

The impact of Erasmus program on intercultural communication skills of students

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Abstract. In this paper we examine the development of students' intercultural communication skills as a result of participation in the Erasmus Mobility Program. For the analysis both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. The results of survey show that students' level of knowledge, skills and attitudes are much higher than before the program, especially in the skills category. According to the interview with students it can be concluded that students regard the experience of participating in the Erasmus Mobility program as positive primarily for learning a foreign language and developing cross-cultural communication skills. Thus it allows us to confirm the positive impact of Erasmus on intercultural communication skills of Russian students.

1 Introduction

In a current globalized world a range of new competences are required from young specialists graduated from university. Among such competences a special position is occupied by intercultural communication skills, which reflect the ability of person to maintain the diverse and multi-level contacts and forms of communication inside multicultural teams as well as use various behavioural strategies within social and professional activities.

Intercultural communication is an essential requirement in the critical efforts to ensure world peace, stability, necessary to improve relationships between countries, ensure resource sustainability and promote values like tolerance and diversity [1, 2]. All these explain why such competence becomes so vital recent time.

According to many authors the best conditions for the development of contemporary competencies can be created using the educational technology "learning by doing" [3, 4]. Also the task of improving of the skills of intercultural interaction is solved through the participation of students in various international projects [5, 6] and international educational programs.

In Polytechnic University each semester hundreds of students from different departments take part in Erasmus Mobility program. They are directed to different countries of Europe to gain experience of study process and improve their foreign language skills. The duration of the participation is usually 3-4 months that is quite a long period of being.

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The purpose of this study is to analyse the influence of European Erasmus Mobility program on Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic university students' intercultural communication skills.

1.1 Literature review

Studying students abroad helps foster international understanding and intercultural interaction. One of the programs that allow students to study abroad is the Erasmus exchange program. The Erasmus Exchange Program provides two types of mobility, including staff and student mobility. This program promotes professional cooperation, the development of quality and competition of knowledge between universities, and also encourages interaction between citizens of different member countries [7].

The issues investigated in studies conducted at the European or national levels reflect the main advantages of the program, showing general aspects as well as some differences that need further study. A first aspect that draws attention is the result of a study by Bracht et al. [8], which emphasizes that the Erasmus program has a greater impact on the careers of students from Central and Eastern Europe than from countries in Western Europe. Regarding inclusion in the program, Krzaklewska & Krupnik [9, 10], based on the monitoring of international exchange programs (including Erasmus) at the European level, conducted by ESN (Erasmus Student Network), distinguish two types of students participating in the Mobility Program: (1) career-oriented students - they usually come from groups of low-income categories, such as students from low-income families, women, students from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, and their motivation related enhancing their academic knowledge, improving their prospects as future employees, and practicing a foreign language, and (2) experience-oriented students - usually men, Erasmus students, primary school students, and these reasons are related to the need for new experience, the need to learn about new cultures, new people, the need to be independent and live in a foreign country. A study by Engel [11] shows that 90% of students believe that mobility has a positive impact on their personal development, but also on other aspects (we should also pay attention to a less optimistic orientation regarding future professional development) - getting first job and building a long-term career (53%), getting a job is related to their academic level (41%).

Studies in this area by Sigalas [12], Braht et al. [8], Krzaklewska & Krupnik [13], Otero & McCoshan [14], on outgoing and incoming Erasmus students, report a statistically significant increase in communication skills in the host language countries. We should note that the goals of the Erasmus program include promoting / learning European languages and getting to know other European cultures since 1995 (European Council), which is an additional reason for monitoring progress in this direction. Otero & McCoshan [14] show that a significant proportion of students (65 - 95%) believe that the Erasmus program had a positive impact on their attitude to careers and aspirations, and helped to develop their common knowledge, their personal values, their understanding of people from different cultures or ethnic groups, improving their interpersonal relationships and self-confidence. A study of Valera [9] shows that Erasmus mobility had a positive impact on personality development - 89% (total sample), 90% (engineering).

Intercultural communicative competence (henceforward ICC) is considered a transformative process, entailing a dialogical reflection and a connection between cultures [15, 16, 17]. ICC disputes the traditional idea of language teaching as a way of expressing universal meanings. Instead, special meanings, contextual differences, and complexity and tolerance of ambiguity in languages and cultures are key to language learning [16].

In addition, the development of ICC includes the educational integration of language and culture, as it places students between cultures, acting as an intermediary role [18],

which will allow them to realize their own identity and how they are perceived by representatives of other cultures; in the latter case, this allows one to explain and accept cultural diversity.

Biram's ICC system has proven to be a useful tool to confirm the extent to which intercultural communication competency can be developed and developed [18].

2 Methodology

To implement our study we conducted an online survey with 8 open questions and 12 closed questions with answers based on 5-point Likert scale. So it gave us an opportunity to make quantitative and qualitative analyses. 78 participants of Erasmus program took part in our survey, 69 of them are still studying at university, 9 – graduates.

Implementing the study we answered the following research questions:

1. Does Erasmus program significantly improve the intercultural communication skills of students?

2. How students perceive the experience of Erasmus Mobility program?

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Evaluation of intercultural communication attributes

We defined the level of intercultural communication competence of students in terms of three primary attributes: knowledge, skills and attitudes. As the idea of the survey was to reveal the change in the level of this competence after participation in Erasmus Mobility program we divided the questions in two categories – before and after the Erasmus program. Based on the survey results each of the attributes was assessed and the t-value was calculated to determine whether the changes in indicators were significant or not (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive results of intercultural communication attributes

| Indicator | Period | Results (average mean) | SD | t-value |
|-----------|--------|------------------------|------|---------|
| Knowledge | Before | 2.7 | 0.29 | 1.9 |
| | After | 2.8 | 0.33 | |
| Skills | Before | 2.93 | 0.41 | 5.9*** |
| | After | 3.42 | 0.4 | |
| Attitudes | Before | 2.81 | 0.37 | 3.6** |
| | After | 3.13 | 0.39 | |

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

According to the Table 1 Erasmus Mobility program positively influenced on the development of intercultural communication of students. The most significant changes were in the category skills. This means that students perceive their abilities such as observing, listening, interpreting especially improved after the program.

3.2 Online survey

We conducted an online survey among participants in the Erasmus Mobility program. The survey involved 47 students. The survey consisted of 8 open-ended questions, which should be answered yes / no and commented. It should be borne in mind that students attended

different universities in different countries, so factors such as living standards in the country, differences in culture and customs, and the unusual mentality of residents of the host country may influence students' responses.

The list of questions:

1. Do you find your experience in the program positive?
2. Has the knowledge of a foreign language improved as a result of participation in the program?
3. Was this experience useful for studying your profession?
4. Have you met with the culture and customs of the host country?
5. Are there any difficulties in communicating with representatives of the culture of the host country?
6. Do you think that this experience will help you in finding a job?
7. What difficulties did you encounter during the program?
8. What is the main advantage of participating in this program in your opinion?

According to the survey, 75% of respondents believe that participation in the Erasmus Mobility program was useful. Students noted that they studied with pleasure in another country, made new acquaintances, improved their knowledge of the English language and gained new learning experience in another educational system. All respondents confirmed improved knowledge of a foreign language (see. Fig. 1).

Knowledge of the foreign language

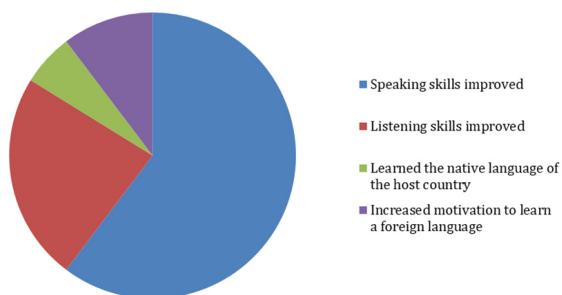


Fig. 1. Comments of students about knowledge of a foreign language.

53% of respondents considered their experience in participating in the Erasmus Mobility program useful for studying professional disciplines. Among the negative comments, there is a lack of complete coincidence of curricula. As a result, students often visited subjects for which they lacked basic knowledge, or vice versa, these disciplines had already been studied in their native university.

Students indicated that immersion in the culture of the host country was both the most interesting and the most difficult. Figure 2 shows the most common answers about difficulties.

Difficulties in Intercultural Communication

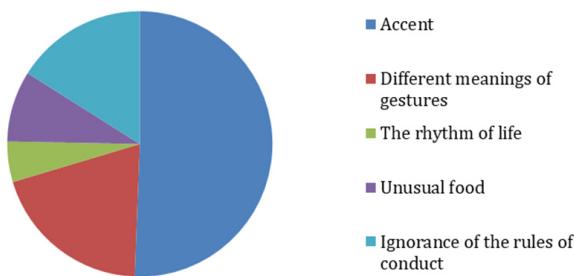


Fig. 2. Comments of student about difficulties in intercultural communication.

64% of students said that experience in participating in the program will be useful for their future careers. This is due to the fact that students improved their communication skills in an unusual environment and learned to adapt more quickly to changing conditions. Also, a good knowledge of English and the cultural characteristics of representatives of other countries will allow students to work in international companies. All advantages mentioned by respondents are presented on the Figure 3.

Advantages

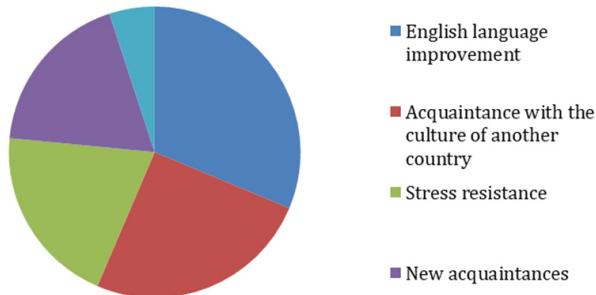


Fig. 3. Advantages of participation in Erasmus Mobility program.

According to the results of the survey, it can be concluded that students regard the experience of participating in the Erasmus Mobility program as positive primarily for learning a foreign language and developing cross-cultural communication skills.

4 Conclusion

Our research showed that the participating in the Erasmus Mobility program positively influenced intercultural communication skills of students, which are essential for specialists of 21st century and needed to be evolved at university.

Previous work of researchers allowed us to fully understand the importance of the studied skills in order to make our study more reliable, which allowed us to correctly assess the abilities of students. Our study evaluates the improvement of intercultural communication competence in terms of three primary attributes: knowledge, skills and attitudes after students participated in the Erasmus Mobility program. Additionally, we studied students' opinions about the program. The theoretical work of other scholars in this

field has been a useful resource for planning and designing, and we expect that our study will provide something of value for future researchers, too. Of course, there are some limitations in our study, as it does not take into account that students attended different universities in different countries, so factors such as living standards in the country, differences in culture and customs, and the unusual mentality of residents of the host country vary.

In our further research we are going to analyze how the Erasmus Mobility program affects the career of university graduates.

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