

Mocanu-Florea, Vasilica. *Language Learning in Study Abroad: Social, Cultural, and Identity-Related Factors. Erasmus Students in Northern, Southern, and Eastern-European English as Lingua Franca Contexts. Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2023. 219 pages*

Sofia Peña Fernández (sofia.pf@usal.es)
Universidad de Salamanca

The Erasmus program is a European initiative that aims to promote education and mobility abroad, giving European students the possibility of spending a sojourn abroad by attending a different European University for between 2 and 12 months, to “bring positive and long-lasting effects in the participants and participating organizations involved” (European Commission, 2023). Within the last decades, studying abroad has become more and more popular and has been acknowledged as a source of language learning as well as a “way to a more flexible and dynamic identity” (Mocanu 13).

One of the most obvious objectives of the Erasmus program is to achieve “increased competence in foreign languages” (European Commission). Multilingualism is one of the European Union’s greatest points of pride, which explains this institution’s efforts to promote the teaching and learning of other European languages in the Union. As stated by Enric Llurda et al., “multilingualism represents the distinguishing feature of an increasing number of globalized, hybrid and multicultural societies, like the European” (7), and it can be considered a recognition of European identity by its citizens. In addition, studying abroad not only entails contact with a target language but also provides broader personal and cultural experiences. As stated by Michael Bryam, “[i]f language learning is to be part of a policy of internationalization, it has to be more than the acquisition of linguistic competence” (29). When studying abroad, students not only learn the language and customs of other countries but also become involved in a holistic learning event entailing social, cultural, and identity-related outcomes that challenge their expectations and beliefs; thus, identity plays a key role in sojourns abroad and above all in language learning. Such is the importance of identity in the process of language acquisition that one of the main objectives of the Erasmus program is “to strengthen European identity and active citizenship” (European

Commission). This sense of belonging to the Union is particularly involved in language acquisition, since it “depends on the ability to interact and communicate with other Europeans using the full range of one’s linguistic repertoire” (Llurda, 8). For this reason, the linguistic, the cultural, and the identity-related factors are closely intertwined when speaking about European citizenship and study abroad sojourns.

Vasilica Mocanu’s *Language Learning in Study Abroad: Social, Cultural, and Identity-Related Factors* covers a remarkable study that illustrates the social, linguistic, and cultural aspects of language learners when studying abroad and how participation in the Erasmus program impacts their identities, language attitudes, and professional development. The value of this monograph is that it examines the impact of studying abroad on language learning and identity building, through participants’ reports. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, Mocanu presents in-depth research on the attitudes and expectations of European students before and after their sojourn abroad in three different European locations, namely Oulu (Finland), Bucharest (Romania), and Lleida (Spain), thus successfully providing a deeper understanding of the real outcomes of study abroad sojourns in the European continent.

Mocanu’s volume comprises five chapters. The introductory section establishes the background of the study, which is based on the connection between language and identity. Language learning cannot be understood only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as “part of a complex life experience” (21) that has social, cultural, and linguistic consequences. The main purpose of this overview is to explore the sociocultural facets of language learning and study abroad experiences. This part also includes an overview of the theoretical background, the research questions, the methodology used, and a summary of the focus and aims of the study.

Following this brief overview, the author introduces the theoretical framework of her research in Chapter 2. This section explains the impact of studying abroad and provides evidence of previous studies on this same question. As previously stated, studying abroad is understood as a holistic experience that convers linguistic, social, cultural, and identity-related facets. As the author observes, study sojourns abroad make participants develop new abilities as they become not only

language learners but also language users (27). This chapter considers the experience of studying abroad as a challenge to the self by delving into the social and psychological impact of language learning, and the effect of a neoliberal ideology within language learning, which sees language learning as a profitable endeavor for the future which makes the acquisition of wealth and status possible.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study. The author uses mixed methods research, which “combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research (...) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al., 123). This approach offers a wide-ranging perception of a phenomenon, as it answers questions that a qualitative or a quantitative method alone could not answer. In this case, Mocanu combines a questionnaire, through which quantitative data was gathered, and a semi-structured interview, employed to collect the qualitative data. Data were collected at two different points corresponding to the beginning and the end of the participants’ sojourn abroad, which helped participants to reflect on their experiences and was beneficial to the research process in that initial expectations and outcomes could be compared. This chapter also introduces the procedure, analysis, location, and participants in the study. Regarding the procedure, the questions in both the questionnaire and the interview were based on an extensive reading of literature on language learning in study abroad. To guarantee adequate research, a pilot study took place, in which participants corroborated their understanding of the questions, made the necessary changes, and completed the study by adding more questions. The analysis focused on the selected tests to collect the data and observe the results, utilizing a Mann-Whitney U Test that analyzed the participants’ responses, to a Wilcoxon signed-rank test that examined the evolution between the PRE and the POST questions answered by the participants. The research took place in three different European destinations, namely Oulu in Finland, Bucharest in Romania, and Lleida in Spain. The number of participants differed in the qualitative and the quantitative data, but all of them came from different geographies, levels of education, and socio-political backgrounds to offer a broader and more accurate study.

Chapter 4 examines the results of the study, taking into account the role of the host context, the socio-cultural and linguistic contact,

and identity-related factors, in all cases comparing the beginning and the end of the participants' sojourn abroad. Concerning the context, the participants were asked about their expectations, their language learning motivation, and their language use. For the linguistic and socio-cultural contact situation, questions about the participants' sense of belonging, self-perception, and future mobility were asked. The identity-related inquiries were related to the personal, academic, and professional benefits expected by the participants. This last category of the study paid attention to the participants' motivation and investment in the improvement of their knowledge of English, other languages, and other cultures, the sense of growth regarding their autonomy and self-confidence, and their acceptance of other cultures. This section also pays attention to the notion of "neoliberalism" from the point of view of sociolinguistics, which considers that language learning is an investment that will benefit the learners' future and make them more "employable." Overall, the participants in Finland felt more disappointed at the end of their stay because of the darkness of the climate, the high prices, and mixed feelings regarding the locals and the institutions; the participants in Bucharest felt much more welcomed than they had expected and benefited from the Romanian friendliness and inexpensive lifestyle; the participants in Lleida also felt welcomed by the locals but quite dissatisfied with the dominance of Catalan, the local language mainly used in the institution. In addition, the participants noted a tendency towards a lower use of English and local languages during their sojourn abroad than initially expected. The only exception was that students in Lleida believed they had improved their skills in Spanish (not in Catalan), although not because of contact with other local citizens but with Latin-American exchange students, especially those coming from Mexico. In general, the participants felt more prepared for the professional world although they did not feel they had improved much on the academic level. In addition, the results on personal issues such as self-confidence autonomy, or acceptance of other cultures were lower in Oulu in contrast to Romania and Spain.

The fifth chapter highlights the main findings in the previous chapter and triangulates them with the results of previous literature on the topic. This section ends the monograph with some concluding remarks on the socio-cultural, linguistic, and identity-based outcomes of the study. At the beginning of the sojourn abroad, the participants'

expectations tend to be high, especially the ones related to their knowledge of other cultures and their use of English. However, the outcomes differ in each Erasmus location, starting with the Oulu group, whose initial expectations were high because of the high expectations linked to Northern European countries but were rather disappointed at the end of their study abroad. The opposite tendency was observed in Bucharest, where students traveled with relatively low expectations but concluded their sojourn with a positive experience. Similarly, the students in Lleida chose this destination because of the presence of Spanish and its importance in the linguistic panorama. The students in Lleida completed their sojourn with their desires accomplished. Regarding their identity, this tended to be more complex at the end of their stay abroad, since contact with different people and cultures can confuse some students in their prospects.

Although the Erasmus program has proven to produce mostly successful results, these experiences abroad may trigger “a destabilization and hybridization of identity” (193) as the participants’ ideas about Europe, the world, and themselves change. This “alteration of the self” is explained by the use of a second language and an international atmosphere that leads to an expansion of people’s horizons. Nevertheless, the improvement experienced at a personal and professional level is enormous, as the students end their sojourns abroad with a more open mind, feeling more confident about being mobile abroad and more attracted to discovering new places. All in all, the study reveals that those students with high expectations at the beginning of their sojourn abroad tend to end their experience with rather disappointing results, while those who have low or no expectations undergo startling fulfillment.

The last pages of the monograph offer an appendix with the specific questions asked in the PRE and POST questionnaires and interviews.

In summary, this book provides a highly valuable study of the impact of study abroad sojourns on social, cultural, linguistic, and identity-based gains. Although study abroad has been a subject of concern for sociolinguistics within the last decades, Mocanu’s study offers a broad view of the repercussions of sojourns abroad as experienced by European students. The variety of locations chosen and participants interviewed allows for a wider analysis that thoroughly exemplifies the object of the study. The insights and descriptions of the research conducted

are rigorous and well-explained so that they are comprehensible and relevant for the reader. The statistics, explanation of the graphs, and final appendices are a reliable complement to this study.

Works Cited

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