Popping the Erasmus Bubble: Perceptions of Intercultural Awareness and Competence of Incoming Erasmus+ Students and the Preparation Challenge

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Abstract: The Year Abroad is an important point of departure in many students' lives, not only exposing them to new personal and academic contexts and challenges but also to providing them with the opportunity to grow and develop linguistically and interculturally. This article presents the findings of an empirical study comprising one-to-one semi-structured interviews with incoming Erasmus+ students at Maynooth University, and marries this with the dearth of research on outgoing students in multiple contexts, alongside the anecdotal shared experiences of previous outgoing domestic students at Maynooth University. The article examines the key issues of social media and social networks within the process of developing intercultural awareness and competence prior to and during the sojourn abroad, and the lack of sufficient and effective preparation of students before mobility which emerge as the two dominant issues in the empirical data obtained through anonymous module evaluations completed by students. The article culminates by discussing the development and piloting of a preparatory module at Maynooth University to address this preparation challenge. The empirical data generated from students matriculated in the piloted preparatory module indicates a strong desire for, and positivity towards, a well-developed, fully accredited, elective module integrated into students' degree programmes prior to their sojourn abroad.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Competence, Year Abroad Preparation, International Students

1. Introduction

Considering current societal developments and the growing number of countries involved in the process of globalization, and reacting to it by ever-changing approaches to internationalization, 'intercultural competence' has become a key and highly desirable skill in order to effectively navigate communication between different cultures intra-nationally and internationally. As a result, 'intercultural competence' is espoused increasingly as a central component to teaching and learning. As Deardorff points out "one meaningful outcome of internationalization efforts at post-secondary institutions is the development of interculturally-competent students" [1]. Thus, 'intercultural competence' is already encouraged by including it in the curriculum and additionally students can develop their skills "through meaningful intercultural interactions on campus, and through other opportunities such as service learning" [2].

In view of the challenges associated with integrating intercultural approaches into teaching and learning within higher education systems, exchange programmes in particular are identified as a primary avenue through which one can further intercultural skills, not only by living and studying in another country, but also by facilitating "internationalization at home" [3], exposing domestic students to intercultural realities on their home campuses through the presence of international students and lecturers. One such representative programme operating within this intercultural agenda is the Erasmus (since 2013/2014 renamed Erasmus+) programme, a European exchange programme enabling student and lecturer exchanges on an academic level. Within this programme, there is a notable percentage of students from the Arts and Humanities, particularly modern language degrees, teacher-training degrees and degrees in literary and cultural studies [4].

The literature in this area is replete with studies focussing

on domestic students' experiences abroad, a natural area of study from academics who are interested in gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their domestic students' experiences abroad and the impact of such on their overall development interculturally and often linguistically [2, 5, 6, 7], as the two are arguably intrinsically linked. A far lesser studied issue is the experiences of international students within a so-called 'Erasmus bubble' [8, 9, 10] during their time at host institutions, how they see themselves developing interculturally, and what are the major factors that underlie the challenges and successes they experience during their study abroad period. Following a Grounded Theory approach, two central issues in students' experience emerge: the effect of social media/networks, and pre-sojourn abroad preparation. Given the centrality of the issue of preparing students for the year abroad, this articles aims to make a contribution by exploring the experience of a number of international students from divergent linguistic and cultural backgrounds within the Erasmus+ programme studying at Maynooth University in Ireland and marrying this with the perspectives of outgoing domestic students within a preparatory module currently being piloted at the institution. This article, therefore, contributes to an empirical evaluation of the potential for the Erasmus+ programme to stimulate intercultural learning on the part of its participatory students even within the so-called 'Erasmus bubble' focusing particularly on the topics of intercultural awareness versus competence, and the preparation challenge to the year abroad process for incoming and outgoing students.

2. Understanding the Intercultural: Awareness and Competence

It is evident from the dearth of research in the area that an all-encompassing and generally accepted definition for intercultural awareness and competence does not yet exist and is very much a constantly evolving area. The nebulous nature of the terms has led to scholars in the area diverging widely in terms of the constituents that may be included within a definition of the two phenomena. While 'awareness' appears somewhat less problematic to define, 'competence' remains a source of significant debate. 'Intercultural awareness' may be viewed as constituting ethnocentric characteristics. Definitions of the intercultural competence however are far more heterogeneous and debated ranging from the general, more simplistic operational to the precise, complex theoretical.

Researchers have been attempting to define IC over the last forty years, yet, although it has consolidated itself into a discipline under the term 'Intercultural Studies', it remains a difficult term to define. This is evident from the 300 models and counting, which are currently available defining this concept [11] and forty-plus instruments for the effective measurement of intercultural competence [12]. This trend of over-complexifying is proving to be of concern. Witte and Harden [13] argue that if a standard search on the Internet

already yields over 300,000 results then the already vague notion may become useless, should the trend continue. This argument is even more resonant considering that, since this research was published, the Internet now yields more than 600,000 hits using the same search parameters.

The primary reason for the lack of consensus on a definition centres on the terminology used, because "the terms 'intercultural' and 'competence' cannot be defined in a universally valid manner" [13]. Deardorff [14] supports this argument and asserts that due to the use of IC within various fields (e.g. in the field of social studies in comparison to engineering) it is difficult to agree upon stringent terminology, as there are different contexts to consider. Furthermore, Fantini [12] expresses concern surrounding the quantity of terms available in this area, such as communicative competence, cross-cultural awareness, and cross-cultural communication. The inconsistencies in the IC definitions in current circulation served as an impetus for Deardorff's research employing the Delphi Technique, which aimed to foster consensus on the concept of IC, to agree on its necessary components and to outline the ways in which IC can be assessed [1, 15].

The question of culture in the context of ICC remains a subject of intense debate. Some of the available working definitions currently aim for a culture-specific context. For example, Moeller and Nugent [16] describe an interculturally competent speaker of a foreign language as possessing 'both communicative competence in that language as well as particular skills, attitudes, values and knowledge about a culture' [16], reflecting a definition of IC in the context of FLL. Kim [17] aims conversely for a 'culture- and context-general' approach to defining IC: "the overall capacity of an individual to enact behaviors and activities that foster cooperative relationships with culturally (or ethnically) dissimilar others" [17]. Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman [18] also posit a context-neutral definition when referring to intercultural competence as 'the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways' [18]. Consequently, the key terms 'culture' and 'competence' must first be addressed before any working definition of ICC can be postulated.

There appears to be an abundance of definitions of culture, modified to suit the needs of researchers dependent on the focus of their research. This in turn poses challenges to using culture in the context of intercultural communication. Kroeber and Kluckhohn [19] outlined 164 definitions of culture as cited in [20]. Scollon [21] argues that by tailoring their definitions depending on the context of their research, researchers are diminishing the overall concept of culture. What appears certain is that '[c]ulture hides more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants' [22] exemplified in the iceberg analogy describing the complexity of culture [23] cited in [24].

This can be illustrated by the iceberg analogy, which is commonly used to describe the complexity of culture [23] cited in [24], reflects the various ways in which people interpret culture. Berger and Luckman [25] (1966) highlight

an important distinction as *objective* and *subjective* cultures – with the *objective* culture referring to the visible forms and the *subjective* referring the invisible or unseen aspects. Mirroring the cultural iceberg, Hinkel [26] identifies culture as concepts of personal space and appropriate gestures, however its impact is "both broader and deeper, defining the way a person sees his or her place in a society".

The type of culture reflected in many ICC models focuses on both objective and subjective cultures – not just on the visual aspects of culture, such as behaviours and customs, but also the meanings behind them. Clearly, the traditional correlation between culture and nation, however, is no longer adequate. Although attitudes, values and beliefs may reflect a particular nation, there are also subgroups or *subcultures* to consider regarding to age, gender, geographical, class or ethnic backgrounds [27].

Thus, residency abroad creates the opportunity for a greater realisation that the world is subjective and not objective, that people have different opinions and values, which need to be recognised and respected. Furthermore, it brings into sharper focus culture and language are intertwined – 'language is to a large extent shaped by culture, but the reverse is also true to some degree…' [28].

The assessment of culture is not the only component that provides difficulties in defining IC. There is also a disagreement as to what 'competence' implies. Pottinger [29] describes competence as 'one of the most abused words in our professional vocabulary' due to the confusion which results when trying to assess qualities in people, as cited in [25]. Harden [30] agrees with this sentiment stating that "the concept of competence is based on a number of historical misunderstandings and adaptation which render it so extremely flexible and broad that its value as an instrument for serious research is virtually nil". Moosmüller and Schönhuth [31] describe competence as 'polyvalent', comprising aspects of responsibility and authority on one hand, and capability, ability and skill on the other. Hymes argues that the emphasis should be placed on the appropriateness of the language used, focussing on the social context, depending on cultural aspects: '[a] general theory of the interaction of language and social life must encompass the multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning' [32]. By focusing on the processes involved in communication, Hymes is not only focusing on the cognitive, but also the affective and the behavioural elements of communication. Hymes refers to this type of competence as 'communicative competence', which through its measuring ability has become the 'cornerstone of communicative foreign language teaching' [30] and arguably also for intercultural competence, exemplified by the number of models which have been produced, resting upon the theory of communicative competence. These are most notably in the American context by [33], and in the European context by van Ek, through his communicative ability model [34]. Van Ek's model in particular has significant influence in FLL in the European context, and forms the origin of the highly influential Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence by [35]. Intercultural awareness may, therefore, be seen to constitute more ethnocentric characteristics while competence indicates a transition into more ethnorelative perspectives enabling the individual to alternate between the cultures present within the temporal, socio-geographical space within which they find themselves.

3. Methodological Framework

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of incoming Erasmus+ students within the institution, it was decided that a purely qualitative approach would be employed to probe deeply into their various facets of students' experiences in terms of interculturality. According to Deardorff [1], "the best way to assess intercultural competence is through a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures". This qualitative pilot study would, therefore, also serve as important input into a larger subsequent study comprised of qualitative and quantitative research instruments to be conducted at the same institution. It was conducted during the month of November in 2016 on site at Maynooth University. An initial list of all incoming Erasmus+ students was obtained from the institution's International Office and all students registered for that semester were invited to participate. Of the 205 students contacted, 52 students indicated an interest in participating. During follow-up correspondence with students, it transpired that only 10 of these students were willing to attend the envisaged one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The reasons for an inability to participate ranged from time constraints, to workload commitments, upcoming exam preparation and indeed a desire to maximise their remaining time in Ireland by travelling around the country in their free time to gain maximum exposure to the language and culture. In the end given time and other restrictions, it was only possible to conduct 6 in-depth qualitative interviews with Erasmus+ students with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. 3 of the 6 interviewees were German which may be attributed in part to the access to German students afforded the researcher as a result of his base in German Studies within the institution, and also due to a higher level of interest and motivation noted in the German students about the study. Broadening the scope and diversity of the participating students to a wider range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds was identified as a result of this as an important consideration for the later larger study.

3.1. The Context

Maynooth University, officially the National University of Ireland Maynooth, was founded under the Universities Act, 1997 but draws on a heritage of over 200 years' commitment to education and scholarship, by tracing its origins to the foundation of the Royal College of St. Patrick in 1795. It is Ireland's fastest growing university with currently around 10,000 students. The university is divided into three faculties: Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy; Science and Engineering; and Social Sciences, with each faculty

comprising a number of schools and departments. Each year more than 450 international students come to study at Maynooth for one or more semesters at undergraduate and postgraduate levels from its large network of Erasmus+ partner institutions, in addition to a number of partner institutions in North America, Latin America, Asia and Australia.

3.2. Study Participants

The participatory cohort was deliberately as heterogeneous as possible, with only one notable concentration of cultural backgrounds noted i.e. three of the six participants were German. The remaining three were from Western Europe (France), Central Europe (Slovakia) and Eastern Europe (the Ukraine) respectively. Securing students from such disparate cultural backgrounds was a desired aim of the study in order to obtain as broad a range of perspectives on interculturality as possible. The average age of participatory students was 22, with two of the three German students participating in Masters-level courses as they were matriculated in Masters programmes in Germany. The remaining German student and the students from France, Slovakia and the Ukraine were all Bachelor-level students and were registered predominately for Final Year modules at the host institution. The disciplinary background of the students was equally as heterogeneous as their cultural background. While four of the students came from disparate Arts and Humanities subjects (English Studies, German Studies and Music), two students were studying subjects which may be subsumed under the disciplines of the Natural Sciences (Mathematics, Chemistry). This disciplinary diversity will serve as an interesting variable in studying respondents' views on intercultural awareness and competence. While it may have been initially hypothesised that students of the Arts and Humanities are more sensitised to the notion of intercultural than their Natural Science counterparts owing to the ontological orientation of the Arts and Humanities; it arises in the subsequent data, however, that sensitivity to intercultural matters transcends disciplinary boundaries and is not necessarily stronger in the Arts and Humanities.

3.3. Research Instruments

As outlined above, it was decided within the auspices of the pilot study to restrict the method of data collection to one instrument, one-to-one semi-structured interviews. According to Dörnyei [36], interviews are the most commonly used research method amongst qualitative methods, particularly in the area of Applied Linguistics. They are often the most valuable form of qualitative data collection [37]. An array of interview types exist along a spectrum of structured to unstructured, where the former corresponds closely to the written questionnaire format, while the latter to a more formalised conversation with emphasis on the interviewee [38]. An interview format capable of exploring, in an in-depth manner, issues was required. The researcher, therefore, decided on a one-to-one semi-structured interview format, an

approach advocated by Dörnyei [36] and Morse & Richards [39] in contexts where researchers already possess an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and wish to explore the context further in greater detail.

"The 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" [40]. Considering the more intimate nature characterising the one-to-one semi-structured interview as opposed to the focus group situation, it is more appropriate in capturing personal experiences of participants which is precisely the aim of this research. Furthermore, in view of the exploratory nature of this research, interviews were deemed the most appropriate tool to access and document these experiences. Personal diaries and narratives were excluded as research instruments as they presented too large an imposition on participants in terms of time and workload which would likely have impacted negatively on participation rates.

The interview genre is common to the cultural knowledge repertoire of the vast majority of people within the HE system, and as such they are well versed in the composition, process and conventions of an interview and the role it plays in the construction of personal meaning [40, 41, 42]. This presents major advantages for the employment of interviews as a data collection tool. Given the high level of familiarity with the genre coupled with its position amongst people's common cultural knowledge, and the tool's popularity and proven track record in the field [42], interviews can be employed by researchers without invoking a great degree of hesitancy amongst research participants as many feel comfortable with the format.

3.4. Procedure

While a question route was developed with some key questions for discussion, a large degree of flexibility was adopted to allow for the exploration of unanticipated themes and issues, and indeed to allow the interview to flow in a natural manner much like a conversation. The design, therefore, draws on a 'flexible' interview design outlined by Rubin and Rubin [43]. They suggest that a flexible interview design, or elements thereof, is well suited to qualitative interviewing that is exploratory in nature. In this study, it enabled the researcher to examine new ideas and themes as they emerged by altering the array of questions as desired. Furthermore, it also allowed the researcher to tailor questions for individual interviewees who may be more knowledgeable in one area than others. This flexibility towards questioning broadens the scope of the research beyond the narrowly defined assumptions about the interview context and interviewees. Additionally, interviewees appeared to perceive this flexibility in a positive way to mean that the interview was very much interested in their personal insights which in turn increased their desire to disclose information.

In terms of the location of the interviews, it was decided to follow the array of recommendations on focus group locations, which are equally relevant for one-to-one

interviews, made by Litosseliti [44] and Krueger [45] regarding the size, composition and location of the room. The size of the meeting room was also conducive to the use of audio recording equipment as it was sufficiently small for the acoustics to favour voice recording. It was decided that voice recording would be employed as a means of documenting the interviews. Dörnyei [36] supports the use of voice recording highlighting that note-taking is simply not capable of capturing the nuances involved in the interview process. With the researcher's attention freed up by the employment of voice recording for data collection, the researcher was able to better build a positive rapport with interviewees, a decisive factor in successfully conducting research interviews [43, 46].

The ethical issues regarding participation and the use of recording equipment was highlighted by the researcher prior to each interview before proceeding to the main content stage. Within the research project, the time for each interview varied quite significantly amongst participants. Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes in length.

Transcribing the data presented many challenges in view of the multifarious composition of the study cohort under investigation. Although all interviews were conducted in English, as the only language common to all participants' linguistic repertoires, a wide variety of non-native varieties of English comprised the samples including many varieties of German English, Bulgarian English and Lithuanian English. Transcription systems and conventions are in large supply in the area of Applied Linguistics which suggests that no overarching 'perfect' transcription system exists. It was, therefore, decided to adopt a 'pick and mix' approach for the transcription process in this research project. Following Roberts [47] and Lapadat [48], Dörnyei [36] advocates such an approach in developing and utilising an individualised transcription system capable of representing the data they have collected in the most comprehensive manner. The transcription conventions utilised within the research project were based on those for the creation of "The Limerick Corpus of Irish English" [49]. All interview data transcriptions were then input into NVivo and analysed using a synthesis approach to Grounded Theory [50], in conjunction with elements of Vaughan's "Theory Elaboration" approach [51], and some limited discourse analysis.

4. Perceptions and Development of Intercultural Awareness and Competence

The key and perhaps unsurprising finding of this empirical research, which shall be extrapolated and explored in this section, relates to the fact that the majority of students do not possess the understanding of interculturality necessary to differentiate between intercultural awareness and competence. All study participants except one use the terms awareness and competence interchangeably in discussing and

reflecting upon their experiences during their year abroad. Semantically, competence and awareness appear to the students to carry the same meaning and indeed weight. In the case of the one student who differentiates, the difference between the two terms is hierarchically understood in that awareness is something which can developed relatively quickly both before the year abroad through the language classroom or independent research and during the year abroad itself in encountering cultural artefacts in the host culture. Interestingly, this student was not a student of the Arts and Humanities, which as aforementioned may be more sensitive to questions of culture and interculturality considering the ontological orientation of the discipline. The student in question was a student of Chemistry, who however had a mixed heritage background which may explain in part his sensitivity to intercultural issues:

"I know about the Irish and the drinking of the Guinness and eating fries for breakfast, so I'm competent in their culture and can interact interculturally" (Intl-Stud-1)

"I developed intercultural competence in my language classes at home in Ukraine. The teacher gave us information on Ireland and Britain which I learned and so I'm now competent" (Intl-Stud-5)

"I had awareness before I left France to come here [Ireland]. I knew the Irish people they...ahhh...drank alcohol a lot. I knew food is different here like...ahhh...black pudding and baked beans. Competence is the tricky thing. It means more than awareness. It means you can act in a way that isn't foreign. I don't think I know competence yet" (Intl-Stud-4)

Intercultural awareness as discussed by students moves beyond a somewhat superficial level of cultural knowledge relating to cuisine, drinks, festivals and tradition in the case of three participants. Behaviours and worldviews are recognised by students; however, they merely view differences in behaviours and viewing the world through a comparative lens with their respective home cultures with somewhat negatively connotated language. Such perspectives suggest that students within this study are still very much located within the ethnocentric part of the spectrum with no students exhibiting ethnorelative tendencies. Interestingly, the 'we'/'us' group in some utterances are not necessarily delineated according to nationality but rather pertain to the Erasmus in-group in opposition to the domestic out-group:

"The Irish, they have a very relaxed way of doing things which is fun but when you're working on a group assignment they don't take their work seriously like us [Germans]" (Intl-Stud-6)

"All they [the Irish] want to do is have fun and drink and eat. We don't always want to go out drinking so they make us feeling like we don't belong in their group. Why can't they do something that doesn't mean drinking alcohol?" (Intl-Stud-3)

Students comment that the arguably natural formation of an Erasmus bubble constitutes a major impediment to pursuing developing greater intercultural awareness of the host culture and indeed the chance to progress beyond

awareness into competence territory. Five of the six students confirm that their exposure to Irish culture and interaction with Irish students is largely limited to contact within their university classes and to a far lesser extent outside the classroom in working on group projects. None of the students appear to have been successful in cultivating relationships with Irish students. According to students, the potential for them to engaging with Irish students in intercultural learning is limited and impels students to cluster within an Erasmus group creating a so-called Erasmus bubble.

An additional impediment to intercultural learning beyond issues pertaining to breaking into the 'Irish group' is the use of social media as a form of umbilical tethering between students and their home cultures. Considering the ubiquity and convenience of modern technologies, international students can remain ensconced in their home culture even when in a host culture. All students within the sample confess to spending a significant portion of their free time interacting with friends and family at home through media such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, access to streaming websites containing media products dubbed into students L1 further reduces students' exposure to host linguistic and cultural artefacts. Additionally, participants comment that the comfort and security involved in this strong tethering to the home language, culture and people also constitutes a blocking factor in students' efforts to engage more with the host language, culture and people, particularly those involved in a shorter exchange period (e.g. one semester vs one academic year). Clearly, from the below data excerpts, it becomes quite clear that emotive factors play a key role. If students are genuinely interested in engaging with the host culture, they will seek out opportunities and reflect on their practices of attempted interaction and integration. If interaction and integration are not important to the individual, there are barriers the individual can erect to live in the host culture not only interact with it superficially i.e. preservation of home social networks via social media, use of home media products and/or international media products dubbed into their L1. As one student outlines below, linguistic fatigue can significantly impact upon interest in and practices of engaging with interculturality:

"I know I shouldn't but I'm on social media constantly while I'm here. Well, you know, you need it. To keep in touch with family and friends is important. I think maybe it does stop me from making more of an effort to make friends with the Irish though. It's just more easy and you need some comfort sometimes." (Intl-Stud-4)

"I have tried to watch TV and movies here in English, but I get really sick of that. You know, I'm using English all day long. I just want sometimes to escape to my own language to relax. I thank the fact that there are streaming sites I can use for my language" (Intl-Stud-2)

"From time to time I watch things in English but a lot of the time I prefer to watch them in my own language. I mean, it doesn't probably help me to have common ground with the Irish because I'm not watching the same as them

or even in the same series I'm beyond the time, but I need that time to turn off my brain" (Intl-Stud-5)

"I'm very happy there is Snapchat and WhatsApp so I can talk to my friends at home the whole time. They are very important to me and I'm only here for one semester so I don't really need real friends here" (Intl-Stud-1)

It is evident from such views that students engaging with the year abroad context within their study programmes have varying views of intercultural awareness and competence. It appears that such views are not necessarily explained by the disciplinary orientation of students but rather may be attributed to exposure to interculturality within the home country context, be it at university, in society at large or indeed within family and friend circles. Furthermore, while social media outlets provide an important support mechanism for students to maintain important links with home, equally there is an inherent danger of these home social networks displacing and relegating the host culture and its social networks to lesser significance or indeed insignificance and can, thus, serve as a powerful barrier to interaction with the host culture and moves towards integration. Interestingly, social media was only referred to by students in discussing maintaining their home social networks. No student commented on social media usage for gaining access to host country social networks (e.g. module Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups). Arguably, therefore, in order to equip students with the tools they require to understand, cope more effectively with, and learn from, their new intercultural existence in the year abroad context and the barriers that may exist to fully engaging with the experience, higher education institutions should provide additional supports beyond those relating to overcoming the logistical challenges posed by the year abroad relocation (documentation for study/work in the host country, official registration in the new country, opening bank accounts, travel arrangements etc.) in the form of intercultural preparation, be it in the form of an entire module, training workshops or online/blended courses (on a credit or non-credit bearing basis). This issue will be discussed subsequently within this article.

5. The Preparation Challenge

Half of the study participants in the early stages of the interview referred to some sort of preparation for intercultural issues during the year abroad in the course of their studies hitherto. One participant mentioned that exposure to other cultures was addressed explicitly during her language classes, while two other participants explained that they had participated in a workshop prior to their sojourn abroad in which information about various target cultures were presented. The remaining three participants did not refer to any form of training or awareness building at institutional level prior to coming to Ireland:

"I developed intercultural competence in my language classes at home in Ukraine. The teacher gave us information on Ireland and Britain which I learned and so I'm now competent" (Intl-Stud-5)

"Our university arranged a kind of talk in the semester before we left. They talked about some of the cultures we might meet. For example, the Irish eat fried food for breakfast and like Guinness a lot and drink too much alcohol. I kind of knew such things but it was useful to hear them" (Intl-Stud-1)

"We had an Irish person working in Engineering in our university so our department asked him to talk to us about British culture in a talk which was about an hour"
(Intl-Stud-4)

What emerges from each student's discourse surrounding awareness raising and training in the area of interculturality is that much of the training was very much haphazard and presented interculturality at a superficial level of knowledge about another culture. Those participants who had undergone some sort of training prior to the year abroad expressed a rather limited view of culture and interculturality, mainly as a result of the usual pervasive stereotypes that individuals have about different cultures but also in part reinforced by the training they received. While it is certainly positive that some form of institutional offering in the area of intercultural training prior to the year abroad is provided, the form and approach of such a provision requires some reflection and amendment to better position students to deal with interculturality.

With such experiences in mind alongside the reported experience of outgoing exchange students from Maynooth University over a number of years, the researcher, in consultation with departmental colleagues, engaged in the design and implementation of a semester-long fully accredited year abroad preparatory module which could be taken by students as a 5 ECTS-credit elective within their foreign language. The primary aims of this module were three-fold:

(1) To sensitise students to, and stimulate student reflection on, the relativity of culture in all its guises: locally, regionally, nationally and internationally

(2) To expose students to the range of strategies and models, deriving from the wealth of research literature in the area, for dealing with linguistic and (inter) cultural challenges in a host culture

(3) To engage students in simulated intercultural critical incidents from authentic scenarios in order to better position students in coping with interculturality

Consequently, the first 4 weeks of the module involved seminars in which presented with various views on what constitutes culture and how it is diffused. Central to these seminars was a highly interactive task-based learning approach where students had to deduce varying views on culture and marrying these with the research literature in the area. The relationship between language, culture and thought was also highlighted to illustrate the important interrelationship that is relevant to all students in a year abroad context. Importantly, the broad range of views on culture referring not on to national and regional cultures, but also to the transcendence of culture beyond geophysical lines e.g. family cultures, interest-related culture (e.g. individuals

interested in heavy metal music, horse riding, fashion, swimming). According to anonymous student evaluations of the module, this four-week seminar block stimulated a high degree of awareness building of culture, interculturality and the relativity of norms amongst students. A further component of this segment of the module was also hands-on sessions regarding the various components to the application process for Erasmus+ and the English Language Assistantship scheme, which together account for 95% of student placements in abroad.

The second 4 weeks of the module adopted the same format as the first 4-week block focussing this time on useful developmental models (e.g. Bennett's DMIS model) in the area of intercultural awareness and competence. The aim of such was to sensitise students to the non-linear nature of intercultural awareness and competence and to encourage them to analyse and reflect upon the process which they have begun in their foreign language studies and that would intensify during their first sojourn abroad within the target culture. Given the close and reciprocal interrelationship of culture and language, language within the process of intercultural development was discussed as were the pragmatic strategies that students can employ to maximise their ability to further develop their foreign language capital. A further aim was to assist students in recognising and avoiding the pitfalls of conceding ground to the pervasive use of English in many non-English speaking countries, and the strong desire for such non-L1 speakers of English to improve their English proficiency through interaction with L1 students from Ireland, and being too strongly tethered to home social networks and media. Student feedback on this portion of the module was the most positive, owing mainly to its highly practical orientation and utility for their upcoming sojourn abroad. Given that improving language competence is the most dominant primary goal for students going abroad from the language programme studied at Maynooth University in this research project, it is unsurprising that engaging with this topic specifically, at length and pragmatically proved extremely popular amongst students. Students participating in the Year Abroad at the institution studied exhibit high levels of anxiety about the Year Abroad, mainly due to the fact that it is their first time living away from the parental home not to mention their home country. Anxieties are multifaceted but the most common thread revolves around the logistics of dealing with a new language and culture on a daily basis. Discussing the research literature on the lived experiences of students in the Year Abroad context and focussing on the two pillars of dealing with linguistic and cultural challenges instils a sense of preparedness and greater confidence in students' abilities to deal with such challenges.

The final 4 weeks of the module, the focus of the module progressed to interculturality having established the fundaments of culture at the beginning of the module. In this portion, students were exposed to varying viewpoints on intercultural awareness and competence and encouraged to explore both concepts and their components. Additionally,

this portion of the module moved beyond the theoretical by engaging students in acting out role plays which were self-developed critical intercultural incidents from their students' own lives in addition to authentic intercultural role play encounters. With such role plays, students were asked to reflect upon what they have learned about cultural relativity and intercultural awareness and competence and apply this to dealing with various situations which could possibly await them on their sojourn abroad. Student feedback for this portion of the module was overwhelming positive. Students cited the employment of role plays as not only being a very effective means of enabling and stimulating students to reflect on the theoretical material discussed in the module hitherto but also applying experiential learning to encourage students to engage strategies to deal with intercultural incidents and thus prepare them for the greater level of intercultural challenges awaiting them abroad.

Following the first year of the module, anonymous student feedback for the module was broadly very positive. Students comment that the best aspects of the module related to the middle 4-week period where strategies and models for dealing with linguistic and (inter) cultural challenges in a host culture were discussed and actively engaged with, as such topics were viewed as the most urgent and pragmatic to the sojourn abroad. In close second, students commented positively on the opportunity to engage with authentic intercultural critical incidents in order to improve their ability to cope with such eventualities during their time abroad. Unsurprisingly, students were more measured in their feedback on the first 4-week portion of the module focussing on concepts of culture, commenting that they struggled to fully understand the theoretical material and relate it to their practical lives. Following such feedback, the module was further refined in order to maximise its benefit to subsequent student cohorts. The first portion of the module in particular was adapted to make the content more accessible for students. In the continuance of the study, the researcher intends on conducting one-to-one semi-structured interviews at the start of the Academic Year 2018/2019 with students returning from their sojourn abroad in order to ascertain the effectiveness of the preparatory module in easing students' transition into the year abroad and coping with the challenges they faced.

6. Conclusion

The Year Abroad is an important point of departure in many students' lives, not only exposing them to new personal and academic contexts and challenges but also to providing them with the opportunity to grow and develop linguistically and interculturally. The empirical data collected from incoming Erasmus+ students at Maynooth University, and marrying this with the wealth of research on outgoing students in multiple contexts in addition to the anecdotal shared experiences of previous outgoing domestic students, identifies the issues of social media and social networks within the process of developing intercultural awareness and competence prior to and during the sojourn abroad, and the lack of sufficient and

effective preparation, as key components in students' experiences. The use of social media and continual intense tethering to home social networks are identified by students as a significant barrier to development of other social networks in the host culture. While such tethering assists students in dealing with issues of homesickness, they are aware that remaining in their social comfort zone limits their integration into the host culture and true engagement with interculturality. Examining the experiences of incoming and outgoing students and their clear demand for a form of preparation encouraged the development and piloting of a preparatory module at Maynooth University which was also studied empirically and reported upon in this article revealing a strong desire for, and positivity towards, a well-developed, fully accredited, elective module integrated into students' degree programmes. Students in particular value the sensitisation they received during the module to the range of challenges which have been experienced by their predecessors abroad and the international students currently in their midst. In the next phase of this research, it will prove illuminating to uncover the views of student cohort who matriculated in the preparatory module in terms of how the module prepared them to a certain degree for the challenges they encountered on the sojourn abroad.

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