linguistic repertoires, new avenues which were difficult to imagine before become available for them.

Finally, these results also show some euphoric satisfaction towards their participation in the Erasmus stay as it appears in Krzkalewska (2013) who states that “the high level of satisfaction with the ERASMUS experience expressed by ERASMUS students can to some extent be explained by the fact that a story of “being an ERASMUS student” fits very well into contemporary discourses around youth and adulthood” (p. 79). This is because the Erasmus experience, coinciding with the entrance into adulthood, seems to be in some cases some sort of rite of passage, where individuals have the chance to act according to their will while they take distance from the moral and social norms and expectations of their societies which could also trigger major identity changes, or at least, the experience can become a catalyst for the destabilization of what seems to be rigid identities

Conclusion

Paraphrasing Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, *it is a truth universally acknowledged* that a young researcher (and I would dare to say any researcher by extension) wishes to start writing the concluding lines of her or his work. I am doing it with the bittersweet feeling of having started to assemble a puzzle and then realized that the whole story was never about finishing it, but about doing one's best to put together a part while not losing the hope someone else will come up and keep it going. Therefore, in the following lines, I will recapitulate the part of the puzzle that this thesis is able to complete, as well as its implications, and the limitations that hopefully will sketch the way for future research projects.

The present study has adopted a mixed methods longitudinal framework to approach the issue of identity, investment, and language learning in study abroad. It has done so by examining the sense of belonging, imagined identities, attitudes towards languages and cultural difference, expectations and degree of investment in both personal and professional learning among European higher education students in a Northern, an Eastern, and a Southern European setting. The following research question guided the project:

What is the impact of the participation in the Erasmus study abroad program on the identities, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as reported by international university students in Finland, Romania, and Catalonia?

However, for reasons of clarity, the main research question was divided into the following sub- questions:

1) What are the expectations of the participants, their forms of investment, and their imagined identities at the beginning of the stay?

2) In what ways Erasmus students relate and adapt to the languages present in the Erasmus community in the three analyzed contexts?

3) What are the identity and employability-related outcomes of the experience as reported by the students at the end of the stay?

4) What changes in identities (with a focus on European identity) and in attitudes are experienced among university students as a result of a stay abroad?

5) How expectations and outcomes in three different European settings are different and what profiles of students can be established according to their chosen destination.

To begin with, this project has contributed to the bulk of studies on identity and language learning in study abroad by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods at every stage of the study and in this way, it has responded to research questions that could not be answered in a more complete way by using purely qualitative or quantitative research. Therefore, interpretations are made, and conclusions are drawn based on results obtained from both quantitative and qualitative data and through the combination of both methods. By doing so, the present project brings to the field increased confidence in findings, improved accuracy and completeness, and it informs and contributes to overall validity of the findings (McKim, 2017: 203). Furthermore, connected to the above, in the case of the present project, a mixed framework was chosen because I believed that a single data source was not enough to tell the whole story. By using a mixed methods framework, this thesis has contributed to shedding light not only on the similarities between two types of data, but also on the paradoxes and contradictions that might arise from combining surveys and interviews, achieving a more detailed picture of the phenomena, one that leads to a better understanding of the impact of study abroad and the processes that conduct to the outcomes of such experience.

The second contribution of the present study is something that was not originally planned to be a central element in it, but nonetheless was determined in the findings, which is bringing to light the fact that the vast majority of higher education students participating in the Erasmus program declare belonging to the middle class. Furthermore, some students report having had to finance their whole stay abroad because the Erasmus scholarship, which already accounted for less than half of the cost of the stay, arrived in the last weeks of their stay. This has serious implications for the objectives of the program which aims at integrating people with fewer opportunities by showing that this aim was not accomplished by 2016. In this respect, I would encourage the EU stakeholders to implement strong and serious measures in order to integrate those students whose families cannot face the cost of a part (or the entirety) of their stay abroad. Otherwise, and judging from the reported changes concerning the degree of employability of the participants at the end of their stay, it seems to me that what the program is actually doing is contributing to augmenting the gap between those with resources and those without them. These measures should be financial first of all, but I believe there is a need to also encourage students coming from lower class backgrounds to participate in the program, especially because there might be a difference between the type of personal support they receive in their families and that received by their middle class mates whose parents have graduated from university in most of cases. A possibility would be that international offices at universities that manage the Erasmus program organize speeches, workshops, presentations among the university community so that these students might get the input and support they may not receive at home.

The third contribution of this project is showing that participating in an Erasmus study abroad program does have an impact on the identities, language attitudes and uses, and employability, as perceived by the international students in the three above mentioned groups. This impact is visible both at a quantitative, statistical level, and at a more fine-grained, qualitative level.

With regard to the impact on the identities and sense of belonging of the participants, overall the Erasmus stay triggers a significantly higher perception among students that their identity is more

complex and contradictory at the end of the stay abroad, where distinctions between places, languages, and cultures are more blurred. Therefore, it can be stated that the Erasmus experience triggers a more pluralistic and hybrid identity and increased willingness and ease to become mobile in the future independently on the country of the stay. While at the beginning the students appear to be able to express with considerable clarity the places they belong to and what elements keep them rooted in these places, at the end of the stay, many of them seem to have the conviction that they can feel at home in more than one place. A loss of a sense of home is also reported, as well as a reduced concern about the participants' sense of belonging. Therefore, it can be concluded that participating in an Erasmus stay, independently of the context, triggers a destabilization and hybridization of identity. Spending at least one semester studying at a foreign university through the Erasmus program provides an environment where individuals are confronted with cultural, symbolic, and material difference which gives them awareness about the way things work in different places, and which finally, might blur or change the idea of the participants with regard to their sense of belonging and their position in the world.

In spite of the fact that living with difference for a prolonged period could lead to a feeling that differences are not as big as expected, and therefore, to trigger increased tolerance, openness, and an ultimate expansion of the horizons with respect to the places the participants could belong to, it can also prompt in certain cases an increased sense of belonging to the national state and higher pride for one's origins. The present study has showed that this is a possible outcome of the Erasmus program, even though it never comes together with blindness to other realities, but rather in combination with an openness to navigate difference.

The above results indicate that a stay abroad without moving from the European continent for a period as short as one semester can lead to a transformation of the identities of the participants towards more hybrid and open sense of belonging, triggered by the expansion of the array of positions the participants' feel they can occupy in the world. This fact can have substantial

implications for education policies that aim at improving the willingness of university educated individuals to become mobile workers in the future. Furthermore, since it also has implications for the overall state of economy, I would say contributing to the training of Europeans to expand their identity horizons through study abroad should be a matter of concern for both public and private stakeholders.

In the fourth place, and connected to the above, the present project signaled that an Erasmus period abroad could also trigger a significantly higher sense of being able to deal with cultural difference and an increase in the multiplicity of points of view. However, it is somehow remarkable that a stay in Bucharest seems to prove a bigger effect on the appreciation of and willingness to live among cultural differences than Oulu. From the beginning, those participants who chose Bucharest as a destination seem to be more open towards cultural differences than the other two groups and they also relate to the category of immigrant with respect to the context of their stay to a lower extent than those who chose Oulu. This could suggest that students who choose an Eastern European country for their Erasmus stay might have more facility to feel at home in foreign places than those who choose a Northern European country. However, the fact that at the end of the stay this difference has disappeared points out to the fact that a stay abroad, no matter where, and independently of the initial degree of willingness to be a citizen of the world, has a homogenizing effect among the students by increasing their willingness to feel at ease in many places.

Once more, these results have implications for the formation of what could be a new category of Europeans characterized by a transnational, culturally, socially, and spatially flexible identity and it suggests that a period studying abroad through the Erasmus program does trigger changes in this respect. However, Eastern Europe appears to have a stronger effect than Northern Europe. In this respect, this study contributes to the knowledge on the Erasmus program by showing that the context can play a role when it comes to changes in intercultural awareness and behavior towards cultural differences, with Bucharest proving a more efficient setting than Oulu.

The fifth contribution of the present project is related to the objective of the European Union to enhance a sense of Europeanness through the Erasmus program. In this respect, the results of this study are not too encouraging. However, they point to the fact that both before and after the Erasmus experience, higher education students who embark in a stay abroad imagine themselves living in a European country in the future to a higher extent than anywhere else, even when compared to their own country. However, there are significant differences between the groups both at the beginning and at the end of the stay. On the one hand, once more the Bucharest group is more willing to live in any Western country in the future than the Oulu group. The stay abroad seems to determine those students who chose Oulu as a destination to feel to envision themselves living in their own countries to a significantly higher extent than the students in the other two groups, and to a significantly lower extent to see themselves living in any Western country than the other two groups, as well as to a significantly lower extent to live in any country of the world than those in the Lleida group. What these results signal is that an Erasmus stay in Oulu increases the possibility for the students to envision themselves in their own countries, and less in any Western country or any place of the world than a stay abroad in Bucharest or Lleida.

The degree of the expectations related to each of the three contexts could partially explain these results since it appears that despite the fact that different degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are reported by the participants, in general, the Oulu group is the one that signals the highest expectations and also the highest disappointment at the end of the stay. All this clearly illustrates the need for students to have realistic expectations in order to feel satisfied after the experience. It also shows the importance of the differences in how different European contexts are perceived by young European citizens. The above mentioned differences signal there is disparity between students who choose certain contexts for their stay, in terms of who is expecting and what, and in what practices the students in each group feel more eager to invest and it has implications for

understanding in what types of experience students choosing one context or another are eager to invest.

One more time, these results could serve as a means to orient students when they have to choose the setting for their Erasmus stay, and inform them about the realities of every place in order to avoid unrealistic expectations and the disappointment they can trigger. In the same way, since the decision to resist or accept the target language and culture could account for the actual outcomes of the experience, there is a need for people in charge of the Erasmus program, both incoming and outgoing, to promote willingness and ways to integrate in the local societies among the participants in order to avoid unpleasant experiences. Furthermore, they also point out the fact that an Erasmus stay should not be understood as a homogeneous identical experience for everybody regardless of the context, since different gains are achieved through stays in different places.

In contrast with the willingness to live in Europe in the future, students across the three contexts report feeling more attached to their towns, cities, provinces, countries, and the world than to Europe. Sense of belonging to Europe is the lowest both at the beginning and at the end of the stay. These results signal that one of the main objectives of the Erasmus+ program, which is enhancing sense of belonging to Europe, is not attained by the students in any of the three contexts.

Moreover, in relation to identification with different groups of people according to the languages they speak, the participants feel identified firstly with those individuals who speak the same first language, and secondly with people who speak English. Therefore, for the Erasmus students in the three contexts, being able to speak English is more important for identifying with a group of people than being European, and the Erasmus stay has no effect in this respect. These results indicate that language, in this case English, is a much more powerful identity connector than an alleged European identity for Erasmus students. On this note, we should consider the possibility

that promoting English, and more concisely, English as a lingua franca, could enhance a strong identification element among young European higher education students.

Similarly, in relation to having people from the same country, Europe, or the whole world as neighbors, students deploy a very similar willingness to live aside with people belonging to any of the three groups and their perception is not affected by the sojourn. These results could signal that young university students from European background who decide to enroll in a stay abroad are already quite open towards living aside different groups of people. In this respect, I would recommend taking advantage of what seems to be fertile ground for growing further acceptance and tolerance among Erasmus students and in this way, opening the fore for them to become future agents of change regarding migration issues.

In relation to the news and affairs students follow, this project has shown that after the Erasmus experience, an increased interest for local news and affairs is shown, contrary to what might have been expected, which is that the interest for European news and affairs would have risen. Moreover, with regard to voting, the participants seem to be more likely to vote in national elections than in any other type of election, both at the beginning and at the end of the stay abroad. European elections are the ones in which the students seem to be the least likely to vote. Furthermore, pride for being European is significantly lower at the end of the stay, and this is an overall tendency among the three groups. Similarly, pride for Europe with regard to European history and the contribution of Europe to the formation of modern civilization, European human rights, European shared heritage, and even European sports competitions are lower at the end of the stay than at the beginning.

The present study brought to the light that Erasmus students only show pride for Europe in relation to its political influence in the world and the euro. The euro is, in fact, most of the times, the first element the students mention as a possible unifying element in the EU. Furthermore, there is an overall difficulty to express what elements could conform European identity, which signals a scarcity

of acquaintance of Erasmus students to Europe and an infrequent identification with it. This could be regarded as an indicator of the fact that in the common imaginary of the students, the conforming elements that constitute European identity do not exist, which leads to the impossibility to identify with Europe, since it is not feasible to identify with something you struggle to give meaning to.

Furthermore, differences rather than similarities between European countries are more often reported, both at the beginning and at the end of their sojourn, which could signal that identification with Europe hasn't got a space yet in the common imaginary of the participants. On the other hand, the fact that elements that are common to all Western or developed countries together with the common good education of Europeans are brought to the fore could signal the fact that when Erasmus students imagine Europeans, what they have in mind is middle-class, university-educated students from different European (and not just European) countries. Consequently, middle-class, well educated, and Western could be more powerful unifying elements in the common imaginary of Erasmus students than an alleged European identity. Furthermore, there are also claims that EU's history is too short for all the people to identify with the others and that unification will take longer, if it is ever going to happen, which shows a forward-looking but skeptical attitude.

These results are, again, not very reassuring in terms of the EU's stated goals of the Erasmus program and they could signal that despite the EU investing in it, young individuals studying abroad through the program will not feel more identified with Europe at the end of their stay. Judging from the recent events at the moment of collecting the data when the EU was facing the beginning of the refugees' crisis, I would suggest the Erasmus program may have no effect on the students' attitudes towards Europe if the EU's strategies for dealing with problems does not change.

The present project has also showed that Erasmus students want to spend most of the time of their stay with other international students, followed by local people, and native speakers of English. Paradoxically, the desire to spend their stay with other international students and with local people is

considerably high, while the desire to learn the local languages (Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan) is rather low. The only exception is Spanish, which appears to hold a very different status, in the eyes of students, to the other three local languages.

Expectations and outcomes are also different in this respect. At the end of their sojourn, the participants report having spent significantly less time with local people, as well as with native speakers of English and significantly more time with people from their own countries. These networks, together with the hybridization of identity reported above could contribute to the creation of flexible forms of citizenship which allows responding in opportunistic ways to the flux of markets and politics brought by late capitalism. The participants in this study give reasons to believe the Erasmus stay could open the fore towards a kind of flexible and dynamic identity where the individuals' life project becomes perpetually adjustable. On the other hand, the fact that the participants spend more time than expected with other students from their own countries could have contributed to a critical perspective towards Europe and increased closeness to their national countries.

Another contribution of this thesis is concerned with the expectations from and outcomes of a stay abroad. Overall, the highest hopes concern personal aspects. Personal aspirations and personal benefits are the only ones that show no significant difference between the degree of expectation and the degree of accomplishment while professional and academic benefits are overall lower than expected.

With regard to personal expectations from the Erasmus experience, they could be related to the particular realities of young adults, a period of intense personal changes. For some participants, the stay abroad is the first time they live outside their homes and at a relatively big distance from their families and their comfort zone. It is therefore not surprising that one of the personal expected assets of the sojourn is an increase in independence and autonomy.

Similarly, some other participants report that they will improve at a personal level by overcoming the fear to become mobile in the future. Fear is an element that appears in the participants' discourses at the beginning of their stay, but it is hardly ever seen as a negative aspect, but as something desirable, a challenge, and a special opportunity to go through uneasiness while one is still in a position of relative comfort. The endurance that might be gained by going through this uneasiness endurance is expected to lay the foundations for harder times when the participants will take steps on more serious types of mobility often related to work. Students report to expect to improve social skills by getting in contact with other mindsets and experiencing different cultures.

Personal and professional expectations sometimes seem to be one and the same thing, and the participants struggle when it comes to separating what outcomes they will get from the sojourn on a personal level and what others will be obtained in relation to professional skills. This fact suggests that an identity approach to study abroad is necessary since one cannot consider what personal outcomes are expected from the experience without taking into account what is the final aim of these personal outcomes which could be becoming the sort of individuals the employment market seems to be looking for. This is related to the idea that the new globalized economy looks for individuals who are able to cope with different cultures, languages, and realities, and this could be the type of imagined identity the participants envision for themselves and have in their minds when they enroll in an Erasmus stay abroad experience.

At a personal level, the most outstanding impact is an increased willingness to travel, and also to live in foreign places for an extended period of time, which comes with the easiness to feel at home in multiple places, higher tolerance towards other cultures and people, and an enhancement in social skills. Participants also report knowing themselves better due to the unique chance to look inside themselves that the stay abroad offers which brings the feeling of being a more open, self-confident, social, and also resilient person.

As for professional expectations and outcomes, the most outstanding finding of the present project is that the vast majority of students think that their participation in the program has enabled them to become more employable. In some cases, it is the global vision and the ability to deal with different people and new situations gained through the program (a type of capital that is in its essence, symbolic) that is perceived to bring material gains in the future, either when they are looking for a job or when they are already working. The experience also provides a rich environment for making connections and establishing friendships with people alike from different places. However, and despite the fact that the participants perceive they are more employable due to their participation in the Erasmus program, this study has shown it is rarely due to the formal education received. In some cases, the participants mention not having improved much on an academic level (particularly evident among students in Bucharest). This is connected to the fact that students in Bucharest do not seem to have chosen their destination with an academic goal in mind, but rather with a desire to live in that particular environment. For this reason, their Erasmus experience is positively valued when it brings them a new perspective and life-experiences that help them become different from what they were like at the beginning of their stay abroad. This is also observable in the other two contexts, but more accentuated in the Bucharest group.

The stay has not got any effect on the attitudes of the participants towards languages in Europe. However, students in the Bucharest come back more convinced about the fact that English is a tool for bringing Europeans together. These results indicate that a stay abroad in Bucharest increases the perception on the value of English as a unifying tool among European citizens.

In relation to English, the significantly higher scores assigned to the importance of communication over imitating native speaker rules might signal that the sojourn abroad increased the participants' belief that communication matters more than native-likeness when it comes to the English language, and shows that the students naturally embrace the idea of ELF. This tendency is even more accentuated in the Bucharest group.

The final contribution of this study is related to language expectations, attitudes, investment, and outcomes. It shows that, straight from the beginning, the local languages Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan are given similar importance, while Spanish clearly stands out from the rest. These results indicate that the perceived economic value of each language has an outstanding role in Erasmus sojourns, of which the participants are aware. The experience determines the three groups to feel significant less motivation for the local languages (Catalan, Romanian, and Finnish), while significantly higher motivation for Spanish is reported in the Lleida group.

These results signal that a stay abroad can contribute to decreasing the motivation of the students in relation to local languages that are not perceived to have much importance on the market and to increasing the admiration for languages the economic value of which is perceived to be high. This might suggest that feelings of being rejected by the host culture or a certain degree of superficiality in the relationship with the host members can lead to withdrawal and reduce success in second language acquisition. However, the positions that the learners adopt when encountering sociocultural and linguistic differences may also play a role in restricting or facilitating their access to the target communities. In fact, more negative feelings towards the local languages Finnish and Romanian also become apparent at the offset of the sojourn which relates to the more economical idea of investment in Flubacher *et al.* (2018). On the same note, the present study has shown there is a tendency among Erasmus students towards a significantly lower reported use of both English and the local languages and a significantly higher reported use of their own languages at the end of the stay.

Regarding the perceived language-related outcomes of the stay abroad, overall, the low level of improvement of Finnish, Romanian, and Catalan is similar among the respective three contexts signaling that there is no direct relationship between study abroad and linguistic immersion but a much more complex relation where the role of economy is substantial. On this note, this study shows there is room to believe language learning in study abroad is a reality. However, it is seldom related

to local languages whose economic value is perceived to be low. A different outcome would probably be obtained if participants were migrants who had the intention to settle down in the host environment, but the participants in the present study only intended to carry out a temporary stay.

As for communicative skills, there is a significantly higher perception of the participants in Bucharest that the mobility stay impacted positively on their communicative skills than in the case of the participants in Oulu. Furthermore, in relation to the impact of the stay abroad on the willingness to learn other languages, there is significantly lower motivation to learn foreign languages as a result of the stay abroad of those students who had Finland as a destination than the ones who were in Lleida and Bucharest.

The interviews show that the linguistic expectations of the participants are closely related to the contexts they had chosen for the Erasmus experience. At the end of the sojourn, participants in Oulu improved their English but in some cases, they are not satisfied yet by the level they acquired. Hence, some participants affirm their English level has opened some professional doors for them. Bucharest provided a good environment for improving competences in English as a lingua franca. Many participants mention their English progressed because they were able to develop communication strategies that enable them to manage in situations when English is used among non-native speakers.

These results could also complement and give a response to the ones of Cubillos *et al.* (2008) who after assessing the listening skills of an at home and a study abroad group of students concluded that study abroad students applied top-down and social listening strategies to listening comprehension tasks. On this note, what the present study suggests is that the enhancement of listening abilities as a result of the Erasmus stay might be due to interaction with people with different linguistic backgrounds.

Those students who chose Lleida declare having improved their Spanish. Interestingly, their Spanish improved mostly due to communicating with other international students from Mexico. Therefore, limited contact with the local community in Lleida did not impede the participants to pursue their linguistic aim. These results imply that Erasmus students have clear linguistic goals which for whose attainment they are ready to find ingenious ways.

Norton (2000), Block (2014), and Riley (2007), for instance have referred to the complex, often impossible to dissect, intersection between identities and second languages as ‘second language identities’. The term refers, in its essence, to all those aspects of an individual’s identity which are connected to a second language they might be proficient at (to different extents) and/or they might use. The present study attempted to approach what I understood to be the most relevant aspects of identity that study abroad could have an impact on. In order to be able to make reasonable claims on the actual impact of study abroad on identity and language learning, as Kinginger (2013: 354) recommends, this study has focused on data that were collected, analyzed, and contrasted through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, the interpretations of the experience of participants from diverse backgrounds and origins whose Erasmus experience took place in what I considered to be three different settings in Europe were considered.

However, as I initially mentioned, I am very aware of the fact that this thesis has just completed a small part of the puzzle, and this has not come without limitations. Probably the most important one is the limited sample of students in each context. They were certainly enough for detecting some significant differences, but in the cases of Bucharest and Lleida, the limited number made it difficult to find significant differences in cases where the differences encountered clearly suggested an effect of the location and in which significant differences no doubt would have appeared had the sample been more extended. Another limitation that I would remark is the fact that it has focused on three contexts across Europe, sketching possibilities for each of them but far from

being able to make claims that are extendable to the rest of European countries, not to mention study abroad overseas.

Another limitation stems from the fact that the same variety of origins of the participants that could have enriched the findings of this project could also be seen as a distorting element when trying to shed light on identities and how they are affected, since each of the contexts the participants have inhabited have shaped who they are in different ways, and therefore, initial differences in the sample are unavoidable.

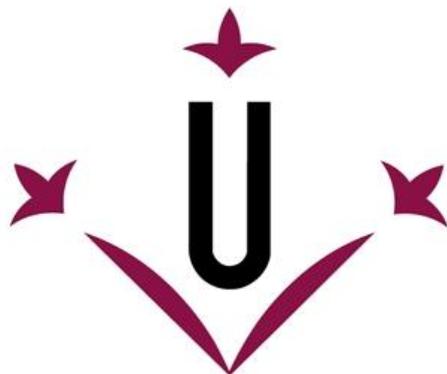
Finally, I would like to remark the fact that the present study focuses exclusively on the individuals that are both agents and subjects of studying abroad through the Erasmus program: higher education European students. Consequently, this thesis has not been able to contrast their responses to the ones of any other social actor who directly or indirectly might have participated from the experience such as teachers, international offices managers, and even class or workmates. This would have been a very enriching way to see the bigger picture.

It is therefore, in this direction that I would recommend future researchers to look. Approaching a sample of the population that would allow for comparing groups, focusing on a wider array of contexts and considering the voices of other social actors taking part in the experience will keep adding new pieces to the puzzle of understanding the processes and outcomes involved in the study abroad experience and how the European society is transformed through university student mobility programs. I hope this study has modestly contributed a relevant piece to it.

Appendices

Appendix 1: PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE – INTERCULTURALITY, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY AMONG MOBILITY STUDENTS



Universitat de Lleida

This questionnaire has been developed for a PhD project concerned with the identity and language evolution of mobility students. This project has been financed by the University of Lleida, Spain.

The data obtained through this questionnaire will be treated as confidential, statistically analyzed and used in an **anonymous way** with the single aim of this research.

I read this document and I accept to participate in this data collection.

Signature

.....

Name and surname (CAPITAL LETTERS):

Date:

With your participation you are making a valuable contribution to the research regarding mobility, identity and citizenship. If you are interested in this project, you can contact Vasilica Mocanu, the researcher and author of this study (vmocanu@dal.udl.cat).

Many thanks for your collaboration! ☺

Demographic information

1. Name and surname:

2. Gender (please circle): MALE/FEMALE

3. Age:

4. Nationality:

5. Habitual country of residence:

5. E-mail address:

6. Telephone number:

7. Current Studies: degree (Bachelor / Master /PhD) and field:
.....

8. Languages you speak (circle the level you think you have)

- 1) Elementary Intermediate Advanced Native
- 2) Elementary Intermediate Advanced Native
- 3) Elementary Intermediate Advanced Native
- 4) Elementary Intermediate Advanced Native
- 5) Elementary Intermediate Advanced Native

9. Level of education of parents (please circle the highest):

Primary / Secondary / Vocational Studies / Bachelor / Master / PhD

10. Social class you think you belong to (please circle)

Low / Low -Middle / Middle High / High

11. Previous mobility experience (please circle and write the country and the duration in months). If you participated in any more than once, please write the total amount of time)

- 1) School mobility program. Country Duration
- 2) University mobility program. Country Duration
- 3) Language course. CountryDuration
- 4) Work mobility. Country Duration
- 5) Other (please specify)
Country Duration

12. Do you consider yourself a person with a strong interest in foreign people or cultures? (please circle)

YES / NO / UNDECIDED

13. I am an (please circle) ERASMUS EXCHANGE STUDENT / DEGREEPROGRAMME STUDENT.

14. Duration of your stay (in months)

1. Please, write the first 5 words that come to your mind when you hear the words:

Erasmus/ Student mobility program

1..... 2..... 3..... 4..... 5.....

In the following section we would like you to answer some questions by simply giving marks from 1 to 5. Please, circle one of the numbers:

1 = not at all 2 = not really 3 = so-so 4 = quite a lot 5 = very much

Example:

How much do you like hamburgers? **1** 2 3 4 5

2. How frequently do you follow the following news and affairs?

Local	1 2 3 4 5
National	1 2 3 4 5
European	1 2 3 4 5

3. How would you rate your knowledge of European history? 1 2 3 4 5

4. How proud are you to be European? 1 2 3 4 5

5. How proud are you of Europe in each of the following:

The way democracy works	1 2 3 4 5
The political influence in the world	1 2 3 4 5
The economic achievements	1 2 3 4 5
Its history	1 2 3 4 5
Its treatment of all groups in society	1 2 3 4 5
Its contribution to the foundation of modern civilization	1 2 3 4 5

6. When you think about the European identity, how important do you consider to be:

The European Flag	1	2	3	4	5
The Euro	1	2	3	4	5
Open borders	1	2	3	4	5
Shared cultural heritage	1	2	3	4	5
Multilingualism	1	2	3	4	5
Common future	1	2	3	4	5
Sports competitions	1	2	3	4	5
Human rights	1	2	3	4	5

7. How much do you feel you belong to:

Your town/city/province	1	2	3	4	5	Europe	1	2	3	4	5
Your own country	1	2	3	4	5	The world	1	2	3	4	5

8. To what extent do you identify with:

People who speak your first language	1	2	3	4	5
People who speak English	1	2	3	4	5
European people, no matter their language	1	2	3	4	5

9. How likely are you to vote in the following elections:

Local	1	2	3	4	5	National	1	2	3	4	5
Regional	1	2	3	4	5	European	1	2	3	4	5

10. How opposed would you be to having as street neighbors people from:

Other regions in your country	1	2	3	4	5
Other European countries	1	2	3	4	5
Countries outside Europe	1	2	3	4	5

11. Do you consider participating in other mobility programmes? YES / NO. Please, write down which type of programme.....

12. Every European citizen should know at least two foreign languages _____ 1 2 3 4 5

13. It would be a good idea to have a common official language in Europe _____ 1 2 3 4 5

14. English is an important tool for bringing the Europeans together _____ 1 2 3 4 5

15. The English spoken by all Europeans should follow native speaker rules _____ 1 2 3 4 5

16. The multiplicity of languages in Europe is a handicap for:

Economic competition with other continents _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Internal cohesion _____ 1 2 3 4 5

17. All languages in Europe should have equal official recognition _____ 1 2 3 4 5

18. English lessons should focus on communicating rather than on imitating the rules of the native speakers _____ 1 2 3 4 5

19. The people I understand better when speaking English are (please circle):

Native speakers

Other Europeans

20. To what extent did the opportunity to learn one of the following languages motivate you to take part in this mobility programme:

English _____ 1 2 3 4 5 Other languages _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Finnish _____ 1 2 3 4 5

21. My level of English will be an important barrier to communication _____ 1 2 3 4 5

22. All cultures have the same value _____ 1 2 3 4 5

23. Different cultural backgrounds can be a barrier to communication _____ 1 2 3 4 5

24. My life experience enables me to be successful in any cultural context _____ 1 2 3 4 5

25. When I get to know some other cultures, I realize how much better my culture is _____ 1 2 3 4 5

26. No matter their culture, people everywhere are motivated by the same things _____ 1 2 3 4 5

27. How do you perceive yourself with regard to the local community in which your stay will take place:

An immigrant _____ 1 2 3 4 5 A traveler _____ 1 2 3 4 5

A local _____ 1 2 3 4 5 A stranger _____ 1 2 3 4 5

28. The more cultural differences, the better – it's boring if everyone is the same _____ 1 2 3 4 5

29. People in other cultures are different in ways I hadn't thought before _____ 1 2 3 4 5

30. I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways in any context _____ 1 2 3 4 5

31. Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there _____ 1 2 3 4 5

32. I can look at any situation from a variety of cultural points of view _____ 1 2 3 4 5

33. This study abroad experience will give me better job opportunities _____ 1 2 3 4 5

34. My decision-making skills are expanded by having multiple cultural viewpoints _____ 1 2 3 4 5

35. This mobility experience will have influence on my:

Knowledge of English _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of other cultures _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Autonomy _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Self-confidence _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of other languages _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Acceptance of other cultures 1 2 3 4 5

36. This experience will benefit me

Personally 1 2 3 4 5 Professionally 1 2 3 4 5

Academically 1 2 3 4 5

37. I want to spend most of my stay with:

Local people 1 2 3 4 5

Other international students 1 2 3 4 5

People from my own country 1 2 3 4 5

Native speakers of English 1 2 3 4 5

38. I think mobility students mostly socialize and connect among themselves during their stay 1 2 3 4 5

39. In the future, I see myself living

In my country 1 2 3 4 5

In any European country 1 2 3 4 5

In any occidental country 1 2 3 4 5

In any place of the world 1 2 3 4 5

40. Our world will increasingly resemble an Erasmus community, with intense contact between languages and cultures 1 2 3 4 5
41. I know well who I am and to which geographical space I belong 1 2 3 4 5
42. My identity is complex and sometimes contradictory with regard to the places where I live, my cultures and my languages 1 2 3 4 5
43. We acquire our identity from our parents and environment; we have no choice 1 2 3 4 5
44. We have the choice to decide on how to develop our own identity 1 2 3 4 5
45. I have the feeling that I need to negotiate my role in society constantly 1 2 3 4 5
46. I will never use Finnish, so it's useless to learn it 1 2 3 4 5
47. We should all try to use Finnish frequently 1 2 3 4 5
48. In my current context, learning English is more important than learning Finnish 1 2 3 4 5
49. I like or I would like to speak Finnish 1 2 3 4 5
50. I like listening to people speaking Finnish 1 2 3 4 5
51. I will never use English, so it's useless to learn it 1 2 3 4 5
52. We should all try to use English frequently 1 2 3 4 5

53. Learning Finnish is more important than learning English 1 2 3 4 5

54. I like or I would like to speak English 1 2 3 4 5

55. I like listening to people speaking English 1 2 3 4 5

56. Which language do you think you'll use more during your mobility stay:

Finnish 1 2 3 4 5

English 1 2 3 4 5

Your
own
language 1 2 3 4 5

Would you like to participate in a short, informal interview during your international experience?

ALL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS WILL TAKE PART IN A LOTTERY ☺(please circle)

YES / NO

Appendix 2: PRE – INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What's your name and where are you from?
2. Which were the reasons that determined you to enroll in a mobility program?
3. Why Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest?
4. In which ways do you think this mobility plan will influence your life?
 - Personally
 - Academically (languages)
 - Professionally
5. How would you define yourself? Do you feel you belong to a country/a province/Europe?
What makes you feel this way?
6. Do you think a mobility plan can have any effects on your sense of belonging?
7. Are you planning to socialize more with local/Erasmus/people from your own country?
Do you think Erasmus students usually get along together?
Why?
Which is the common language of the Erasmus communities?
8. Which were your expectations before coming to Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest?
How has your stay here been so far?
9. Which are your hopes with regard to your stay here?
And fears?
10. How do you see your role in this new society?
11. How do you see yourself in 5 years?

And where do you see yourself?

12. Had you had any experiences with foreign people before coming here?

Which kind of experiences?

How do you react to different manners to do things?

Do you think they affected your choice to be here in any way?

13. Which kind of jobs do you imagine yourself having in the future?

Do you think this experience will help you with that?

14. Do you think that the Erasmus programs are a place to make friends for a life?

How will you stay in contact with them?

15. Do you think there are any elements that define the European culture/identity?

16. Do you think the fact you belong to a European country made your stay here easier?

17. How do you see the world in the future? Do you think it will resemble more and more an Erasmus community?

18. How do you see the future of the European Union?

Appendix 3: POST - INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

What's your name and where are you from?

Which were the reasons that determined you to enroll in a mobility program?

Why Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest?

In which ways do you think this mobility plan have influenced your life? In which ways do you think it will influence your life?

Personally

-academically (languages)

professionally

How would you define yourself? Do you feel you belong to a country/a province/Europe?

What makes you feel this way?

Do you think a mobility plan can have any effects on your sense of belonging?

Did you socialize more with local/Erasmus/people from your own country?

Do you think Erasmus students usually get along together?

Why?

Which is the common language of the Erasmus communities?

Which languages have you used and in which situations?

Which were your expectations before going to Oulu/Lleida/Bucharest?

Did you feel welcome by the society where your stay took place? What about the institutions?

How has your stay there been so far?

Which were your hopes with regard to your stay here? Were they fulfilled?

And fears?

In which way was the culture of your stay different from yours?

Which languages can you speak now?

Have you learnt the local language? Why/why not?

Have you learnt English? Why/Why not?

What do you know now about Finland/Romania/Catalonia that you didn't know before? Have you learnt any social or cultural aspect?

Has your vision about any national group of people changed?

Have you thought about going back to Finland/Romania/Catalonia?

How do you see your role in this society now? Would you say it has changed?

How do you see yourself in 5 years? And where do you see yourself?

How do you react to culturally different manners to do things?

Which kind of jobs do you imagine yourself having in the future? Do you think this experience will help you with that?

Do you think that the Erasmus programs are a place to make friends for life?

How will you stay in contact with them?

Do you think that this experience provided you with anything that the students back home do not have?

Do you think that this experience would have been different in a southern/northern/eastern European university? What was special about the country of your stay?

Do you think that your host university encouraged the development of your knowledge of a different language and a different culture?

What about outside the university? Was there any place for your own voice? Have you talked about the customs in your country? To whom? Which was their reaction?

Have you visited your country during your mobility stay? Have you visited other countries?

Do you have the feeling that you belong to a different society in your host country?

Do you think it's a good idea to use your first language while you're on Erasmus?

Do you think that knowing more English and using it more somehow stops the development of other languages?

Have you used any digital networks during your mobility stay? What for?

Did you fall in love during your stay? Has this fact changed your view about the national group this person belonged to?

Do you think there are any elements that define the European culture/identity?

Do you think the fact you belong to a European country made your stay here easier?

How do you see the world in the future? Do you think it will resemble more and more an Erasmus community, with more intense contact between people from different places?

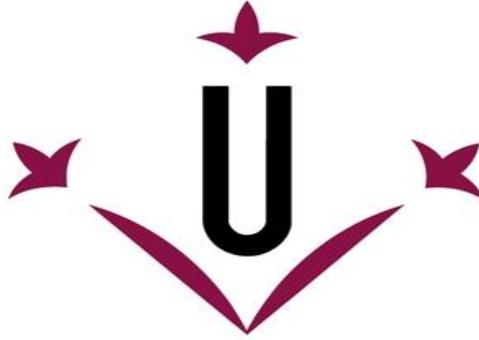
How do you see the future of the European Union?

How do you see your country now, after the mobility stay?

How are you going to keep in touch with the people you met during your mobility stay?

Appendix 4: CONSENT FORM

**QUESTIONNAIRE – INTERCULTURALITY, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY AMONG
MOBILITY STUDENTS**



Universitat de Lleida

This questionnaire has been developed for a PhD project concerned with the identity and language evolution of mobility students. This project has been financed by the University of Lleida, Spain.

The data obtained through this questionnaire will be treated as confidential, statistically analyzed and used in an **anonymous way** with the single aim of this research.

I read this document and I accept to participate in this data collection.

Signature

.....

Name and surname (CAPITAL LETTERS):

Date:

With your participation you are making a valuable contribution to the research regarding mobility, identity and citizenship. If you are interested in this project, you can contact Vasilica Mocanu, the researcher and author of this study (vmocanu@dal.udl.cat).
Many thanks for your collaboration! ☺

Appendix 5: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FORMER MOBILITY STUDENTS

Dear friend,

My name is Vasilica Mocanu and I am doing a thesis on the impact of the Erasmus program on young Europeans' language and identity evolution. I would be grateful if you would like to share with me your memories of that time. Feel free to tell me all the memories/experiences/anecdotes you want. Every detail might interest me. The material gathered during this interview will be treated as confidential and securely stored. In subsequent publications or use of these questionnaires your name will be removed where used and your comments made unattributable. You are invited to answer the following questions in any of the following languages English/Spanish/Catalan/Romanian.

Thank you in advance for your input!

Kind regards!

Biographical information

- Name and Surname:
- Age:
- Country of origin:
- Studies:
- *Which languages do you speak? Write them in order, starting with the ones you feel more comfortable with.*
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.

The Erasmus/mobility program

- *In which country did you spend the Erasmus/mobility period?*
- *When did you enroll on an Erasmus/mobility program?*

Month	Year
-------	------
- *Name the three most important reasons that determined you to enroll on an Erasmus/mobility program.*
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- *For which reasons did you choose this country?*
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- *Have your expectations been fulfilled? Please underline the chosen option.*

Yes	No	Partially fulfilled
-----	----	---------------------

- *With which groups of people did you have more contact? Please underline the chosen option.*

Local people

Erasmus/mobility students from different countries

Erasmus/mobility students from your country

- *Which aspects do you consider determinant when an Erasmus/mobility student has to join a certain group of people?*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

- *Do you think the Erasmus/mobility program has given you any strategies (linguistic/social/others) that you could use in your future life? Can you name any of them?*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

- Write some lines explaining your experience as an Erasmus/mobility participant. The following questions may be considered (but not all of them have to be answered):

How would you define the Erasmus/mobility program with regard to the study experience? Which aspects do you think it has helped you to enhance? Did you have the chance to attend any language courses? Which languages could you study? With which languages did you enter in contact? Which language (s) was/were most frequently used? Do you think your participation in the program has changed your perception about you and the society? In which way/ways? Have you learnt anything about other societies and cultures? Has this fact changed your perception about social and cultural aspects? In which way/ways? Do you think the Erasmus/communities students form independent communities during their stay? If they do, on what things are these communities based? What is/are the language(s) of these communities? Why do you think the chosen language(s) is/are this one (s)?

Please, feel free to add any other aspects you would like to share.

Continuation on the next page

How would you define yourself as a subject in relation to your position as an Erasmus/mobility participant? Please underline the chosen option.

I felt that I belonged to another social group (not the Erasmus/mobility group).

I felt that I belonged to the Erasmus/mobility group.

I felt that I was a world citizen and I could become a member of many other social groups if I wanted.

None of the previous.

That's all! Thank you!

If you would like to receive the findings of this research, please write down your e-mail address.

Feel free to contact me if you have any further questions.

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