European Dimension and Multilingual Functioning in Higher Education: Erasmus Students' Experience

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Annotation. We live in a global society where education goes beyond the boundaries of one educational institution or even one country. In the European Union (EU) context, mobility of university students and their multilingual competence have always been a major concern and are at the heart of the EU policy towards the integration of its country members.

Today we have to assume that multilingualism has become students' mobility and employability increasing factor. Seeing that, communication in several languages is an urgent need for young people who search for new learning or work experiences. Students from different nationalities or cultures come together to study in teams bringing with them different levels of language skills as well as expectations and beliefs of how they should be taught together. In other words, they contribute to the whole with their own cultural and linguistic input. The promotion of students' mobility in the EU has also had a huge impact in recent years in Lithuania, which has now become one of the countries with more students going abroad on an Erasmus programme.

The conducted research focuses on Erasmus Exchange Students' self-evaluation of their language competence and reflections about the challenges they have encountered while applying their knowledge and skills in study process. For collection of data the qualitative research method was applied. The instrument was an interview composed of 10 open-ended questions. The paper also addresses a very important issue of interrelation between students' language competence and their educational aims.

Key words: *linguistic competence, multilingualism, Erasmus exchange programme, acquired skills, students' mobility, self-assessment.*

Introduction

In the last decade European life has become more international and multilingual as the result of the Commission's multilingualism policy which aims at encouragement of language learning and promoting linguistic diversity in society. The EU policy document contains a clear statement on this account: 'The European Union is founded on 'unity in diversity': diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs — and of languages' (Commission of the European Communities, 2005).

There is further emphasis on this account in the documents of the EU and EC on multilingualism and intercultural competence:

European Union is founded on 'unity in diversity': diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs - and of languages. Besides the 20[1] official languages of the Union, there are 60 or so other indigenous languages….(A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism, 2005).

The European Commission takes support and complements the Member States by indicating the importance of languages learning in higher education in promoting societal and individual multilingualism. In the Communication from the Commission is indicated that:

All students should study abroad, preferably in a foreign language, for at least one term, and should gain an accepted language qualification as part of their degree course (Commission of the European Communities, 2003).

Promotion of cooperation of education institutions has already taken significant steps among universities in Europe by providing students at all levels with foreign language skills, and in this way

reducing 'a languages gap' of unevenly spread language skills across countries, and indicating the relative importance which society in different Member States attaches to language learning (Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, 2005).

Different languages are already a part of curricula in many higher education institutions of Member States. The education activities are also carried out under different students' mobility schemes. The Erasmus exchange programme is one of the EU's education and training programmes involving more than 1,800 European universities in 30 countries and enabling 200 000 higher education students to study in a foreign country where learning a foreign language is a condition of cultural exchange. One of the main objectives of students' mobility for studies is "to benefit students educationally, linguistically and culturally from the experience of learning in other European countries" (EC Education and Training. Erasmus Student Mobility for Studies).

The analytical report made by The Gallup Organization, reveals the benefits of spending time abroad for educational purposes. According to the report:

18 out of 31 countries surveyed, the largest proportion of respondents, almost 6 in 10 (57 %) thought that having improved their foreign language skills was the most or second most important benefit of their longest learning mobility period abroad, and 4 in 10 respondents indicated a

greater awareness of another culture (The Gallup Organization, 2011).

In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases students' employability and job prospects. According to the study The Professional Value of Erasmus Mobility:

the employers consider the internationally experienced graduates superior to other graduates as far as many other competences are concerned, and many of them believe that formerly mobile students will be more successful in their long-term career (Bracht et al., 2006).

The above statement in line with The EU education policy documents evidence the demand for the use and learning of different languages by young people who are searching for new work experiences. Mykolas Romeris University being a modern higher education institution, a member of the Association of International Universities and the Association of European Universities participates in Erasmus students' mobility schemes and, in this way, contributes to the development of interest and to the diversity of foreign language use.

The aim of this article is to discuss the Erasmus Exchange Students' (2010/ 11) attitudes to their foreign language competence to study abroad, benefits and challenges they have encountered while applying their knowledge and language skills in study process. The authors present the analysis of the survey findings on students' reflections and experiences of studies abroad.

The research tasks:

1. To analyse Erasmus Exchange students' self-evaluation of LSP competence acquired at MRU.

2. To determine interrelation between students' language competence and study requirements in host countries.

3. To identify challenges and problems encountered during studies in host countries

Research Methods

The article focuses on the end-of-ERASMUS students' language competence acquired at MRU and their evaluation of linguistic performance in host countries.

The target group for analysis were 20 Erasmus Exchange Students of different Bachelor study programmes (Financial Economics, Business Informatics, Law, Public Administration, Social Work) of the year 2010/ 2011 at MRU having the skills of professional foreign languages. The study participants went on Erasmus Exchange programmes to different countries: Spain (4), Germany (2), France (2), Italy (2), Poland (2), Austria (1), Hungary (1), Turkey (1), Czechia (1), Holland (1), Slovenia (1), Belgium (1), Bulgaria (1).

For collection of data the qualitative research method was applied. Qualitative research is defined as an

Empirical research in which the researcher explores relationships using textual, rather than quantitative data. Results are not usually considered generalizable, but are often transferable (Glossary of Key Terms).

Qualitative studies are tools used in understanding and describing the world of human experience (Woods, 2006; Bitinas, 2006; Lemke, 1998, Golafshani, 2003). "The ultimate aim of qualitative research is to offer a perspective of a situation" (Myers, 2000), which in the presented analysis is related to students' experiences gained while studying in host countries and self-assessment of their LSP competence. The instrument of the conducted research was an interview composed of 10 open-ended questions delivered and collected online.

The small research sample (20 respondents) did not allow to make any "statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The qualitative research methodology seemed more appropriate to address the aim of the research, since such categories as reflections and experiences are not immediately measurable in percent or scores.

Verbal data, including particularly written or printed texts, always makes sense in relation to (1) a context of production, the circumstances in which it was written or spoken, and (2) a context of use, those in which it is read or heard (Lemke, 1998).

The authors read students' responses one by one focusing on individual comments, sometimes quite exciting and glowing and spotted common patterns of constructive feedback. The survey participants were coded by letters, consequently their real names are not revealed. In the following descriptive analysis, qualitative data was grouped and categorized, disclosing correlations between language proficiency, study requirements and success of study. Grounding of these methodological assumptions the research was conducted by grouping the surveyed students' responses according to the following categories:

1. Language competence acquired at MRU:

   • Languages studied at MRU

   • Self-assessment of acquired foreign language competence.

2. Experience of temporary study in another European country:

   • Study languages

   • Linguistic performance (language skills)

   • Encountered problems

   • Interrelation between foreign language competence and success of study.

1. Language competence acquired at MRU

1.1. Languages studied at MRU

The obtained findings illustrate the ratio of foreign languages studied at MRU by Erasmus exchange students participating in this survey. English was studied by the majority of Erasmus programme students (16 respondents), whereas the proportion of other languages learned at MRU was respectively lower — German (2 respondents) and French (2 respondents) (see Fig. 1). The distribution demonstrates the apparent advantage of English over the other foreign languages at the time of studies at MRU.
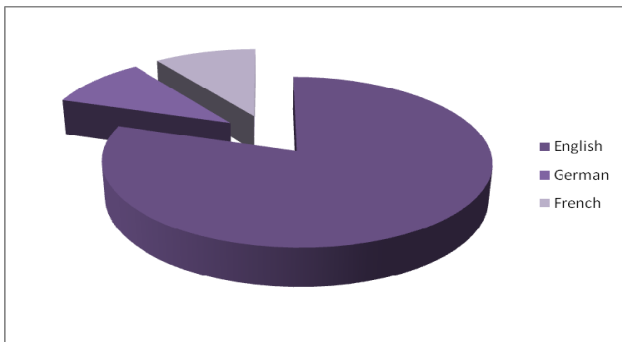
Fig. 1. Distribution of Languages Studied at MRU.

1.2. Self-assessment of acquired foreign language competence

The sample's responses about their knowledge acquired at university ranges from excellent to satisfactory (see Table 1.). All the respondents studied a language (English, German or French) for specific purposes (LSP). Most of the interviewed students evaluated their LSP proficiency level acquired at MRU as *very good* or *good*. Except some reserves, LSP learning experience at MRU was described as *most positive*, *perfect*, *very positive, good, efficient, superb, valuable, well enough, useful, sufficient*, *intensive*, *interesting, progressed*, etc. Legal English or Business English were marked as a positive aspect of their knowledge which they admitted to be using at present. The overall picture of *positive* evaluation evidences a fairly high level of language competence acquired at MRU pertinent to specific, professional and special language needs applied in studies abroad. Just 2 in 20 of the surveyed respondents felt less satisfied with their level of language competence by pointing at *the native professors' language proficiency compared with students' language competence acquired at home.*

Table 1. Self-assessment of LSP Acquired at MRU.

Evaluation	Responses	LanguageStudied
Excellent	4	English, French, German
Very good	5	English
Good	2	English, German
Satisfactory	2	English, German

The students' feedback on LSP competence provides a good impression on foreign language education at MRU. Some individual comments were full of appreciation of language teachers, and their *supportive, cooperative, brilliant, demanding* teaching methods and techniques which resulted in the surveyed respondents' fluency in English, German, and French.

2. Languages of Studies in Exchange Countries

The next interview question dealt with the study language or languages in the exchange country. Written data analysis helped identify seven languages taken for studies in a host country (see Fig. 2.). Most of the respondents studied in English.
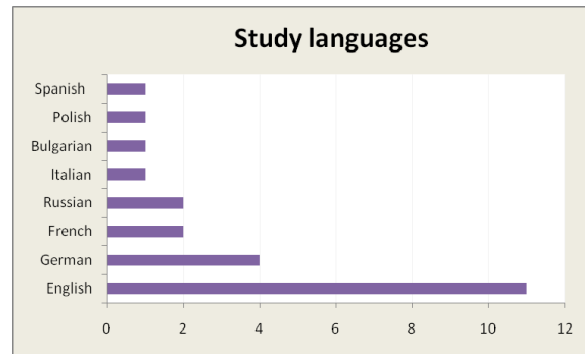

Fig. 2. Study Language/s in the Exchange Countries.

Figure 2 illustrates the diversity of languages taken by the respondents on purpose to study in a multilingual and culturally diverse environment. The findings reveal that the most usable languages were *English, German, Russian, and French*. As compared to other languages, *English* was the main language of instruction (11 responses), whereas *German* was used by a much smaller number of the sample (4 responses). *Russian* and *French* as languages of studies were indicated by 2 students each. Four languages *Italian, Bulgarian, Polish,* and *Spanish* were indicated by 1 of the respondents respectively. The results demonstrate the apparent advantage of English over other languages of studies.

The findings reveal that going on the Erasmus Exchange programme to different countries was *a good opportunity* for students *to learn more than one language* or *to advance skills of other languages*, consequently some of the surveyed students indicated two study languages (English and German or English and Spanish), one respondent even three languages (English, Bulgarian and Russian). In spite of *the advantage of English as the most popular language of studies*, the interviewed students applied the knowledge and skills of other not so popular languages, e.g.: *Italian, Spanish, Bulgarian*. The respondents pointed out the problems related to language fluency at the beginning of studies. They had to equip themselves with the knowledge of language in order to achieve the required level of language proficiency *by doing language courses or learning individually*.

3. Language skills necessary for active participation in study process

3.1. Level of listening comprehension to understand lectures

According to language educators the four basic language skills are related to each other by two parameters: the mode of communication: oral or written and the direction of communication: receiving or producing the message.

> *Listening comprehension is the receptive skill in the oral mode. When we speak of listening, what we really mean is listening and understanding what we hear (SIL International, 1999).*

One of the examples of non-interactive listening situations is lectures. In such situations students usually do not have the opportunity to ask for clarification, slower speech or repetition. Listening and understanding skills are of key importance when it comes to active participation in

learning process. As Hannigan (1990, in Koenh and Rosanen, 2002) puts it:

Linguistic proficiency provides the ability to speak and understand another language, whereas effective cross-cultural communication requires skill in listening and understanding.

Therefore, one of the interview questions was related to students' abilities to listen to lecturing, understand the content of lectures and to participate in lectures.

The students' responses illustrate their different levels of language comprehension at the beginning and at the end of studies:

The overall ability to understand could be described as

fluent, completely enough, no problem, enough, not easy at the beginning, only the essence, not enough, don't need dictionaries, in most cases enough, etc. *It was not easy at the beginning, but by the end of the semester the courses of Italian helped me to cope with the difficulties to study in another language (respondent D).*

Some of the respondents had listening comprehension experience with a high degree of *fluency, precision of vocabulary, understood everything, were confident* and *relied on their fluency*. Half of the respondents had listening comprehension which was described as *quite sufficient,* but likely *less fluent*, whereas 2 could understand only *the essence of message*. Only 1 respondent was not at ease *to catch all information* and had more serious listening comprehension-related problems. The analysis of individual comments allowed identifying 4 categories of listening comprehension:

- Definitely sufficient
- Quite sufficient
- Sufficient to understand the essence
- Insufficient (see Table 2.).

Table 2. Self-evaluation of Listening Comprehension to Participate in Lectures.

Categories	Respondents
Definitely sufficient	7
Quite sufficient	10
Sufficient to understand the essence	2
Insufficient	1

Analysis of students' responses concerning language related problems highlighted particular patterns which were categorized according to languages and factors having caused language comprehension difficulties (see Table 3.).

Further analysis of the problems that hindered students' learning process allowed to distinguish the following categories of language-related problems (see Table 4.):

- Specific/ professional vocabulary;
- Lack of language proficiency;

- Lack of foreign language use;
- Study overload.

Table 3. Factors which Caused Language Comprehension Difficulties.

Language	Comprehension-related factors
German	dialect of native speakers; -lack of general language vocabulary; -lectures aimed at native speakers; -sophisticated lecturing; -lack of speaking skills; -information overload;
English	-professional vocabulary and phrases; -special topics; -parallel languages of studies;
Bulgarian, French, Italian, Spanish	-specific professional vocabulary; -lack of confidence; -lack of general vocabulary; -lack of language experience; -lack of proficiency;

Table 4. Categories of Language-related Problems.

Category	Factor
Specific/ professional vocabulary	-professional vocabulary and phrases; -sophisticated lecturing; -specific professional vocabulary; -special topics; -lectures aimed at native speakers; -dialect of native speakers;
Lack of language proficiency	-lack of general language vocabulary; -lack of proficiency; -lack of general vocabulary;
Lack of foreign language use	-lack of language experience; -lack of speaking skills; -lack of confidence;
Study overload	-parallel languages of studies; -information overload;

3.2. Level of speaking skills to accomplish oral assignments

Speaking is the productive skill in the oral mode. It is more complex than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words. According to language educators

there are 2 basic kinds of speaking situations in which we find ourselves: Interactive speaking situations which include face-to-face conversations and partially interactive, such as when giving a speech to a live audience (SIL International, 1999).

The analysis of the participants' self-assessment of speaking skills to perform oral assignments highlighted three common levels: Fluent (9 responses); sufficient (9 responses); Insufficient (2 responses).

The surveyed respondents were involved in different forms of interactive and partly interactive speaking activities such as *making reports, participating in discussions, projects, workshops, lectures, speaking face-to-face to teachers during oral exams*, etc.

Equal shares of the surveyed respondents described their speaking skills either as *fluent* or *sufficient*. The respondents of *fluent* share were more self-confident and could understand and participate in conversations within the range of personal and professional experience with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary.

The respondents of *sufficient* share were somewhat to feel less satisfied with their speaking skills. They spoke with *a little lack of fluency*, *no big problems, no additional difficulties,* were *enough fluent,* but indicated that speaking tasks *were a little more difficult than other tasks*. The respondents of this share made *rare grammar or memory related errors*, and sometimes they were *short of professional or general vocabulary*. The benefits of well-*balanced syllabus*, *tasks aimed at cooperation, generous tuition, and favourable assessment system* were indicated by this share of respondents as important factors influencing their speaking fluency.

Only a few of the respondents got into trouble with their speaking skills by indicating the reasons related to *insufficient vocabulary or spoken language very different from which had been learned at school or university*.

3.3. Level of writing skills to do written assignments

Writing is the productive skill in the written mode. According to language educators

> *it is more complicated than it seems at first, and often seems to be the hardest of the skills, even for native speakers of a language, since it involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way (SIL International, 1999).*

The analysis of self-evaluation of writing skills identified 2 categories:

1. Fluent/ more fluent than in other areas (2 respondents);

2. Sufficient (18 respondents).

The majority of the respondents evaluated their writing skills as *sufficient* by pointing out some problems they had encountered: *some errors of style and grammar, new and unknown forms of assignments (e.g., essay writing), very tiring and time consuming preparation, the need of tutor's assistance to cope with the task, etc.*

A few of the surveyed respondents rated their writing skills as *fluent* or *more fluent in relation to other skills*, e.g., *writing is easier compared to other skills, reading results in good writing, in written it's easier to express ideas.*

4. Interrelation between foreign language proficiency and success of study

4. 1. Study requirements for Erasmus students language proficiency

According to Erasmus programme requirements, education institutions participating in Erasmus programmes expect outgoing students to be acquainted with languages of incoming countries. Therefore, Erasmus Exchange students are supposed to have at least one of the following:

• a Higher or 'AS' certificate in that language;

• other qualification demonstrating a minimum of level B1-experience of formal study in that language;

• a minimum of one year university level study (as a non-beginner).

> *In the absence of at least one of the above requirements, participants are required to take a language test at IALS and to achieve at least Level B1 (Council of Europe. Common European Framework Reference for Languages) before taking up their exchange place (Language requirements for Erasmus).*

As not all partner universities offered English programmes, the outgoing students of this research had to learn the language of the host country. Depending on where they went, they were offered intensive language courses by host institutions or took language courses at home, e.g. French, Italian, Spanish. Specialized Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) for the less taught languages were organised where these languages were used as languages of instruction, e.g. Bulgarian, Greek.

For the processes of effective Erasmus Exchange mobility, MRU relates to Erasmus requirements and provides the outgoing students with the proof of language proficiency by evaluating the outgoing students' linguistic preparation. Only those, whose level of foreign language is not less than 8 in the evaluation scale from 1 to 10, are eligible to go abroad.

4.2. The correlation between foreign language proficiency and success of study

The feedback related to the influence of language proficiency on success of studies shows that roughly all of the surveyed respondents had a good opportunity to advance their professional knowledge. Language proficiency resulted in *upgrading in the field of study and better assessments during exams*. The ability *to apply language in everyday communication more effectively* was also indicated as one of the benefits.

No one of the surveyed respondents rated their language competence acquired at MRU as poor in all likelihood because of the strict LSP *requirements. The teachers' efficiency* and their *supportive, cooperative, demanding teaching methods* resulted in the surveyed respondents' sufficient competence to study abroad. The vast majority of respondents (roughly 18 in 20) evaluated their linguistic preparation as *fluent* or *sufficient* to use in the study process although the *language competence-related problems* and *the complexity of subject(s)-related problems* were indicated as the most or the second most challenge they experienced in studies abroad.

In spite of the problems related to the language fluency, e.g. *insufficient level of language knowledge, specific vocabulary or phrases, unknown definitions, native accent, dialect, spoken language very different from that learned at school or university, errors of style and grammar, etc.,* the overall picture evidences a fairly high level of LSP at MRU pertinent to specific, professional and special needs.

> *In the European and global arena, English has increasingly assumed the role of lingua franca for international communication. The rise of English has occurred at the cost*

of all other national languages of Europe, including French (Extra and Yagmur, 2002).

The findings support this view and reveal the role of English as the study language and communication instrument; what is more, they confirm the position of English as the leading language compared to other languages such as French, German, and Russian.

The Erasmus Exchange programme takes significant steps to realize changes of education policies in relation to diversity of languages in studies. Previously, English, French, German, Russian were the main languages of instruction offered at universities. Nowadays, due to the cross-cultural education policy of the EU, the interest in other languages has also increased, e.g. Spanish, Bulgarian, Italian, etc. Education institutions make no differentiation any longer between the status of languages as *small* or *large*, home language, heritage language, as a first or second language, with exception of French, which according to the surveyed respondents *has the status of home language and a big advantage over other languages.*

Although most of the respondents studied in English, the role of other languages was of great relevance to study process and personal interaction.

> *The attitude that English alone is enough in fact creates self-imposed limitations. To remain monolingual is to stunt your educational development, to restrict your communication and thinking abilities, and to deny yourself the ability to fully appreciate and understand the world in which you live (Trimnell, 2005).*

Roughly all of the surveyed respondents consider the studies abroad as a *good* opportunity *to develop foreign language skills, to advance skills of professional languages or to equip themselves with the additional knowledge of language proficiency by doing language courses o*r *learning individually.* The fluency of language *results in the higher level of professional knowledge and development in the field of study.*

Erasmus programmes develop interest in foreign languages but the fact that the students are not good at the language of instruction at the beginning of their study period abroad is a reason for concern: how can one expect recognition of study during that period if they start the study period abroad with a relatively low level of language proficiency.

Skills acquired on the Erasmus Exchange helped the students to develop:

1. The proficiency in English as a first or second language;

2. The competence in languages other than English;

3. Professional skills;

4. Forms and study techniques;

5. The greater confidence and motivation in studies.

Conclusions

The qualitative research of the students' experience of studies abroad has revealed:

1. Going on the Erasmus Exchange programme to different countries is a good opportunity for students to advance language skills or to learn other languages than English. The surveyed students studied in seven languages; however, the most usable languages were English, German, Russian, and French. The foreign language fluency results in achievement of higher level of professional skills and better evaluation in the field of study.

2. The findings evidence a positive correlation between students' foreign language proficiency and learning outcomes: students improve their foreign language proficiency, get to know another academic environment, access to a wide range of subject areas, take opportunities to experience different learning practices and teaching methods and possibly acquire knowledge that is more likely to be offered abroad than at home, and are better qualified for a professional career at home.

3. Among language-related problems four categories were identified:

   a) specific/ professional vocabulary;

   b) lack of language proficiency;

   c) lack of foreign language use;

   d) study overload.

Undoubtedly, ERASMUS contributes to developing interest in foreign languages. The analysis of the surveyed students' self-assessment of language skills has proved the relevance of foreign language proficiency to active participation in the study process.

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Europos dimensija ir daugiakalbis funkcionavimas aukštajame moksle: Erasmus studentų patirtis

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio autorių tikslas yra ištirti MRU Erasmus mainų programos studentų (20 respondentų) užsienio kalbos įsivertinimą ir jų požiūrį į profesinės užsienio kalbos kompetencijos lygį studijuoti užsienio universitetuose, gebėjimus suprasti ir atlikti užduotis žodžiu ir raštu, priimančios šalies studijų privalumus ir išbandymus, bendravimo su kitais mainų programos studentais ypatumus. Respondentai apklausti elektroniniu būdu, tyrimo duomenys nagrinėti taikant kokybinį tyrimo metodą.

Tyrimo rezultatai atspindi Erasmus mobilumo programos naudą bendrinės ir profesinės užsienio kalbos žinių tobulinimui ir mokytis naujų kalbų. Kelių kalbų žinojimas ir kalbų mokėjimo įgūdžiai sąlygoja profesinių žinių lygį, geresnius įvertinimus studijų procese, padeda susipažinti su įvairiomis kultū-romis ir pasisemti svarbios gyvenimiškos patirties.

Gauti rezultatai išryškino problemas, su kuriomis studentai susiduria mokydamiesi užsienyje: nepakankama kalbos kompetencija; studijuojamo dalyko sudėtingumas; studijų reikalavimai ir taisyklės; nepažįstama ir nauja aplinka, taip pat nepakankamas technologijų naudojimas studijų procese. Tyrimo rezultatai pagrindžia profesinės užsienio kalbos svarbą, kaip studentų mobilumo pagrindą, siekiant profesinių žinių ir įgūdžių mokymosi procese.

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