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Using ELF: Insights into Erasmus Students' Intercultural Experiences at a Croatian University

ABSTRACT:

This paper is based on qualitative interviews with ten exchange students in the Erasmus Program at the University of Rijeka, Croatia. The aim of the study is to explore non-native English students' experiences in the light of their use of English in intercultural contact with speakers from different countries. The findings show different uses of English and complexity of interactions, and suggest that ownership of English no longer belongs to any particular group as ELF is negotiated through efforts and adjustments by all parties involved.

Introduction

Departing from the position that English is the undisputed lingua franca in academia central to international mobility (Mauranen, 2010) and effective intercultural contact among students from different L1 backgrounds, this paper explores Erasmus students' perceptions of their use of English at a Croatian University. In recent years, Europe has seen an unprecedented expansion of student and staff mobility through the Erasmus programme, which has sparked an increased demand for English as a common language of communication, and for practical knowledge of intercultural communication (IC). The Erasmus programme has numerous benefits as it «enriches students' lives in the academic and professional fields, improves language learning, develops intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness» (Erasmus website, n.d.). It is evident that, «[i]ntercultural competence is both the outcome and the essential prerequisite of student residence abroad» (Coleman, 1998: 197).

One of the greatest impacts of the Erasmus programme is that it has directly contributed to the internationalization of academia (cf. Doiz *et al.*, 2011: 346), and to "the adoption of English in [higher education]…" (Coleman, 2006: 4). Given that traditionally «the vast majority

of European universities recruited students nationally or even locally» (Doiz *et al.*, 2011: 346), Erasmus has changed the face of academia. Consequently, «Erasmus students have become pioneers of a networked Europe, based on personal relationships [and] communication in new lingua francas…» (Olive-Serret, 2009: 102). It is estimated that by 2020 as many as 6 million students will be studying outside their home countries (Hughes, 2008), many of whom will be using English, the most popular language in Erasmus (Coleman, 1998).

Evidently, with the internationalization of Universities English has become the dominant language (Coleman, 2006; Phillipson, 2006) which has transformed traditionally monolingual universities into contexts where students are exposed to and use a diversity of Englishes. The students use English for academic purposes as well as exchanges in everyday situations, and in the process, they adapt the language in lingua franca interactions.

However, in order to be able to function with individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds during mobility and residence abroad, knowledge of (the English) language is not sufficient, and apart from linguistic knowledge, students also need to acquire intercultural communicative competence (cf. Byram and Zarate, 1997; Fantini, 2012). Specifically they need an amalgam of knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness i.e., a complex of abilities to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (Fantini, 2007: 12). Given that international communication in ELF is, by its very nature intercultural (Meierkord, 2000), students in foreign contexts need to be prepared for intercultural communication not only to be able to make themselves understood but also to be accepted behaviorally and interactionally (Fantini, 1997; 2012).

In brief, in today's globalized world and internationalised European academic settings, the use of English is central to the multifarious intercultural contacts. The use of English as a lingua franca in intercultural communication in academia involves the functional use of a language to achieve communication in a non-native English speaking lingua cultural setting. This is particularly the case of institutions "in countries whose national language(s) are little taught elsewhere and mobility is possible only through a common language, i.e. English (Coleman, 2006: 5).

In light with these views, the aim of this paper is to provide insight into Erasmus students' perspectives on their experiences of use of English as a lingua franca for IC at a (predominantly monolingual) Croatian University. The paper is organised as follows: in the next section, we look at the notion of English as a lingua franca relative to intercultural communication in

academia. In section 3, the study and the findings are presented. Finally, in the last section, some concluding remarks are offered.

1. English as a lingua franca and intercultural communication in academia

It is widely a known that today English has become the global lingua franca for international communication. With more non-native speakers than native speakers of the language, the ownership of English has become 'denationalized', and it is no longer the sole property of the native speakers (House, 2003; Widdowson, 1994). In fact, «many non-native speakers may never encounter a NS of English, let alone have the need to communicate with one» (Bucklede, 2010: 141). Hence, ELF used between any L2 users and L2-L1 users of English (McKay and Bockhorst-Heng, 2008) reflects the diversity and complexity of using English internationally (Rudby and Saraceni, 2006). Moreover, it is the realistic language (Seidlhofer, 2003) which primarily has a communicative function in international multilingual contexts (cf. Freidrich and Matsuda, 2010). As such it comprises the uses of English within and across Kachru's circles for intranational as well as international communication, and features that do not conform to native speaker standard are widely used and accepted (Seidlhofer, 2005, 2011). According to this, it follows that ELF is characterised by «functional flexibility [in] many different domains» (House, 2003: 557) and «[t]here is no one variety that is or can be used successfully in all situations of international communication» (Matsuda, 2012: 19).

If English reflects the reality of uses across the world, it is a «contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication» (Firth, 1996: 240). As speakers of different L2 backgrounds communicate in English they make use of their multilingual resources. These multilingual speakers will use English for utilitarian purposes, i.e. as a communication tool (Bjorkman, 2003; Saraceni, 2008; House, 2003) and their pragmatic competence is not centred on the native speaker (and conventional native speaker norms), but rather on the intercultural speaker.

Clearly, in ELF intercultural communication the interlocutors come from different L1 backgrounds; however, they have probably also learned lingua-cultural English NS norms (Meierkord, 2000). Nevertheless, in the use of ELF, they do not necessarily follow the native speaker norms as they negotiate their sociolinguistic identities (cf. Grazzi, 2010), and multifaceted

cultural backgrounds. Hence, the speakers of ELF will not develop a cultural affinity with the language or attempt to represent their identities through English but merely use it as a communication tool while maintaining their own cultural identities (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). As Fiedler (2011: 79) explains, «a language of communication is used for practical communicative purposes, and due to its primary functional nature, correctness or particular stylistic and cultural features associated with the speech community from which this language originates are less important». On the other hand, as she points out, a language of identification means a language which is learnt in order to be integrated into and identify with the respective speech community, which is hardly the case of the majority of speakers of English. Hence, users of ELF do not identify with English and concerns with culture are irrelevant for ELF (Edmondson and House, 2003) as they create a 'linguistic masala' and assume membership distinct from the native speakers (Meierkord, 2002).

In line with these views, it is doubtful whether native speaker communication patterns and cultural beliefs (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) are relevant in ELF intercultural interactions in academia. Hence ELF in intercultural communication is a negation process of knowledge attitude skills and awareness of the 'other' (cf. Fantini, 2012), distinct from a specific native-speaker culture and as such reflects negotiation of a variety of pragmatic and cultural norms. However, the use of ELF in intercultural communications may be a challenging feat as it is difficult to predict the interlocutors and their (scanty) shared lingua-cultural knowledge (Mauranen, 2005). In the diversity of contexts in which ELF is used, speakers cannot rely on «preconstituted forms of meaning» but rather have to resort to «complex pragmatic strategies that help them negotiate their variable form accordingly» (Pedrazzini and Nava, 2010: 288). In fact, there has been much debate as to whether «the lack of shared knowledge and sociocultural framing between ELF speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is likely to lead to misunderstanding and communication difficulties, as participants will rely on the norms of their mother tongue and native culture to interpret meaning» (Cogo, 2010: 296).

Curiously, though, in spite of the global spread of English as a lingua franca used in intercultural communication, research on intercultural communication has largely focused on non-native speaker – native speaker contact and interaction, and rarely on interaction among non-native speakers of a language (Meierkord, 2000). A case in point is Fantini's claim that it is necessary to help «students develop the knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness that will foster development of the competence

they need for English-speaking contexts» (Website eslminiconf, 2011). However, he does concede that «we need to rethink how to prepare individuals for intercultural participation using multiple languages», as not all interaction will take place in English (Fantini, 2012: 270). The dominance of NS norms in intercultural communication could be due to the fact that «English is the lingua franca in most intercultural research, and it may seem obvious to use […] norms established in an English-speaking country», which are however, usually based on American or British English (Van de Vijer and Leung, 2009: 414). In view of the fact that NS norms dominate intercultural communication, direct objections should be raised against the prominent role of native-speaker English as it does not reflect the multitude of uses and users of ELF in international academic communities.

An interesting observation regarding the unrealistic supremacy of native-speaker English in academia is that it probably stems from the fact that the international educational scene and student mobility have been dominated by institutions from English-speaking countries (Hughes, 2008). In fact, only recently have universities in non-English-speaking countries joined the bandwagon to compete on the higher education markets with «Anglo-Saxon cultures» (Hughes, 2008: 119). Hence, the changing academic realities have raised awareness of the variety of contexts of uses of English in non-English speaking academic environments. Indeed, «most of the uses that language is put to in academia brings English in contact with other languages and is being carried out in ELF» (Mauranen, 2010: 10). After all, academia is a typical lingua franca domain as it is «international», «mobile», and «dependent on English» (Mauranen, 2010: 7).

2. The study

2.1 The aim and research questions

The aim of the study is to explore international students' perceptions of the use of English as a lingua franca in a non-native English speaking academic context.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are Erasmus students' experiences of ELF communication at UNIRI?

RQ2. What skills and competences are needed for successful intercultural interaction?

RQ3. To what extent is native speaker English and the notion of correctness relevant for non-native interactions in English?

2.2 The participants and context

The participants in the study comprised 10 Erasmus students from Poland, Spain, Slovenia and Slovakia studying at three Faculties at the University of Rijeka, namely The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management. All the students were non-native speakers of English studying in English and/ or Croatian. The mean age of the participants was 20.7 years. In terms of their level of English, they reported to be at the B1/B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The context where the research took place is the University of Rijeka (UNIRI), which with approximately 16,800 students, is the second largest University in Croatia. Mobility to UNIRI was initiated in 2008 when the precursor to Erasmus, the *Mobility Pilot Programme,* was launched (Lenac, 2008: 41). A year later, in 2009, UNIRI was awarded the Erasmus Charter. By the end of the academic year 2013/2014, UNIRI had signed 260 Erasmus agreements and realized 154 incoming and 366 outgoing student mobilities. In 2012/2013, when the research was carried out, there was a total of 80 incoming students at UNIRI.

It should be noted that the sample in this study is not considered to be in any way representative of Erasmus students at UNIRI, but rather provides insights into the participants' views and understandings regarding the use and dominant discourse on English.

2.3 Method

The method used to collect the data comprised of qualitative interviews which lasted between 20-30 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded and conducted in English. Following the qualitative paradigm, the objective of the interviews was to gain understanding of the participants' views and experiences (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). In other words, the interviews provided opportunities for the participants to present their understandings and experiences of use the English as a lingua franca in a non-native English-speaking academic context (cf. King and Horrocks, 2010). The interview questions elicited, among other, the participants' use of English and their understandings of intercultural communication. Another aspect that was investigated was the notion of «knowledge of English» and the role of English

at the University and the broader context. The students were also invited to elaborate on their prior English language learning experience, and its relevance for the use of English in the mobility programme. Based on their experience as students in a foreign context, they were encouraged to explain what knowledge and skills were necessary to be able to interact appropriately in culturally diverse settings, and to identify the potential challenges they faced. In addition, questions were posed to inquire as to why the participants had decided to take part in the Erasmus programme and study at UNIRI.

2.3.1 The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework used for analysing the data is based on the four dimensions of intercultural communication KASA (*knowledge*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *awareness*) (Fantini, 2012: 272). Specifically, KASA consists of the following components: a) knowledge about language norms, behaviour and culture, b) positive attitudes, openness and tolerance towards others, c) skills to adjust behaviour and interact appropriately, and d) awareness of differences, similarities and levels of competence.

While all these dimensions are fundamental for intercultural communication, questions are raised as to what knowledge, attitudes, awareness and skills are relevant for ELF interactions in academic contexts. Specifically, if we consider language norms, cultural understanding and appropriate behaviour, in the light of ELF, a justifiable argument is that they will differ from the ones needed in English speaking countries or in interaction with native speakers of English. This being so, the four domains of intercultural communication are contingent on context and participants. Let us now turn at the findings in the light of the data and KASA conceptual framework.

2.4 Findings

In general, the findings suggest that knowledge of English is limited to the use of language skills. Linguistic knowledge and accuracy are not deemed important in student interactions, and English is viewed as a shared language used for socializing with other students and members of the host community. When used for specific academic purposes, however, reference is made to accuracy and competency and the participants have reported some difficulties using the language appropriately. In terms of students' attitudes towards English, they view it as a tool that will enable cultural contact. The participants also display awareness of their levels of language competences and notice differences between students' English. The notion of the native speaker of English and native speaker discourse

seems to be relevant only to one student (language major). Overall, when using ELF, the students do not report misunderstandings or communication difficulties, regardless of interlocutors and their L1 backgrounds.

i. Knowledge of English for socialisation and academic purposes

In terms of the knowledge needed, students point to differences in needs when using English for academic purposes and socializing. In both cases, the ultimate goal is to be communicatively competent and be able to interact appropriately with speakers of different lingua-cultural backgrounds. Accuracy, though desirable, is not central to interaction and establishing relations, while it is primarily important to be able convey the message in English and to be understood. When using the language, the students do not reflect on the language and its pragmatic components, but rather use it intuitively focusing on establishing relationship with others.

> «I never think about how well … I'm speaking English … I'm just using it. When I am go out with the students I am using English and it's important that we're understanding each other.»
> (Interview extract S1)

> «I have luck because I find friends here… they are nice, yes very. I think you only need to know how to speak and then there is no problems. It doesn't matter where am I from or where are the students from. We speak in English.»
> (Interview extract S8)

The extracts suggest that English, by default, seems to guarantee understanding among participants and the students, regardless of the fact that they come from different L1 backgrounds, and thus share little cultural knowledge. They make no reference to NS norms of interaction and the country of origin of the speakers does not appear to be a barrier, as students share other commonalities which helps them find mutual grounds that foster intercultural communication (cf. Cogo, 2010). For the majority of the participants, this is the only realistic and authentic situation in which they have used the language in intercultural communication (cf. Seidlhofer, 2003), as the following extract suggests:

> «I learn English from 8 years but in Poland … I don't have opportunity to speak English … so I went to Erasmus and I knew I would speak in English.»
> (Interview extract S9)

It would appear that non-native (ELF) contexts are seen as the only relevant situations of language use appropriate for the development of English. In fact, the opportunity to practice English is a seen as a valid reason for taking part in Erasmus. The participants explain that the main reason for using English is for interaction in intercultural contact and socialization. Nationality and origin of the interlocutor is not deemed relevant. While it has been suggested that for appropriate language use it is necessary to understand the cultural dimension of language to avoid becoming «fluent fools» (Bennett, 1997: 16-21), it is questionable whether these particular students have an understanding of the cultural dimension of native-speaker English, and whether it is relevant in the contexts of Erasmus mobility. For the participants, the UNIRI academic context provides an authentic use of English.

Reference is made to the Croatian language as a means of enhancing students' lingua cultural understanding of the host community. The Erasmus students take Croatian intensive language courses; however, they rarely use the language due to inadequate language skills. They make use of the cultural understanding of Croatian gained in the course and resort to the use of English as a language of communication (but not cultural identification) (cf. Felder, 2011). The extract that follows illustrates this point.

> «I'm using English … I learned Croatian in language course here but just some basic so I mean I don't know enough so I have to speak in English … but it's like … like with computer you just have to know how and to use it and … you don't think about it. What you learn about the Croatian people and your country helps us so we can speak better, understand better …»
> (Interview extract S9)

In line with the above, English in intercultural contact seems to have little reference to native speaker English and native-speaking contexts, but rather depends on the shared interpretation of the local context.

ii. Attitudes towards English (lingua franca) and the native speaker ideal

Mention has been made that students of different backgrounds use English as a lingua franca at UNIRI. However, they said that the teaching of English as a foreign language at school primarily focused on standard British and/or American English, and no reference was made to English as a lingua franca. This is not surprising as English language teaching methodology is premised on the belief that students need to learn the language to interact with native speakers and to function in inner circle countries. However, reality is far removed from this ideal and participants

seem to have little use of the native speaker standard as they actually rarely speak with native speakers, let alone visit English-speaking countries (cf. Buckledee, 2010). Moreover, unequal symmetry in native speaker – non-native speaker interaction may set unrealistic expectations on students, and thus cause language anxiety resulting from an extensive focus on the language in the interaction process.

> «It's same … if it's British or it's American at school we had British it's the original one but … I only spoke three times to British, I don›t really think there are these opportunities … If I would speak to English I would be more focused … on mistakes.. if you think you make a mistake … then you feel nervous.»
> (Interview extract S2)

> «I like American and I learn it from movies and I would like to go to America but until now I didn't and I didn't speak with real Americans.»
> (Interview extract S2)

The extracts show that while language may be associated with inner circle countries, these contexts are nor particularly relevant for non-native English speaking students who manly interact with other non-native speaking students in higher education institutions throughout Europe. Nevertheless, the status and leverage of the native speaker ideal was underscored by a language student who stated that she would have rather gone to an English/speaking context, but due to financial constraints, opted for mobility to Croatia, as second best. In her opinion, the advantage of native speaker countries is that it provides better opportunities to learn the language.

> «S: And I haven't found yet the chance to go to the UK … I don't want to be a babysitter…
> I: Ok
> S: And I wanted to go there to try to do something else … not … not by myself
> I: So … that … you think that you would need to go to an English speaking country?
> S: Definitely … because I am hearing things that we never heard before... we watch American films and they are not that sophisticated as the English ones and they … there're a lot of expressions that I've never heard and people would ask me …never heard of that?
> I: What do you mean never heard of that?
> S: Yes … Yes … some expressions…that are very common there … but we never heard of them or we don't think of them that

fast […] it just improves your language because I mean … language
is something that's … very vivid … so that's why.»
(Interview extract S10)

Evidently, the student associates English-speaking countries with authenticity and considers them to be the only place where the language can be learned appropriately. In terms of knowledge of English, the participant believes that she should improve her level and should be able to understand aspects of the language that are not used frequently. She seems to aspire towards the unattainable native speaker ideal, and fears negative evaluation if she doesn't demonstrate appropriate knowledge of the language. Furthermore, she holds that in English-speaking contexts, fluency would be gained. This attitude could stem from the social pressure and unrealistic expectations (of teachers of English) regarding the attainment of native speaker ideal.

iii. Skills for interacting and studying in English

As for the skills needed, students believe that English at the B1 or B2 level is sufficient for studying abroad, in particular as their skills improve through interaction and practice.

«We have to pass the exam of language before going to Erasmus …
I wanted to go to France but I didn't pass the exam of French and
then … I focused on English … I did my best to study English […]
We have to be at B1 or maybe … B2. It's difficult at the beginning
but later it's easier when you use it more.»
(Interview extract S6)

However, when considering their academic language competencies, it would seem that a somewhat higher level is needed for studying in English. In fact, it is necessary to make a distinction between knowledge of English for communication (Basic Interpersonal Skills) and academic English (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) (cf. Cummins, 1999; Doiz *et al.*, 2013) and students admit facing some challenges in using productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing for academic purposes, as the extract shows:

«Sometime I have problem writing in English because in Poland I
didn't have subject in English this is the first time … but … the pro-
fessor they don't … look at English but if you learned something …
so it's not such big problem.»
(Interview extract S4)

Students indicate that English is important in academic contexts for understanding and conveying the content and concede that knowledge of specific language skills like writing are necessary for studying in English. However, English has an instrumental purpose in academia, and the professors conceptualize English as ELF, and thus pay little attention to language accuracy, but rather focus on what they deem to be important, knowledge of the subject content.

Another point raised relative to intercultural interaction in academic settings is that speakers who come from different L1 backgrounds may lack background cultural knowledge of appropriate student-teacher interactions (cf. Hofstede, 2001). In the following extract, a student explains that it is difficult to gauge one's communicative competence in English, prior to use of the language in authentic situations, and expresses some concern regarding appropriate student-teacher interaction.

> «I didn't knew if I … my English is good … or If I would have problems but they don't speak very fast so I can understand everything … only I had problem in consultations and professor … she gave us a lot of papers and we didn't know what's more important what's not important … material in English and … It was difficult. I didn't know what I could ask the professor and should I come to her when I need something»
> (Interview extract S3)

In brief, the skills needed to perform in the academic environment are speaking and writing. In formal interaction, the participants use ELF in accordance with local norms, and underscore the importance of understanding the cultural aspects of the Croatian educational context. Again, native English speaker (cultural) norms do not appear to be relevant for communication and academic work as student focus on the communicative potential of the language.

iv. Awareness of English in intercultural communication

It is generally accepted that Erasmus raises awareness of others, and through international experience, develops intercultural communicative competence. The participants emphasize the role of English in the Erasmus programme, and underscore that mobility would not be possible without a common language. They are aware of the transactional value of English used for communicative purposes and maintain that English brings people together. Indeed, it is perceived as a lingua franca, which fosters intercultural awareness and understanding.

«We are all students … few foreigners … but the majority they are from Croatia … but also some Erasmus students and we had a really good experience here with everything and … you know … I will come back for sure next summer … I learn a lot and I have the chance to speak English I am using it more … yes and … I never been before away from home … I learn much about life here and people …»
(Interview extract S7)

Interestingly, the students make no mention of problems in communicating or establishing relationships, although they had no formal training in intercultural communication. In fact, they believe knowledge of English is sufficient for effective intercultural communication. Overall, they have positive attitudes towards the host culture and, for many, Erasmus is the first opportunity to study abroad and live in a different lingua-cultural context.

«Did you have any training at home … preparation for studying and living in a different culture? Intercultural communication training?
S: In English?
I: In general, or possibly when you studied English or any other language … the intercultural aspect?
S: No … not … we just have to know English, but if we know English we can speak and learn in different countries … no? I think you are competent with English. You don't need more … just need to be open, friendly, nothing else, only speak, communicate.»
(Interview extract S5)

The extract shows that students believe that intercultural communication will take care of itself, as long as they can communicate. The students do not express an orientation to linguistic and cultural norms of native English speakers, but maintain that the English language enables understanding, and no additional skills and competences are necessary for successful cross-cultural contact.

«English is very useful for … how could we study in different countries? If we didn't have English … I couldn›t be in Croatia … yes I don't know how would I speak with everyone … German, Spanish Romanian […].»
(Interview extract S1)

In light of the data presented, it is evident that English is paramount to international education and student mobility. The language helps develop

a sense of interconnectedness among students form different countries. Through experience in an international context, students use English to negotiate intercultural understanding in academic-related matters and everyday situations.

Concluding remarks

This study has gone some way towards enhancing understanding of the use of English in a non-English speaking academic context in Croatia. Given that English is the lingua franca of academia, insights into students' understandings of the use of English and the challenges they face could help develop more accurate expectations in intercultural communication and raise awareness of the need to develop a more relevant language pedagogy for teaching English. Furthermore, the findings have shed light on what type of pre-Erasmus preparation students might benefit from.

Generally speaking, the participants see English as a functional tool for social interaction and academic activities. Furthermore, English is perceived to be sufficient for establishing intercultural contact among peers. While some participants acknowledge the significance of inner circle countries and relate English to the US and UK, only a language major made reference to the significance of the NS ideal. Overall, the participants use English to establish and maintain relationships, learn about the local culture and negotiate understandings in interaction with peers. Socialization seems to be a significant aspect of the use of English as a lingua franca in academia and a central feature of Erasmus. In our particular context, ELF is «… a communicative instrumen[t] an individual has at his/her disposal, a useful and versatile tool, a 'language for communication'». (House, 2003: 561).

Finally, as directions for further research, it would be necessary to conduct studies in different academic contexts and include a wider sample of participants from different lingua-cultural backgrounds (including members of the host culture) to gain a more comprehensive insight into the role English plays in intercultural communication and the Erasmus programme.

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