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The linguistic and cultural experiences of Portuguese Erasmus+ students during their stay in Ostrava: Challenges and opportunities

ABSTRACT. The study investigates the linguistic and cultural experiences of Erasmus+ students from Portugal at the University of Ostrava in the Czech Republic. Special attention is paid to the challenges encountered by the students in both communication and coping with cultural differences, as well as to their language needs, ways of communicating, attitudes towards the Czech culture, and the role of English in communication. The research tool was a questionnaire covering a number of questions related to the purpose of the study. As the results show, while the intercultural experience was generally enriching and the participants appreciated some interesting aspects of the Czech culture, they were particularly disappointed by the limited number of Czechs able to speak English and some of the academic teachers' low levels of language proficiency in English. In fact, this is not limited to the lack of language skills, as communication problems can also lead to the perception of the interlocutor as unpleasant and unhelpful.

KEYWORDS: student mobility, intercultural experience, English as a lingua franca, developing intercultural skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study has been to investigate the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by Portuguese students participating in the Erasmus+ exchange programme at the University of Ostrava in the Czech Republic. Special attention is paid to the students' perception of the Czech language and culture, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of their stay in Ostrava, the communication problems encountered by them and the ways of coping with them, as well as the role of English in communication there. Unlike other studies on stay-abroad learning (e.g. the volume edited by Sanz & Morales-Front in 2018), the present one does not focus on immersion language learning, as the students did not come to Ostrava to study Czech. Instead, they were studying different subjects and what they shared was Portuguese as their native language, a fairly

high level of proficiency in English, which allowed them to study abroad, and the lack of language skills in Czech. Therefore, rather than language learning, the study investigates the experience of a different culture and communication strategies, including language choices, in a country whose language they do not know. It focuses on both English and Czech and on their different roles in the participants' intercultural experience. While English as a *lingua franca* (see Jenkins 2009) is often assumed to be the default language of international exchanges and the lack of its knowledge can result in communication problems, Czech was, on the one hand, unfamiliar to the Portuguese students and their perception of it constitutes an interesting object of study but, on the other hand, in some situations basic phrases in Czech proved indispensable to them, so some kind of immersion learning was inevitable.

Moreover, as noted by Sobkowiak (2021: 150), earlier studies mainly involved international students in the US, where English is the dominant language (Kim 2015, after Sobkowiak 2021: 150), and in China, where English is used in education extensively enough for the students to communicate freely (Tian & Lowe 2014, after Sobkowiak 2021: 150). Other studies investigate international students' experiences in Western countries, such as France (Agulhon & Enfaaa 2016; Walker 2016), the United Kingdom, Germany, as well as Spain, Italy, the Netherlands or Finland (Carneiro, Guerra & Malta 2005). Few studies concentrate on study-abroad stays in countries where less widely taught languages are spoken, and where communication in English is necessary but not guaranteed. Certainly, Dutch and Finnish are less widely taught languages too, but at the same time, their speakers can generally communicate in English. By contrast, this is not necessarily the case in the former socialist countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, where Russian used to be obligatory in schools and the older generations had less opportunity to learn English. However, as Vogl (2018: 193) has observed, the former Eastern bloc countries have changed their foreign language policy "from Russian (and partly German) to English as the most important foreign language". Yet, in Central Europe, multilingualism is still viewed to some extent as a threat to the native language and, more generally, to national languages (Vogl 2014, after Vogl 2018: 193). Certainly, English is now studied there as a foreign language, but Central European students attach considerable importance to rootedness in a specific territory and its language, and, like respondents from other European countries, they stress the instrumental function of foreign language learning (Vogl 2018: 207).

By contrast, research on Erasmus sojourns in Eastern European countries is quite limited and includes, for example, Lipowski's (2012) study, which gives a short overview of the experiences and impressions of Erasmus students in

Lublin, Poland, Sobkowiak's (2021) study, which focuses on the development of intercultural identity by Turkish students in Poland, and a recent study by Szczepaniak-Kozak, Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Lankiewicz (2022), which "investigates the interplay of language and intercultural communication" (Szczepaniak-Kozak, Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Lankiewicz 2022: 53), paying special attention to the role of languages other than English, in this case Polish. In contrast to Sobkowiak's (2021) study, the present one does not assume the development of an intercultural identity by the Portuguese students, but it investigates their perception of a culture which is quite different from their own. It is possible that, to some extent, such development also took place, but this is beyond the scope of this study, given the short period of time taken into consideration. Moreover, like the one by Szczepaniak-Kozak, Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Lankiewicz (2022), in addition to cultural aspects of the sojourn, it investigates communication problems related to language use, although in this case, the language other than *lingua franca* English is not Polish but Czech.

In general, the topic seems quite relevant to the contemporary trends in student mobility and the internationalisation of universities. Even though the pandemic has slowed down these processes to some extent, it can be hoped that student exchange programmes will continue in the future.

The present study was carried out in 2015, when the present author was teaching at the University of Ostrava, but the questions in the survey were general enough for the collected data to be still valid. Some organisational changes may have been introduced as a result of the pandemic, but the patterns of language use and differences between the Czech and Portuguese cultures can be supposed to have remained virtually the same. On the one hand, the student mobility program Erasmus+ (Erasmus until 2014) has become very popular and, undoubtedly, it contributes not only to the intellectual and professional development of students, but also to the exchange of knowledge and, consequently, to an increase in innovation (Lipska 2007). In particular, the knowledge of foreign languages, especially English as the world language, is a key competence for all students, not only those of English Philology or International Relations. As emphasised by Crystal (2003: 110), English is the vehicular language for a considerable part of the world's knowledge, especially in the natural sciences and technology. In addition, in the globalised world, where companies are often international, or they participate in international trade, intercultural communication is very important, and requires not only good language skills, but also intercultural competence. On the other hand, study-abroad stays feature a component of difficulty in adapting to the host country's culture, or even of culture shock, which, if properly reflected on, can lead to the acquisition or further development of intercultural competence (Peckenpaugh 2018; Sobkowiak 2021).

On the above grounds, the present study takes into consideration two aspects of the participants' sojourn in the Czech Republic. On the one hand, the author investigates problems in communication and the students' language needs, especially the limitations on the use of English and the need to learn some "survival Czech" as well as to use other communication strategies. On the other hand, it investigates the participants' perception of cultural differences and ways of adapting to them, as possibilities of profiting from their stay in Ostrava and developing intercultural competence. Consequently, the questionnaire includes questions about both the advantages and the disadvantages of studying in the Czech Republic as an Erasmus+ student.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

In the era of globalisation, international contacts at different levels have become an inherent part of contemporary life. Whether in trade, in research or in tourism, it is undeniable that numerous exchanges require, among other things, a sufficient level of intercultural and foreign language competence. Still, communication is not limited to language use, but requires a variety of interpersonal skills and attitudes. As noted by Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020: 2), employers nowadays expect their employees to interact effectively with people "from highly diverse backgrounds" (British Council 2013; Messelink, Van Maele & Spencer-Oatey 2015; Watkins & Smith 2018, after Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva 2020: 2). It is therefore necessary to possess intercultural competence, understood as both awareness of differences and a set of attitudes, values, knowledge and skills that allow one to interact with people different from oneself.

Language skills are indispensable for communication and, undoubtedly, English is a global language (Crystal 2003) and functions as a lingua franca among speakers of different linguacultural origins (Jenkins 2009: 200), most of whom are non-native speakers. In particular, in more or less international settings, such as universities, English seems a natural choice. However, staying abroad, even as a student, is not limited to the formal setting, as one needs to use public transport, do shopping, etc. In countries whose languages are not widely studied abroad, the language barrier can become a serious obstacle, especially if part of the society does not speak English, which has been shown by Lipowski (2012) for the Polish context.

Even so, however useful it might be, English alone is not always enough and it is actually advisable to be multilingual (Szczyrkowska 2007: 43). It may be enough for communication, for example, during a short stay abroad or dur-

ing basic business negotiations, but it is no longer sufficient if you want to live in a foreign country or sell your products there. As Szczurkowska (2007: 43) points out, true mutual comprehension and respect for another culture's values require the knowledge of its language. For this reason, EU experts in education and language policy aim to propagate multilingualism and, in particular, expect learners to become aware of the cognitive values of their language competence attained by the end of secondary school, to acquire sufficient intercultural competence, to be able to communicate in at least two foreign languages and to be ready to learn further ones in the future (European Commission 2004, after Szczurkowska 2007: 44).

It is important to underscore that learning and using foreign languages is not limited to the school or university context. As languages are used for various purposes, multilingual learners' needs vary from one language to another and, consequently, their language repertoires are varied and enriched with different cultural competences (Coste, Moore & Zarate 1997). According to Coste, Moore and Zarate (1997: 12–13), since multilingual and multicultural repertoires are complex and heterogeneous by nature, one ought to develop language awareness to be able to manage them.

Moreover, as emphasised by Byram (2008: 68–69), being “an intercultural speaker” is not limited to knowing other cultures, but one needs to act interculturally, which requires certain attitudes, knowledge and skills, that is why he defines them in terms of “behavioural objectives,” called *savoirs*. They include attitudes (*savoir être*), such as curiosity and openness, so as to stop taking one's own culture for granted and to accept the strangeness of foreign ones, knowledge (*savoirs*) of social groups, their products, practices, etc., “skills of interpreting and relating” (*savoir comprendre*), such as the ability to interpret foreign texts and relate them to those from one's own culture, “skills of discovery and interaction” (*savoir apprendre/faire*), or the ability to learn about other cultures and use that knowledge in real-life interaction and, finally, “critical cultural awareness/political education” (*savoir s'engager*), or the ability to evaluate cultural practices and products critically, relating them to explicit criteria (Byram 2008: 69). In a study-abroad context, students are likely to have an opportunity to develop all these skills, provided they reflect on their experience.

Still, despite the importance of intercultural competence, it is very difficult to assess its attainment. On the one hand, the construct of intercultural competence has evolved from “promoting familiarity with the foreign culture,” through developing cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence, to the formation of intercultural beings and “life-long learners or interculture” (Sercu 2010: 21). It involves a number of skills, such as foreign language skills, social skills, critical thinking skills, values, attitudes, etc. (Sercu 2010: 24), which

would all have to be assessed holistically, but, in fact, such a holistic measure does not exist yet (Sercu 2010: 25). Even though different relevant test formats have been proposed, it should be remembered that the particular dimensions of intercultural competence are interdependent (Sercu 2010: 28). Thus, in the absence of an adequate assessment instrument which would cover the linguistic and cultural aspects of intercultural competence simultaneously, the present study had to be conducted, using a fairly general questionnaire, investigating the participants' experiences and observations. Still, as the present study did not aim to measure their intercultural competence anyway, it can be assumed that the questionnaire, which will be discussed in Section 5 below, was adequate for the purpose of the study.

3. THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF STUDYING ABROAD

In general, studying abroad is associated with a number of benefits related to the acquisition of linguistic and cultural skills which may later increase one's job prospects. However, this is not to be taken for granted, as encountering cultural differences may render the experience of student exchange negative and fail to bring the expected results. If the differences are considerable, one may even experience culture shock, or the disquieting experience caused by the disappearance of native cultural codes used in interaction and/or their substitution by other codes or symbols (Oberg 1960, after Alserda 2011: 20; Hall 1959, after Alserda 2011: 20).

Even so, the experience of studying abroad enables developing intercultural competence. According to the experiential learning theory (ELT), the learning process involves several stages, from a concrete experience, through observation and reflection, to the creation of new concepts or knowledge. Such knowledge can then be tested in new situations, and thus transferred to other contexts (Passarelli & Kolb 2012, after Peckenpaugh 2018: 478). Montrose (2002: 5–6, after Peckenpaugh 2018: 478) calls the third stage "the conceptualization stage," and that is when it is vital to support such students to prevent them from developing stereotypes or overgeneralisations. In a similar vein, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003, after Peckenpaugh 2018: 477), applied to the description of intercultural learning by Vande Berg, Page and Hemming Lou (2012, after Peckenpaugh 2018: 477), divides the intercultural learning process into stages. It distinguishes six stages, three of which are ethnocentric (denial, defence and minimisation) and involve the avoidance of cultural differences by emphasising one's native culture, and three are ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation and integration) and allow one to relativise

one's own culture in the context of other cultures and thus to explore cultural differences (Peckenpaugh 2018: 477). According to Peckenpaugh (2018: 477), these two models complement each other and the experiential learning theory can help to describe accurately the gradual process of change.

In fact, even negative experiences can be useful for intercultural learning. According to Kim (2008, after Sobkowiak 2012: 152), even though the uncertainty and stress provoked by cultural differences can lead to avoidance or withdrawal, they also have a potential for triggering development. During the adaptation process, people start searching for some congruence between the internal and the external conditions (Kim 2008: 363, after Sobkowiak 2021: 152), which can result in psychological growth, or "an increased complexity in an individual's internal communication system" (Kim 2015: 5, after Sobkowiak 2012: 152).

It can thus be seen that the development of intercultural competence requires conscious reflection on one's experiences, whether positive or negative. One needs to look at one's native culture from a different angle, reflect on what one has observed, and be able to apply this knowledge in the future. In the case of Erasmus+ students, intercultural experience may help them not only in their future studies abroad but, comprising an ability to analyse other cultures and to adapt to them, it may become useful to them, for example, in future work if it involves travelling abroad on business.

4. THE OBJECTIVES AND EFFECTS OF THE ERASMUS STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

The Erasmus programme (Erasmus+ since 2014) was created in 1987 (Bratuń 2009: 18–19) and has always aimed to let students not only acquire knowledge, but also get to know other cultures, nations and customs and to create in Europe a society built on a foundation of tolerance, trust and friendship (Bratuń 2009: 19). At the same time, the societal changes connected with European integration, globalisation as well as the development of technology, lead to the development of the information society, where lifelong learning plays an important role (Szadok-Bratuń 2009: 303). In this society, the role of education is to convey information to create knowledge which will finally result in wisdom (Szadok-Bratuń 2009: 303).

As shown by Krzaklewska and Krupnik (2008), the Erasmus students interviewed by them were most satisfied with the social dimension of their stay abroad, and least satisfied with the problem-solving dimension, for example, the need to solve financial problems. However, almost 20% of the students felt discriminated against during their stay, because of their status of foreigners or

insufficient language competence. Consequently, they were less satisfied with their contact with local students than with that with other international students participating in exchange programmes. Still, they admit that they acquired intercultural competences, such as communication in a foreign country, openness, tolerance, adaptation to another higher education system and career planning.

Certainly, apart from ideals, the Erasmus programme aims to achieve more practical goals. The mobility of students and researchers contributes to the exchange of experience and to an increase in scientific and technological potential (Lipska 2007: 152). As for students' personal development, apart from adaptation to another culture, greater flexibility in contacts with foreigners and increased self-confidence, Lipska (2007: 158–159) mentions practical foreign language skills and experience which may improve one's job prospects. In a similar vein, Engel (2010: 5) observes that Erasmus students evaluate their sojourns abroad very positively for such reasons as better knowledge of other countries and comprehension of other cultures, as well as improved foreign language skills. Moreover, employers regard study-abroad stays as an asset, taking into consideration especially language experience, the discipline studied and the duration of the stay (Engel 2010: 7).

On the other hand, some students also experience considerable difficulties during their Erasmus sojourns. In a survey on their experiences in Lublin, Poland, international students did not only mention the advantages, such as friendly people, teachers who had tried to explain everything to them, or the beauty and the atmosphere of Lublin, but also disadvantages, such as communication problems caused by many Poles' insufficient knowledge of English, difficulty in adapting to the culture and the limited number of courses taught in English (Lipowski 2012: 755–756). In fact, the language barrier proved to be one of the main problems. Some of the students learnt a little Polish to make themselves understood, for example, while shopping. Finally, in spite of some signs of intolerance of foreigners, the students generally express a positive opinion of Polish people, who proved ready to help them (Lipowski 2012: 758). Foreign students' disappointment at not being able to communicate in English everywhere in Poland and the need to learn some basic Polish has also been observed by Szczepaniak-Kozak, Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Lankiewicz (2022).

It can thus be supposed that some of the problems encountered by the Portuguese students in the Czech Republic may be the same as those mentioned by the international students in Poland, especially a language barrier and difficulty in adapting to a different culture. However, in contrast to Lipowski's (2012) study, which involved students from different countries, the present one was addressed at a more homogeneous group, that is why some observations may be shared by the participants and may reflect the distance between both cultures better.

5. THE STUDY

5.1. Participants

The present study was carried out with twenty-two Portuguese students who were studying different disciplines at the University of Ostrava in late November 2015. Six of them were studying Environmental Engineering, four were studying International Relations, four – Social Assistance, three – Economics, three – Languages and Cultures, one was studying IT, one – Human Resources Management and one – Enterprise Management. Twelve of them were female and ten were male.

The duration of their stays in Ostrava, indicated by the students themselves, ranged from two to three months since their arrival (mean = 2.568, SD = 0.495), which indicates that their exposure to the Czech language and culture was comparable and their experiences could indeed be to some extent shared. Apparently, they had arrived around the beginning of the academic year, which, in the Czech Republic, is in September. Following Kim (2008, 2015, after Sobkowiak 2021: 152–153), it might be supposed that they were at a similar stage of adaptation to the foreign culture and thus, despite studying different disciplines, they can be regarded as a fairly homogeneous group in terms of experience of the Czech culture. In fact, as revealed by the results of the questionnaire, which will be discussed in more detail in Subsection 5.3. below, their experience of studying abroad was comparable too, as only one respondent had participated in a student exchange programme before. For this reason, it is possible that they were facing similar challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar culture in general.

5.2. Method

The research tool applied was a questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and closed questions. The closed questions involved either several multiple-choice options or a one-to-five Likert scale, where one represented total disagreement or total dissatisfaction, and five represented full agreement or full satisfaction. At the same time, the open-ended questions allowed the students to make their own comments on different – positive or negative – aspects of the Czech culture, of their studies there and, last but not least, on what they could already say in Czech. The questionnaire was written in Portuguese. It is presented both in Portuguese (Appendix 1) and in English translation (Appendix 2).

The research questions which the study intends to answer are as follows: First, what were the Portuguese students' language needs? How did they com-

municate in the Czech Republic? Second, in the students' opinion, what were the advantages and disadvantages of their stay in Ostrava on an Erasmus+ scholarship? Third, what was their perception of the Czech language and culture, given the distance between the two languages and cultures? On this basis, it will be attempted to identify the implications of these findings for the possibilities of developing intercultural competence in this and similar contexts.

5.3. Results

In general, as will be discussed in detail below, the students proved to be quite aware of their language needs as well as of the communication problems encountered in the Czech Republic. First of all, regarding their language needs, most of them needed English for various reasons. In response to the question concerning the extent to which they needed English, the mean is 4.18 (SD = 1.006), which proves that English is indeed useful to the respondents, even though some of them need it more than others. The reasons given comprise possibilities of working abroad, communication during their studies abroad, including the comprehension of lectures and classes, reading texts by foreign authors, globalisation, the importance of English in companies and in politics, or, more generally, having a good level of English language proficiency for one's professional future. On the other hand, some of the students listed more specific reasons connected with their professional goals, for example: "it is always important for an engineer to speak English", "the development of software/applications is done in English", "it is a field of study which concerns different people, cultures, countries" (an International Relations student), "because most of the classes are in English and a large part of customers are international companies" (an Environmental Engineering student), "because the economy is international and, as English is the language number one spoken in the world, one should be able to speak it" (author's own translation from Portuguese). As these answers indicate, English is perceived as useful in different areas and professions, not only those traditionally associated with foreign language learning, such as English Philology or International Relations.

However, English is not the only foreign language that can be useful in their studies. Five students admitted they needed Spanish, two mentioned German, two mentioned Chinese, one mentioned French and one wrote she needed Czech in order to communicate in the Czech Republic. Two students wrote they needed languages other than English without specifying them. As for their justifications, Spanish would also give them the possibility of work-

ing abroad or else it was the second most important language of the course followed by the respondent. In addition, they mentioned the role of Mandarin Chinese, Russian and German in the world, either in politics (the former two), or in industry (the latter). By contrast, twelve students wrote they did not need any languages other than English.

As for the languages used in communication during their stay in Ostrava, eleven students (50%) admitted that they used only English, while eight students (36.36%) used mainly English, although they had acquired some basic words and expressions in Czech. Two respondents (9.01%) wrote that they used other languages: Spanish and Portuguese. In the latter case, the respondent probably communicated with other Portuguese students. Moreover, two students (9.01%) mentioned the use of gestures and one (4.54%) – that of an electronic Portuguese-Czech translator. These results are quite predictable and confirm the general tendency to use English in international contexts. At the same time, gestures seem to be a universal communication strategy, while electronic translators can facilitate communication by means of technology. As observed by Vogl (2018: 187), this is a generation “familiar with new media and communication technologies from an early age.” As each student could mark more than one answer, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100%. The percentages of the participants’ answers are shown in Figure 1 below.

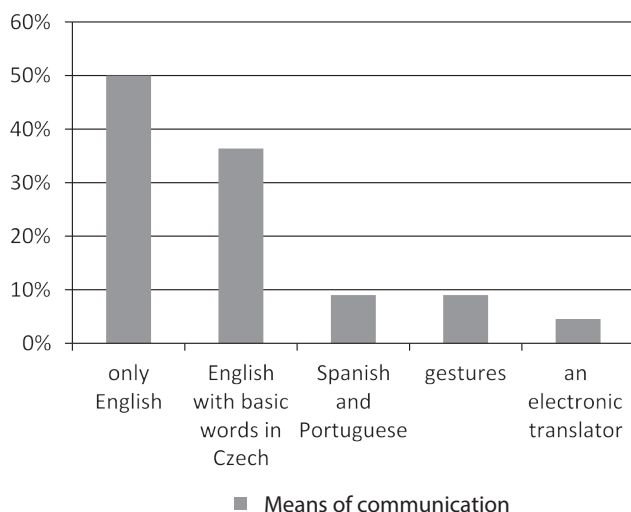


Figure 1. The means of communication used by the participants

Source:

At the same time, the questionnaires also reveal a certain language barrier. In fact, one of the disadvantages of studying in the Czech Republic, according to the participants, is the fact that few people speak English or that Czechs have a low level of English language proficiency. This confirms the widespread belief that English as a lingua franca is the default means of communication in the contemporary world, especially in a country whose language is not widely taught and which the students do not speak. To some extent, the fact of meeting people with whom one is unable to communicate in English and, consequently, the possibilities of communication are very limited, can be regarded as a kind of culture shock or an opportunity for reflection of the value of multilingual competences. This result overlaps with Szczepaniak-Kozak, Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Lankiewicz (2022: 59–61) observation that, contrary to their expectations regarding English as a truly global language, many foreign students realise that some competence in the host country's language is indispensable in their daily functioning.

Certainly, they admitted having acquired some basic Czech words and expressions, but that was not enough for communication. Table 1 below enumerates the Czech words they had already learnt by the time of the study given in answer to the question: "What can you already say in Czech?" It is possible that they had learnt more words and expressions, but these were those which they remembered and could use productively. As the research tool was a questionnaire, they were free to write any words and expressions that occurred to them. However, as mentioned earlier, they had not come to Ostrava to study Czech, they had lectures in English at university and, moreover, they had spent a relatively short time there, so a Czech language proficiency test was not feasible. They picked up some words and phrases in everyday situations and, even if their actual Czech vocabularies were slightly larger, the items given in answer to the question can be assumed to be representative of their competence in the Czech language.

Table 1. Czech words and expressions already acquired by the students

No.	Czech word or expression	Meaning in English	Number of students	Comments
1.	<i>dobrý den</i>	good day	15 (68.18%)	9 students wrote the phrase in Czech (spelling it "dobry den", "dobri den", "dobry dén", etc.) and 6 in Portuguese (<i>bom dia</i>).
2.	<i>na zdraví</i>	cheers; to your health	4 (18.18%)	Spelt "nasdravi" or "nasdrav" by 3 students.

No.	Czech word or expression	Meaning in English	Number of students	Comments
3.	<i>ahoj</i>	hello	8 (36.36%)	5 students wrote it in Czech (1 spelt it "ahoy" and 1 "ahoi") and 3 in Portuguese (<i>olá</i>).
4.	<i>díky</i>	thanks	3 (13.64%)	Spelt "diqui", or "dicki"; only 1 student spelt it correctly.
5.	<i>děkuji</i>	thank you	11 (50%)	Only 3 students wrote it in Czech; 8 wrote the Portuguese words "obrigado" (masculine) or "obrigada" (feminine). Those who wrote it in Czech spelt it "decui", "dekoy", etc.
6.	<i>prosím</i>	please	11 (50%)	8 students wrote it in Czech, also with mistakes, e.g. "prosím"; three wrote "por favour" in Portuguese.
7.	<i>pivo</i>	beer	4 (18.18%)	2 students wrote it in Czech and two in Portuguese (<i>cerveja</i>).
8.	<i>kuřecí</i>	chicken (adjective)	1 (4.54%)	Spelt "kureci".
9.	<i>dobré ráno</i>	good morning	1 (4.54%)	Spelt "Dobre rano".
10.	<i>dobrou noc</i>	good night	1 (4.54%)	Spelt correctly.
11.	<i>náměstí</i>	square	1 (4.54%)	Spelt "namesti", without the diacritics.
13.	<i>ano</i>	yes	3 (13.64%)	Spelt correctly.
14.	<i>ne</i>	no	3 (13.64%)	Spelt correctly by two students; one wrote "né".
15.	<i>pozor</i>	attention	1 (4.54%)	Spelt "posor".
16.	<i>příští zastávka</i>	next (bus/tram) stop	3 (13.64%)	2 students wrote it in Czech (1 spelt it correctly and 1 wrote "pristivaskavska") and 1 in Portuguese (<i>próxima paragem</i>).
17.	<i>Co je to?</i>	What is this?	1 (4.54%)	Spelt correctly.
18.	<i>Jak se jmenuješ?</i>	What is your name?	1 (4.54%)	Spelt correctly.
19.	<i>promiňte</i>	excuse me/pardon	1 (4.54%)	Spelt correctly.
20.	<i>na shledanou</i>	goodbye	3 (13.64%)	1 person wrote it in Czech and 2 in Portuguese (<i>adeus</i>).
21.	<i>Lenka</i>	Lenka (a girl's name)	1 (4.54%)	Spelt correctly.
22.	<i>dobrá</i>	good, very well, all right, OK	1 (4.54%)	Spelt "dobra".
23.	<i>pusu</i>	kiss	1 (4.54%)	Doubled: "pusu/pusu".

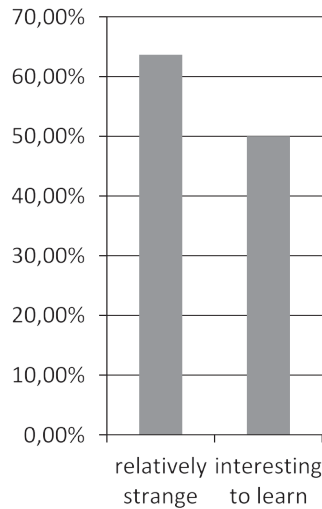
Source: Authors' compilation

Moreover, six words and expressions: *água* (water), *bonita* (pretty), *chave da lavandaria* (the key to the launderette), *quanto* (how much), *panquecas* (pancakes) and *de nada* (you are welcome) were given only in Portuguese. As shown in Table 1 above, the students who provided the words known in Czech also misspelt them quite often, omitting the diacritics or relying on Portuguese spelling rules, as in the case of “diqui” for “*diký*”. This indicates that, even though the knowledge of the oral form of foreign words is not necessarily associated with that of their spelling, such words can still be used in communication. Furthermore, the examples demonstrate that the respondents’ Czech vocabulary consisted of some basic words and phrases, so English was indispensable for communication and remained the main language they communicated in.

At the same time, the students’ expectations of being able to communicate in English were often thwarted by Czechs whose knowledge of English was insufficient in relation to the respondents’ needs and expectations. To illustrate this, in reply to the question about what they particularly disliked about the Czech Republic, they specified that “few people speak English”, “people do not speak another language”, “people are unfriendly towards foreigners if we do not speak their language”, etc. (author’s own translation from Portuguese). In fact, that proved to be not only a linguistic problem, but also a cultural one, as Czechs with little or no proficiency in English appeared unfriendly and unhelpful in the respondents’ interpretation, which will be discussed below.

Regarding their overall perception of the Czech language, the students perceived it as relatively strange (14 participants, or 63.64%) and that it would probably not be useful to them in the future. However, eleven students (50%) admitted it would be interesting to learn a little Czech. As for the host culture, the overwhelming majority (19 students, or 86.36%) perceived it as very different from Portuguese culture, but eight (36.36%) admitted that the atmosphere at the hall of residence was “too international” for them to get to know Czechs and their culture. Four students (18.18%) found the Czech culture very interesting, two (9.01%) marked the answer that they liked it very much and only one (4.54%) claimed it did not interest him because he had come to the Czech Republic to study his major. As each student could mark more than one answer, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100%. The percentages are shown in Figures 2 and 3 below.

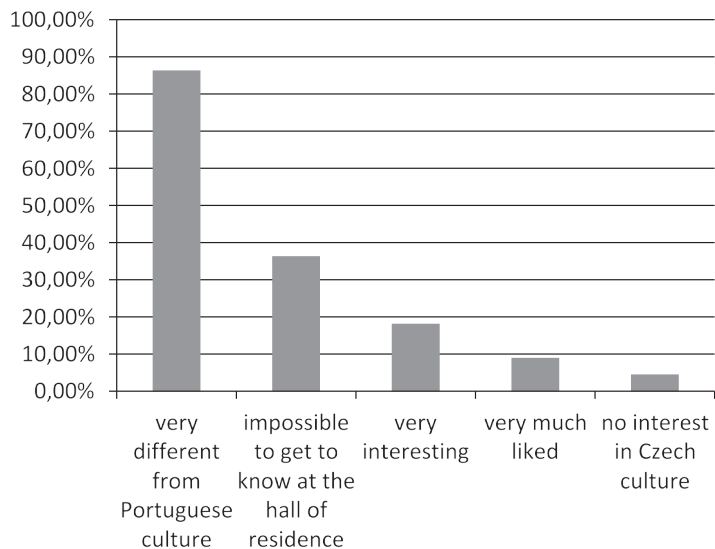
In general, the students relatively liked the Czech Republic and were quite unanimous about it (mean = 3.68, SD = 0.78). What they particularly appreciated were the possibilities of travelling to different places in the Czech Republic and Central Europe (4 students), low prices (5 students; in fact, they described the Czech Republic as a cheap country), an efficient public transport network (5 students), as well as good universities (1 student) with more dynamic teach-



■ The participants' perception of the Czech language

Figure 2. The Portuguese students' perception of the Czech language

Source: Authors' compilation



■ The Portuguese students' perception of Czech culture

Figure 3. The Portuguese students' perception of Czech culture

Source: Authors' compilation

ing (2), a good quality of life (1) and good treatment of pets (1). They also found the country beautiful (5 students), including its architecture (2), cities (of which they explicitly mentioned Prague, Ostrava, Brno and Olomouc) as well as the mountains (1). In the respondents' opinion, the culture is quite different from Portuguese culture (5 students), which allowed them to get to know other points of view (1) and constituted a challenge for their adaptation capacity (1). One student remarked that, despite appearing relaxed, the Czechs worked in a pragmatic and efficient way. This might not seem directly related to the development of intercultural competence, but, arguably, positive aspects of a foreign culture contribute to a positive experience of that culture, which in synergy may motivate students to get to know it better. Moreover, developing intercultural competence was not, after all, the main aim of their stay in the Czech Republic, even though, unconsciously, they acquired some intercultural experience by living in a foreign country. In fact, as noted by Sercu (2010: 21), nowadays the main aim of teaching intercultural competence is no longer the transmission of knowledge about foreign cultures, but rather becoming "intercultural beings" open to the life-long learning of intercultural skills. Thus, even though a positive experience may not necessarily have increased their competence precisely with regard to the Czech culture, it is possible that they acquired some more general intercultural skills, which may lead to life-long learning in the future.

By contrast, apart from the alleged Czechs' low level or lack of proficiency in English mentioned by four students, or in any foreign language (1 student), and the fact that Czech people were unfriendly to foreigners who did not speak their language (6 students), negative aspects included food (5 students) and the lack of fish in particular (1), as well as rude or unfriendly people (5), and people who were unhelpful (1) or not open (1). Only two students described the Czechs as friendly. One student mentioned the lack of integration into the Czech culture and the lack of opportunities to participate in cultural events, which he attributed to the fact that he had few classes in English and, consequently, little contact with Czechs. It might be supposed that, if there had been more classes in English, destined for both Czech and international students, he would have had more contact with Czechs and their culture. However, he did not specify the language of the classes; it may be assumed that, as an Environmental Engineering student, in Ostrava he could only attend classes in English, which, unfortunately, were relatively few. The fact that the Portuguese students found Czechs unfriendly to people who did not speak their language shows that not only is linguistic competence very important, but that incomprehension can also lead to a negative experience of interpersonal contacts. In fact, this observation confirms the importance of competence not only in English but also in the language of the host country. Certainly, the lack of proficiency in English can

be attributed to different factors (for example, the older generation may have had Russian rather than English at school), but international students should be made aware that, contrary to expectations, one may not be able to communicate in English everywhere. Other aspects the study participants disliked about the Czech Republic were the climate, which they found very cold (4 students), and shorter days (1), so the experience of a study-abroad stay can be influenced not only by linguistic and cultural factors, but also by natural ones.

On the other hand, the respondents were a little less satisfied with their studies in the Czech Republic than with their stay there in general. The mean level of satisfaction with their studies was 3.59, with a slightly higher standard deviation (0.91), which suggests more varied opinions. While some of the students considered the classes interesting and dynamic and the teachers friendly, accessible and competent in explaining the subject matter, others complained that there were too few classes in English, that the teachers' English was too poor and that some courses were badly organised for Erasmus students. As one student remarked, the teaching was completely different from that in Portugal, but at the same time, she was generally pleased with her teachers and the subjects being taught. Another International Relations student appreciated the fact that the requirements were higher than at her university in Portugal. One Environmental Engineering student also admitted that he had learnt a lot both from his Czech teachers and from the fellow international students.

Finally, with regard to the students' earlier experience of studying abroad, only one person had participated in such an exchange before. She had stayed in Bulgaria and, as the people did not speak English well either, she had needed help with communication. However, as for the other students it was the first experience of that kind, it can be supposed that their opinions may have been to some extent subjective and they may even have experienced a sort of culture shock.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To answer the research questions, first, while the Portuguese students undoubtedly needed English for their studies and future careers (the mean was 4.18 on a 5-point Likert scale), they recognised the importance of learning other languages, such as Spanish or German, as they mentioned them in answer to the next question. Moreover, during their stay in the Czech Republic, they needed Czech. However, given the short time of their stay, they learnt only some basic words and phrases. Consequently, they communicated predominantly in English, but, to their disappointment, they met many people who did not speak it or spoke it with low command and who proved rather unfriendly towards for-

eigners unable to speak Czech. As an additional communication means, 9.1% of the students used gestures and one student mentioned an electronic translator. Second, the advantages they mentioned included travel opportunities, interesting and dynamic classes at the university and the possibility to learn new things, as well as a good quality of life, low prices and efficient public transport. The disadvantages they listed were related to both cultural factors (people with little or no knowledge of English, unfriendly towards foreigners, and also food) and natural ones (a cold climate). Third, as for their perception of the Czech culture, they undoubtedly noticed that it was very different from the Portuguese culture, but they generally viewed it as an opportunity to learn, which reflects their *savoir être* and *savoir apprendre* (Byram 2008: 69), such as curiosity, openness and willingness to get to know other cultures.

In general, it can be concluded that the sojourn in the Czech Republic was an interesting and enriching experience for them, although also a difficult one because of cultural differences and a language barrier, especially outside the university. At the cultural level, the Czech cuisine, especially the lack of fish (which, according to one student, are essential to life), proved particularly difficult to accept. At the same time, the international atmosphere of the university, the hall of residence and the possibility to communicate in English there facilitated their stay, but this also depended on the field of study. While an Economics student remarked that the teachers' English was comprehensible, the student of Human Resources Management wrote that their English was poor. At the same time, one Environmental Engineering student admitted that, in spite of problems with English, the teachers helped the students. Another Environmental Engineering student also mentioned that there were too few classes held in English, which prevented him from having more contact with the Czech culture.

Certainly, the results obtained confirm the importance of English in contemporary international exchanges. Moreover, the fact that the Portuguese chose the Czech Republic for their Erasmus+ sojourns suggests that even a relatively small country can have different advantages to offer and thus attract foreign students. Even though the questionnaire itself did not include the question why they had chosen the Czech Republic, it can be assumed that it was their conscious and well thought-out decision, as participation in the Erasmus+ programme is not obligatory.

As for the implications of this study for the development of intercultural competence in this and similar contexts, the preparation of students for international exchange programs should include raising their awareness of possible communication difficulties, as English may be spoken at the university, but not always by the general public. Perhaps, it would be advisable to provide Erasmus+ students with some classes introducing them to the culture of the country

they are going to visit and helping them acquire some basic competence in its language. This may improve their intercultural experience, minimise culture shock and allow them to learn more during their stay abroad.

Last but not least, given the relatively small scale of the study and the fairly informal character of the questionnaire, further research on the intercultural experiences of Erasmus+ students would be advisable. In particular, following Sercu's (2010) recommendation, holistic assessment instruments combining linguistic and cultural skills might be developed and, arguably, they might be tested with different groups of participants in different cultural contexts. As a result, even very small changes in students' intercultural competence might be observed and, possibly, capitalised on. Even though staying abroad for, for example, one semester cannot result in acquiring the culture of the host country, it might contribute to developing intercultural awareness and life-long learning skills.

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APPENDIX 1. THE QUESTIONNAIRE USED IN THE STUDY

QUESTIONÁRIO

Sexo: F_/M_

1. Língua materna: _____

L2: _____ Duração da aprendizagem/ nível: _____

L3: _____ Duração da aprendizagem/ nível: _____

Que outras línguas estudou? (Por favor, indique os níveis e as durações de aprendizagem aproximadas.)

2. Que disciplina estuda? _____

Em que grau precisa da língua inglesa nos seus estudos? (1 – muito pouco, 5 – realmente muito)

1 2 3 4 5

Por favor, explique a sua escolha:

Precisa de outras línguas estrangeiras nos seus estudos? Sim/ Não

Se precisa, indique de que língua(s) precisa e porquê?

3. Desde quanto tempo está na República Checa? _____

Em que grau gosta da República Checa no geral? (1 - muito pouco, 5 - realmente muito)

1 2 3 4 5

Porquê?

De que é que particularmente gosta na República Checa? _____

Porquê?

De que é que particularmente NÃO gosta na República Checa? _____

Porquê?

Em que grau está contente com os estudos na República Checa? 1 2 3 4 5

Porquê?

4. Que acha da língua checa? (Pode marcar tantas respostas quantas quiser.)

- É bonita, ao menos tem um som bonito.
- É bastante estranha.
- Nunca me sera útil, porque consigo comunicar-me em inglês em toda a parte.
- Provavelmente não me será útil no futuro, mas seria interessante aprendê-la um pouco quando estivesse aqui.
- Se bem que ainda não tentasse aprendê-la, acho que seria demasiado difícil para mim.
- Não sei, porque não me interessa nada. Cheguei aqui continuar os estudos na minha disciplina principal e não aprender a língua.
- outra coisa (explique, por favor)

Já tentou aprender um pouco da língua checa? Sim/ Não

Se tentou, o que é que acha? (Pode marcar tantas respostas quantas quiser.)

- É difícil.
- É fácil.
- É muito diferente das outras línguas que estudei.
- O que é particularmente difícil é a gramática.
- O que é particularmente difícil é o vocabulário.
- O que é particularmente difícil é a pronúncia.
- O que é particularmente difícil é a ortografia.
- É difícil por razões culturais.
- outra coisa (explique, por favor)

O que é que já sabe dizer em checo?

Como é que consegue comunicar-se na República Checa?

- Só em inglês.
- Sobretudo em inglês, mas aprendi algumas palavras e expressões básicas em checo.
- Já falo um pouco de checo e consigo falá-lo em muitas situações, mas quando tenho problemas, passo ao inglês.
- Sobretudo em inglês, mas também falo uma outra língua (alemão/ russo/ espanhol/ outra língua: _____), e já encontrei pessoas com as quais falei naquela língua.
- outra coisa (explique, por favor)

Que impressão tem da cultura checa? (Pode marcar tantas respostas quantas quiser.)

- Gosto muito. É interessante e também os checos são simpáticos.
- É muito interessante.
- É muito diferente da cultura portuguesa.
- Não gosto.

Se não gosta, porquê?

- Não me interessa, porque só cheguei estudar aqui e não aprender sobre a cultura.
- Acho que é interessante, mas não tenho tempo de chegar a conhecê-la, porque tenho que estudar.
- A cultura na universidade é tão internacional que é impossível chegar a conhecer a cultura checa.
- A cultura na residência universitária é tão internacional que é impossível chegar a conhecer a cultura checa.
- outra coisa (explique, por favor)

5. Já esteve com uma bolsa num outro país? Sim/ Não

Se respondeu "sim", em que país esteve?

Em que língua comunicava-se naquele país? _____

Foi mais ou menos difícil comunicar-se ali do que na República Checa? _____

Porquê?

6. Queria acrescentar um comentário próprio?

Muito obrigada.

APPENDIX 2. THE QUESTIONNAIRE USED IN THE STUDY (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

QUESTIONNAIRE

Gender: F___/M___

1. Native language: _____

L2: _____ Learning time/proficiency level: _____

L3: _____ Learning time/proficiency level: _____

What other languages have you studied? (Please, indicate your proficiency levels and the approximate learning times.)

2. What discipline do you study? _____

To what extent do you need English in your studies? (1 - very little, 5 - a lot)

1 2 3 4 5

Please, explain your choice:

Do you need other foreign languages in your studies? Yes/ No

If you do, please, indicate what language(s) you need and why.

3. How long have you been living in the Czech Republic? _____

To what extent do you like the Czech Republic in general? (1 - very little, 5 - a lot)

1 2 3 4 5

Why?

What do you particularly like about the Czech Republic? _____

Why?

What do you particularly DISLIKE about the Czech Republic? _____

Why?

To what extent are you satisfied with your studies in the Czech Republic? 1 2 3 4 5

Why?

4. What do you think of the Czech language? (You can mark as many answers as you want.)

- It is nice, at least it sounds nice.
- It is quite strange.
- It will never be useful to me because I can communicate in English everywhere.
- It will probably not be useful to me in the future, but it would be interesting to learn a little bit of it during my stay here.
- Even though I have never tried to learn it, I think it would be too difficult for me.
- I do not know because it does not interest me at all. I have come here to continue studying my major and not to learn the language.
- Other (please, explain) _____

Have you tried to learn a little Czech yet? Yes/No

If you have, what do you think of it? (You can mark as many answers as you want.)

- It is difficult.
- It is easy.
- It is very different from the other languages I have studied.
- What is particularly difficult is the grammar.
- What is particularly difficult is the vocabulary.
- What is particularly difficult is the pronunciation.
- What is particularly difficult is the spelling.
- It is difficult for cultural reasons.
- Other (please, explain) _____

What can you already say in Czech?

How do you manage to communicate in the Czech Republic?

- Only in English.
- Mainly in English, but I have learnt some basic words and expressions in Czech.
- I already speak a little Czech and I manage to speak it in many situations, but when I have problems, I switch to English.
- Mainly in English, but I also speak another language (German/Russian/Spanish/another language: _____) and I have already met people with whom I have spoken it.
- Other (please, explain) _____

What is your impression of Czech culture? (You can mark as many answers as you want.)

- I like it very much. It is interesting and Czech people are friendly too.

- It is very interesting.
- It is very different from Portuguese culture.
- I do not like it.

If you do not like it, why?

- It does not interest me because I have come here to study and not to learn about the culture.
- I find it interesting, but I have no time to get to know it because I have to study.
- The culture at the university is so international that it is impossible to get to know Czech culture.
- The culture at the hall of residence is so international that it is impossible to get to know Czech culture.
- Other (please, explain) _____

5. Have you been on a scholarship in another country before? Yes/No

If you have answered 'yes', what country have you been to? _____

In what language did you communicate in that country? _____

Was it more or less difficult to communicate there than in the Czech Republic? Why?

6. Would you like to add a comment of your own?

Thank you very much.

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