Preparing Tertiary Students for Study Abroad Programs—The Identity Negotiation Perspective

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Abstract The present paper concerns the applicability of Ting-Toomey (1999) identity negotiation theory (INT) to the field of foreign language teaching, particularly with reference to the preparation of students for study abroad programs. In the article, a brief overview of INT and its main tenets is followed by the discussion of the criteria and desirable outcomes of mindful intercultural communication. In the second part, the author presents the results of a survey conducted among Polish students participating in one of the study abroad programs. The study investigates whether Polish students are mindful intercultural communicators according to the criteria stipulated in INT, it seeks to identify their greatest perceived needs during their stay in a foreign culture, and attempts to arrive at solutions to the problems encountered.

1 Introduction

Weaving together the elements of social psychology, communication studies, symbolic interactionism and relational dialectics, identity negotiation theory (INT), as proposed by Ting-Toomey (1999), serves as a starting point for the discussion of successful intercultural communication. The interconnectedness of culture, language and identity as stipulated in the identity negotiation perspective allows for applying it to the field of foreign language teaching, particularly with reference to preparing learners for the intricacies of cross-cultural communication.

By demonstrating a connection between culture and self-conception, the identity negotiation perspective explains the impact of the two on an individual's behavioural, cognitive and affective domains. For one thing, it shows how and why people organize themselves into certain groups on different levels of society and culture. Moreover, it shows how individuals crave the need for inclusion and cooperation, on

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the one hand, and for differentiation and autonomy, on the other. Finally, the INT perspective points to various factors involved in the process of moving from familiar to unfamiliar environment, which are responsible for identity shock (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 27).

The following is a brief overview of INT, its main tenets, the criteria of mindful intercultural communication stemming from it and its desirable outcomes. In the second part, the present author presents the results of a survey conducted among Polish students participating in a study abroad program Erasmus. First of all, the study investigates whether Polish students are mindful intercultural communicators according to the criteria stipulated in INT. Secondly, it seeks to answer what their greatest perceived needs were during their stay in a foreign culture, and, thirdly, it attempts to arrive at solutions to the problems encountered.

2 Theoretical Underpinnings of Identity Negotiation Theory

2.1 The Concept of Identity

According to the INT perspective, each of us brings a certain self-image (identity) to every communicative situation, which is particularly characteristic of communicating across cultures. This self-image is shaped by cultural, situational, personal and relational factors, out of which the cultural values are of core importance—they will influence and define such aspects of identity as gender, age or ethnicity (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 26). Human identities are also shaped by encounters with other people. These encounters, in turn, are usually governed by cultural rules, i.e. what is appropriate in one culture could be viewed as inappropriate in another. Effective IC is therefore dependent on being familiar with the cultural norms of an interlocutor. A sense of identity security will spring from communicating with similar others, i.e. ones whose cultural practices are known to us. On the other hand, an individual's habits or norms will often be called into question in an encounter with dissimilar others, thus creating a sense of identity vulnerability. Consequently, identity security/vulnerability is seen by Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 26) as a starting point for discussing intercultural encounters; it is in a way a defining moment which will affect other facets of IC.

INT stems from an assumption that individuals throughout cultures are striving to be successful communicators. As far as communicating within their own culture is concerned, it can be achieved either through repeated practice or through habitual routines. The potential success relies on two types of identity: *group-* and *personality-based*. These can be reinforced as a result of contact with significant others. As Mead (1934, p. 307) argues, we develop a positive self-image when people important to us view us in a favourable light. On the other hand, if significant others have unfavourable opinions of us, we tend to hold a more negative self-image. This goes to say that individuals acquire their identity as well as ways of

thinking about others in the process of communication in various interactive situations. As Ting-Toomey points out (1999, p. 28), no one acquires their identity in vacuum. This is evident in the following quote (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 30):

> The term identity is used in the identity negotiation perspective as the reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from our cultural, ethnic or gender socialization processes. It is acquired via our interaction with others in particular situations. It thus basically refers to our reflective views of ourselves—at both the social identity and the personal identity levels. Regardless of whether we may or may not be conscious of these identities, they influence our everyday behaviours in a generalized and particularized manner.

2.2 Mindfulness and Mindlessness

According to INT, the identities of interlocutors are perceived as the explanatory mechanism behind success or failure of intercultural encounters (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 39). In the process, the communicators evoke their respective and desired identities, at the same time trying to influence or support those of others. For some, this is a subconscious (mindless) process in which they act with a high degree of automaticity. However, some communicators tend to be mindful about the process. Ting-Toomey calls such an encounter "a learned process of cognitive focusing with repeated skilful practice" (1999, p. 40). It is the mindful identity negotiation that is of interest to our discussion, since very few people seem to be born with a natural ability to engage in successful intercultural communication.

Mindfulness is understood by Langer and Moldoveanau (2000, p. 1) as individual's readiness to shift the old frame of reference, to go beyond schemata in exploring other cultures, and to use new categories in their interpretation. Unlike *mindlessness*, which denotes routinized categories, customary thinking and heavy reliance on familiarity, *mindfulness* is proactive. Its goal is to explore how to enhance intercultural encounters, bearing in mind that all individuals strive for building a positive self-image in all communicative situations. Being a mindful communicator, one accepts the existence of cultural similarities and differences and is ready to construct a new identity or analyse unfamiliar behaviour from a new standpoint.

2.3 The Core Assumptions of INT

INT recognizes that in a communicative situation one party's involvement in ensuring competent identity negotiation is enough to set the process in motion, even though bilateral cooperation is preferable. The theory comprises ten core assumptions (Ting-Toomey 2005, p. 218):

1. People's group and personal identities are formed via symbolic interaction with others.
2. All people feel the need for identity security, inclusion, trust, connection and stability; this regards the group- as well as personal identity level.
3. Culturally familiar environment ensures identity security, while culturally unfamiliar environment leads to identity vulnerability.
4. In communicating with similar people, individuals tend to feel identity trust, while identity distrust is experienced in communication with dissimilar others.
5. When desired group membership identities are positively endorsed, individuals feel included, while they experience differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized.
6. There is a natural desire for close interpersonal relationships which lead to interpersonal connection; identity autonomy is experienced in the case of relationship separations.
7. Predictable cultural situations lead to identity stability and unpredictable ones lead to identity change or chaos.
8. The meanings, interpretations and evaluation of identity-related factors are influenced by cultural, situational and personal variability.
9. Successful identity negotiation results in the feeling of being understood, respected and supported.
10. Integrating the necessary intercultural knowledge, motivations and skills is crucial for mindful intercultural communication.

2.4 INT Criteria and Components

Basing on Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) interpersonal communication competence theory, the criteria of mindful intercultural communication comprise *effectiveness* and *appropriateness*. Ting-Toomey (1999) added a third dimension of *satisfaction*. *Effectiveness* refers to the extent to which a desired meaning or outcome is achieved by communicators. *Appropriateness*, on the other hand, is the degree to which the parties of a communicative situation regard the behaviours proper and fitting to cultural expectations. In the light of this, successful intercultural communication takes place if the communicators regard it as appropriate and effective. What can be seen as effective or appropriate in one culture may not necessarily be so in another. Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 50) provides examples of starting a conversation with a joke or using metaphors as instances of behaviours which could be variously interpreted throughout cultures.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) also recognize three components of communication competence: *knowledge*, *motivation* and *skills*. The first of these, *knowledge*, is a cognitive understanding of culturally-sensitive phenomena necessary for effective and appropriate communication. This understanding is gained through conscious learning, experience and observations. It entails elements such as (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 49):

(1) cultural/personal values;
(2) language and verbal communication;
(3) nonverbal communication;
(4) in-group and out-group boundary;
(5) relationship development;
(6) conflict management;
(7) intercultural adaptation.

Secondly, motivation is an individual's willingness to learn about and interact with dissimilar others. Identity dynamics, according to Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 53), plays a crucial role in discussing motivation from the identity negotiation point of view. An interaction sequence such as "Hi, how are you?"—"Fine!" is a culturally-based greeting ritual evoking a process of identity affirmation: "I see you, I greet you and affirm your existence". Individuals should therefore be mindful of their interlocutors' identity needs (e.g. security, trust, inclusion, etc.), identity domains as well as their own ethnocentric tendencies which very often influence the process of communication. Finally, skills are perceived as the abilities to integrate both knowledge and motivation in achieving effective and appropriate intercultural communication. Among those, Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 49) enumerates:

(1) mindful listening;
(2) mindful observation;
(3) verbal empathy;
(4) nonverbal sensitivity;
(5) mindful stereotyping;
(6) constructive conflict skills;
(7) flexible adaptive skills.

We can signal our readiness to understand and acknowledge our interlocutor by mindful listening and paying attention to them. Interpersonal trust can be encouraged by conveying that we respect both their personal and group-based identity. Lastly, we can reaffirm their importance by verbally and nonverbally confirming their desired identities (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 54).

2.5 The Outcomes of INT

It can be noted that the outcomes of successful IC are outlined in the ninth assumption, while the criteria and components are presented in Assumption 10. Successful identity negotiation is therefore contingent on both the willingness of the parties involved to conduct mindful communication as well as their perceptions of its outcomes. A high sense of identity satisfaction will therefore be achieved when "the communicators perceive desired identities have been mindfully understood, accorded with due respect, and are supported" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 46). By contrast, if

the communicators feel that their identities have been mindlessly avoided, insulted or misunderstood, the communication may be regarded a failure.

The first outcome of mindful intercultural communication, the feeling of being understood is a powerful indicator of success. It connotes the idea of being validated and of the existence of an empathetic other. The communicators are willing to expose their identities, and although they do not have to agree, they should remain empathetic towards one another. Secondly, the feeling of being respected involves courtesy, delicacy, and consideration for one another's identities. The two (or more) dissimilar identities are treated as legitimate in their own right, credible and equal. Respecting other individual's identity means mindful verbal and nonverbal interaction so as to avoid insult. Finally, the third outcome, the feeling of being supported adds to positive self-perception. When an individual feels that their identity is treated as worthwhile, especially by a dissimilar other, they tend to view their self-image more positively. The opposite is also true, as Ting-Toomey claims (2005, p. 229), because a negative endorsement of one's identity will add to the creation of a negative self-image.

There are two important concepts connected with identity endorsement: *confirmation* and *disconfirmation*. *Confirmation* is a process of reinforcing an individual's identity. This can be achieved by sensitively responding to their emotional states or accepting their experiences as real. It involves affirming different lifestyles, feelings and/or experiences. An opposite process is *disconfirmation*, by which individuals do not respond with sensitivity to others' emotions, do not recognize them and do not treat their experience as valid. Disconfirmation uses either indifferent or disqualifying messages, so an individual's identity is either ignored or discounted through the use of patronising, evaluative, racist or sexist language (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 47).

As stated earlier, the criteria of mindful intercultural communication, seen from the identity negotiation perspective, are effectiveness, appropriateness and satisfaction. The negotiation of shared meanings and desired goals ought to be ensured by the components of knowledge, motivation and skills. Finally, its desired outcomes are feelings of being understood, respected and valued. A successful and mindful intercultural communicator is characterised by resourcefulness in adapting to a diverse range of communicative situations and by being "attuned to self-identity and other-identity negotiation issues" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 54).

3 The Study

3.1 The Objectives of the Study

It is the present author's claim that the concept of identity negotiation needs to be explored in relation to study abroad programs such as Erasmus. In particular, emphasis will be placed on finding out whether Polish students engage in mindful intercultural communication, as well as the main problems they encounter during

their sojourns abroad. Having established those, the author would like to offer a few preliminary ideas as regards improving the pre-sojourn intercultural training, from the perspective of identity negotiation. The potential problematic areas will fall into three domains: behavioural, cognitive and affective. These roughly correspond to Ting-Toomey (1999) components of mindful intercultural communication: skills, knowledge and motivation. They are also in line with Byram's (1997, p. 34) intercultural competence model comprising skills of interpreting, relating, discovery and interaction, knowledge of self and other and of interaction, and attitudes towards one's own and the target culture. It is generally believed the three domains should be in constant interaction with each other, ensuring maximum communication effectiveness.

3.2 The Participants

In order to find out whether Polish students participating in study abroad programs engaged in mindful intercultural communication, a survey was conducted among the former participants of Erasmus exchanges. Nearly a hundred of them were contacted by the author through the programme's official Polish website. A survey was published on a popular questionnaire website http://www.ankietka.pl and the former Erasmus students were asked to fill it out. Out of 96 students, 33 decided to provide responses. The participants were between 22 and 30 years of age, 75 % of them women and 25 % men. Their average length of stay abroad was nearly 6 months. All the participants remained anonymous. The participants' demographics are presented in Table 1.

3.3 The Research Instrument

The research was conducted in January 2011. The instrument used for the collection of data was a questionnaire consisting of 19 items—15 items placed on a Likert-type scale and 4 open-ended questions. The Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The participants of the survey were asked to answer the questionnaire in the most objective manner. While constructing the

Table 1 The survey participants' demographics

Category	N	Mean	Mode	SD
Age	33	24.21	25	1.88
Sex M	8			
F	25			
Length of stay (months)	33	5.84	4	3.19

questionnaire, the present author took into account three main areas of enquiry, i.e. the behavioural, cognitive and affective domains. Each statement on the Likert-type scale was related to one of the three areas of enquiry, whereas the four open-ended questions served to gather specific information about potential difficulties connected with staying abroad and solutions to such difficulties.

The questionnaire was piloted among former Erasmus students and teachers working in Teacher Training College in Złotów (a city in the north of Poland) in December 2010 and the necessary revisions were made. These included making changes in the wording of the questions to make them clear, rejecting some of the questions and introducing new ones, as well as organising the questions so that they clearly corresponded to each of the domains in question.

To begin with, behavioural considerations touched upon the necessary skills one should possess which would ensure successful intercultural encounters. It can be deduced from the above ruminations on intercultural communication that a successful sojourner is first of all a watchful observer of the surrounding environment. Therefore, they should possess the skill of discovering artefacts from their new environment and critically examining them. All the new information must be interpreted paying special attention to adopting an outsider's point of view, i.e. avoiding the influence of one's own as well as the target culture. Another set of skills is related to the ability of interacting with dissimilar others. Both verbal and nonverbal communication is involved here with a high degree of consciousness and sensitivity. Finally, a successful communicator should have the skill of constructive problem-solving so as to avoid conflicts and solve potential misunderstandings. In order to find out about the changes in the behavioural domain, the respondents were to decide how much they agreed with the following statements:

1. I often noticed foreign cultural phenomena (e.g. sayings, gestures, behaviours, etc.)
2. I was able to critically assess them (e.g. which ones were appropriate).
3. I was able to assess foreign cultural phenomena WITHOUT referring to my mother culture.
4. I was able to solve cultural misunderstandings.

The cognitive domain of intercultural communication refers to all the necessary knowledge needed to conduct successful communication. Closely connected to the skills of interacting is the knowledge of the target language system. The pragmatics of the target language together with the knowledge of the target culture's body language are essential in this respect. Secondly, the awareness of cultural diversities and similarities will also play a crucial role in the process. Intercultural communicators should understand not only how the target but also how their own culture works in order to see any potential discrepancies and sources of conflict. Connected with this is the knowledge of conflict-solving, or what Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 49) calls *conflict management*. Additionally, sojourners should be aware of the process of cultural adaptation and the possibility of experiencing culture shock. The initial difficulties of their stay abroad may be lessened when they are equipped with this knowledge. The following statements were used to assess the changes in the sojourners' cognitive domain:

5. Knowing a foreign language was of help to me.
6. I learned culturally foreign body language.
7. I learned culturally foreign customs and traditions.
8. I understood my own culture better.
9. I had been prepared for culture shock.

The last problematic area is the affective domain. Here, we tackle the emotional side of the sojourn. A successful communicator should manifest positive attitudes towards the target culture; their attitudes should be characterized by openness, curiosity and giving the new culture a benefit of doubt. They should again take an outsider's point of view to relativize their own culture and try not to judge the new experiences they gain in the target culture. Following Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 149) mindful intercultural communication model, a successful sojourner should feel understood, respected and supported by the foreign culture. Quoting Kramsch's idea (1993), they should develop a *third place*, i.e. a meeting point for the two cultures without valuing any perspective better than the other. In order to find out about the respondents' changes in the affective domain, they were asked to judge to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

10. I felt understood by the foreign culture.
11. I felt respected by the foreign culture.
12. I felt supported by the foreign culture.
13. I was eager to meet new people abroad.
14. I am more open towards foreign phenomena.

The remaining five points of the questionnaire were designed to discover the extent to which the Erasmus students found their stay-abroad experience difficult, whether they had been prepared for potential difficulties, what their needs were and how they could have been better prepared for their sojourn. A Likert-type scale was used for statement 15 (i.e. "I had actively sought information about the foreign culture before my departure") and 4 open-ended questions were used for items 16–19:

16. What was most difficult during your stay abroad?
17. Do you think you were perceived differently than in your own culture? How?
18. What sort of pre-sojourn training would help you during your stay abroad, do you think?
19. What are the benefits of your stay abroad?

3.4 The Results

Data analysis for the study took both quantitative and qualitative form. The initial 15 statements underwent statistical analysis to find out the frequency of answers along with standard deviations. The results are presented in Table 2. The remaining

Table 2 The results of the quantitative part of the study

Category	N	Mean	SD	Frequency strongly disagree	Frequency disagree	Frequency no opinion	Frequency agree	Frequency strongly agree
Items								
1	33	3.96	1.01	0	5	2	17	9
2	33	3.23	1.04	2	5	7	18	1
3	33	3.46	1.00	1	7	6	17	2
4	33	3.53	0.69	1	3	11	17	1
5	33	4.65	0.55	0	0	1	11	21
6	33	3.73	0.90	0	2	12	13	6
7	33	4.46	0.49	0	0	1	18	14
8	33	3.88	0.84	0	2	8	15	8
9	33	3.53	1.08	1	8	4	16	4
10	33	3.42	1.00	1	6	7	17	2
11	33	4.0	0.62	0	2	3	24	4
12	33	3.61	0.78	0	2	12	15	4
13	33	4.53	0.57	0	0	1	16	16
14	33	4.57	0.49	0	0	1	15	17
15	33	3.5	1.11	0	11	2	15	5

four open questions were analysed by looking for key words. Such an approach is commonly used where a variety of answers makes it infeasible to attach a numerical value to each of them. What is specific about open-ended questions, according to Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik (2010, p. 172), is that the respondents decide themselves how detailed their responses are. In a situation when the surveyed provide different answers, as is the case with open-ended questions, it is advised (Dörnyei 2003, p. 116; Nunan 2005, p. 146; Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik 2010, p. 172) to search for keywords in each response and later group them into different categories.

Each item placed on a Likert-type scale should correlate with other items (Dörnyei 2007, p. 206) as well as total scale scores. In order to measure this correlation, internal consistency reliability is used for psychometric tests. The internal consistency reliability was measured by determining Cronbach Alpha coefficient using SPSS Statistics 19. In a well-developed test, the figure should be in excess of 0.70 (Dörnyei 2003, p. 112) and in this case it stood at 0.991 for the 15 items.

The results of the quantitative analysis revealed significant unanimity among the respondents. It turns out that most of their responses oscillate around the same answer (in particular, items 5, 7, 13, and 14 show quite small SD). The biggest deviations concern responses to items 2, 9, and 15. Overall, the most frequently chosen response was 4 (agree). Most respondents strongly agreed with items 5 and 14, while the same frequency of answers (16) concerned item 13. As is evidenced in Table 2, very few students strongly disagreed with most of the statements. This goes to show that the participants, on the whole, were eager to make an effort to change.

The qualitative part of the study concerned questions 16–19. In the first of these, the respondents pointed to the difficulties they experienced during their stay abroad. According to the findings, a high number of the subjects (46 %) pointed to language barrier. It was often remarked that Erasmus students had either not been equipped with the necessary language skills, or their language skills were inadequate for the situation they found themselves in (e.g. they were unable to understand slang, jargon or colloquial speech). As much as 16 % of those surveyed mentioned foreign cultural customs. These students had not expected cultural differences to be so great. The third greatest difficulty proved to be finances. Thirteen percent of the respondents complained about financial difficulties they experienced during their Erasmus experience. The same percentage of subjects noted that completing all formalities in a foreign country gave rise to substantial difficulties. Among other answers, the respondents enumerated making friends (10 %), moving around town (10 %), cultural antagonisms (10 %), a different approach to time (6 %), and finding an apartment (6 %). Individual answers mentioned food, missing significant others, and lack of hygiene in a foreign culture. Two of the thirty students who answered this question admitted to having no difficulties during their stay.

As regards the feeling of being perceived differently than in one's own culture, as many as 52 % of the surveyed admitted to having felt alienation. The perceived incompatibilities with another culture were of different nature. While some students

felt physically strange (e.g. because of another skin or hair colour), others pointed to differences in behaviour (e.g. one student wrote that "Poles were seen as hard-working" and another claimed that "I was perceived as rude because I had not used as many 'thank you' as the English"). Thirty-two percent of respondents claimed they had not felt any different while staying abroad, whereas 16 % found it hard to judge.

In the case of next question which dealt with pre-sojourn training, most of the students (76 %) expressed the need for attending a language course before going on the Erasmus program. According to the surveyed, their stay abroad would have been much more successful had they known a foreign language better. The second need mentioned by the subjects (46 %) was learning about a foreign culture. It was also claimed that pre-sojourn training should additionally entail elements of the target country history (20 %) and geography (13 %). Other less frequently mentioned items were target culture traditions and customs (6 % each). The same number of respondents pointed to practical training, e.g. role-plays and talking to foreigners. Individual respondents mentioned learning about the target culture body language, its political situation and cuisine.

The final question in the survey concerned the benefits of going for a study abroad program. In this case, the most frequently given answer (51 %) was better knowledge of a foreign language. The next two most frequent answers (41 % each) were making friends and becoming more open-minded. Thirty-five percent of those surveyed underlined they gained more self-reliance and 22 % claimed they found it easier to cope in difficult situations. The students who took part in the survey also mentioned a better understanding of the foreign (19 %) as well as the mother (16 %) culture. Moreover, 12 % admitted to becoming more tolerant. Among other answers, the respondents mentioned improved job opportunities, developing new interests, education and expanding their world view.

4 Conclusions

The results of the survey demonstrate by and large a high degree of mindfulness involved in identity negotiation during intercultural encounters. It seems readily apparent that the majority of Erasmus students were watchful observers of the sociocultural aspects of their sojourn. For one thing, the behavioural considerations amply show that most of the respondents are characterised by the ability to mindfully observe their environment. Not only did they manage to abandon their cultural perspectives but they were also able to critically assess foreign practices. Additionally, more than a half demonstrates the skill of constructive conflict solving. Clearly, this enabled them to avoid intercultural misunderstandings, although the survey does not yield insights into whether this skill had been developed during their stay abroad.

As for cognitive considerations, the participants of the survey proved they had been able to acquire knowledge either through conscious learning or through

observation and practice. In particular, the development of language skills was very often stressed. Apart from this, the surveyed learnt about the customs and traditions of a new culture as well as gained greater insight into the culture of their mother countries. It also seems clear that most of them had been prepared for experiencing culture shock; however their answers (question 16) indicate that when confronted with foreign culture, many students found it difficult to understand some of its customs. This makes us contemplate the necessity of preparing students for putting theory into practice. Moreover, although nearly 40 % of the students claimed they learnt nonverbal aspects of communicating within members of a foreign culture, a similar number could not decide whether they agreed with the statement or not. Perhaps a greater degree of mindfulness is necessary when dealing with those aspects of communication which are not as "palpable" as language.

There is also a lot of evidence from the survey concerning positive attitudes experienced and felt by the sojourners. A significant number of the respondents felt respected by the foreign culture. A little over a half felt understood, although a fifth claimed the opposite and another fifth was unable to decide. Similarly, more than a half felt supported by the new culture, but 36 % were unable to express their opinion. Far from being passive, most students were happy to meet people and make new friends abroad. What is worth mentioning is the fact that none of the students disagreed with the statement concerning being eager to meet people abroad. None of them also disagreed with the fact that the Erasmus experience opened their minds. This alone may be a sufficient basis for declaring that students going abroad are not afraid to engage in intercultural communication and willingly seek opportunities to do so, as the process positively influences their identities. It therefore seems remotely plausible that the experience of studying abroad would have a damaging effect on one's self-image.

Remarkably, the issue of knowing a foreign language was very often raised in response to questions about difficulties of staying abroad and suggestions regarding the improvement of such stays. Most students consider language skills to be of key importance in intercultural communication as they attach greater importance to verbal communication than to gestures and body language. One could hardly call this a finding; however this information is useful to the extent that it raises questions about the nature of the language taught. The respondents often underlined that what they had been taught at school was incongruent with foreign reality, stressing the need for learning more informal expressions or even slang. On the other hand, the reported difficulties connected with taking care of formalities may also be related to insufficient language skills, in this case stemming from unfamiliarity with formal language. As the students noted, they would have benefited from an intensive language course before their departure as well as acting out role-plays and simulations of life abroad.

This brings us to an ancillary finding, namely the existence of a certain discrepancy between the needs expressed by students and the solutions they offered. Interestingly enough, although they stated the need for more hands-on experience before the departure, their solutions largely focused on gaining theoretical knowledge. In other words, even though students craved more practical tasks and skills

development, they stressed the importance of gaining factual knowledge (e.g. geography, history, culture, traditions, etc.). The responses to item 15 seem to support this conclusion since not many students actively sought information about the target culture before their departure. Perhaps this finding is very informative of the general habit of Polish students, i.e. of being passive recipients of information, and the fact that they were mostly unable to provide examples of practical activities goes to show that their teachers rarely assign them in class.

To conclude, the most promising finding of the survey is that Polish students participating in the Erasmus program, proved to be mindful intercultural communicators, sensitive towards the identities of the foreigners they met. They are very enthusiastic about the experience of studying abroad, which is clearly visible in their answers to the last question, where they enumerate various benefits of the Erasmus program. Additionally, they are willing to learn more to become even better communicators in the future. Therefore, a challenge is posed to educators as there is an obvious urge to create and implement beneficial intercultural training for students taking part in study abroad programs.

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