

# Language Identity in the Study Abroad Context

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Tamara Ilić

LANGUAGE IDENTITY IN THE STUDY ABROAD CONTEXT

Diplomski rad

Rijeka, rujan 2023.

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## **Abstract**

In the last decades, the phenomenon of language identity has raised significant academic interest in sociolinguistics, whereas studies revolving around second language acquisition in a study abroad context have put more focus on exploring the connection between a language and identity instead of the development of language proficiency. This thesis aims to explore the experiences and attitudes of students who participate in study abroad programmes regarding their identity in relation to the language(s) spoken during the exchange program. The main research questions were: 1. How does the change of environment and close circle of friends and family in the study abroad context affect one's view, beliefs and needs? 2. While studying abroad, do students perceive themselves differently while speaking a second language? 3. Do students participating in study abroad programmes perceive improvements in second language usage? The participants were students from different parts of Croatia, three females and two males, who took part in the Erasmus exchange program in Portugal in the 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 academic years (four in Lisbon and one in Aveiro). To achieve the aims of this study, semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method and qualitative approach to analysing participants' answers. The study confirmed that there is a noticeable change in one's self-confidence and independence after the study abroad experience, which is closely related to increased second language proficiency. It also confirmed that some participants perceive themselves differently while speaking a second language and find it more difficult to express their true selves.

**Key words:** language identity, study abroad context, English, Croatian, Portuguese

## **1. Introduction**

This thesis explores language identity in the context of studying abroad. Identity is a complex phenomenon, often influenced and shaped by various aspects of a person's life. Those factors usually include close social relations with other people such as parents and other family members, friends, or being a part of certain societal categories such as gender, class, ethnicity; as well as one's country of origin and its cultural background. All those factors that influence someone's identity also shape their language use. The connection between language and identity is indeed intricate and as such has been capturing attention of scholars in different fields of linguistics and humanities and social sciences in general. Namely, using specific languages and language features allows a person to feel a sense of belonging to a certain social group and- to express that belonging, and it also gives them a feeling of security. But what happens when one steps outside of their comfort zone, and decides to change their familiar environment, and social networks? How do changes like that affect one's language behaviour and effort to improve their language skills? What happens to the identity of a person when challenged to adapt to a second language in a new environment? These and other questions regarding the connection between a second language and identity are discussed in the following chapters.

In contemporary dynamic world characterized by fast change of ideas and intense movements of people, identity, especially its interconnectedness with language, is a phenomenon that intrigues researchers more than ever. According to Preece (2016: 3), identity has indeed become a more complex phenomenon as a result of the mobility and diversity in the social world, both in the physical and the digital domain, due to the complex process of globalisation in the late modernity. In other words, every conversation, experience, and every thought that a person has, builds on their identity and makes them who they are. The vast situations under which a human being uses their language determines whether that person is perceived as someone highly valued in that particular site or perhaps not.

The connection between language learning and identity is of great significance and interest to scholars in fields of language education, applied linguistics, sociolinguistic, and of course second language acquisition. Identity is such a complex socio-psychological phenomenon; it is no wonder that it is used in so many different fields. According to Rahimian (2015), different fields use the term identity in various ways and for different things, making it practically impossible to provide a single definition that can fit all of the

mentioned uses. This is also noted by Benson et al., who said that although there are many definitions of identity in literature, there is as yet no universally accepted definition of second language identity. It is provisionally defined here as any aspect of a person's identity that is connected to their knowledge or use of a second language (Benson et al. 2012: 174). Language identity is a vast field that can be explored from many different angles and it is therefore one of the main focuses of interest by sociolinguists in recent decades.

Language and identity are both complex notions which resist strict definitions. This complexity is probably best summarized in this quote by Preece:

“Language learning engages the identities of learners because language is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols, but also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning of a given utterance – whether oral or written – is partly determined by the value ascribed to a particular speaker or writer. This value, in turn, is best understood with reference to complex social and cultural practices, and negotiated in the context of shifting relations of power.” (Preece, 2016: xxii)

Language has always been associated with social identity. Namely, the way a person speaks and uses a specific language almost certainly provides some clues about who the person is, and where the person comes from. In other words, “identity refers to how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future.” Norton (2013:45)

In the following chapters, the discussion on language identity continues in the direction of the study abroad experience and its connection to the second language identity. This thesis consists of 6 chapters, including this introductory chapter. In chapter 2, the main reasoning behind this research is explained, as well as the main aims and the context of the research. In chapter 3, the state of the art in the field of study abroad and language identity research is presented and the main literature influencing the study is summarized. Chapter 4 provides all important information on the methodology and how the practical part of this study was conducted, and lists the questions used in the semi-structured interviews with the participants. Chapter 5 presents the analysis of collected data and discusses the important findings gathered from the interviews with the five participants of this study. Finally, in Chapter 6, the conclusions of the gathered information are presented and discussed.

## **2. The Aims and Context of the Research**

The notion of moving to a completely different country, where no one else knows you and understands you presents a challenge on so many levels. As Preece puts it, “the search for a new place to belong, the learning of a new language and an identity transformation in which the culture, languages, religion, politics, customs, and practices of what was left behind enter into a fluid mix with what is and what is to come.” Preece (2016: 2) When it comes to identity in this process, Preece (2016: 2) highlights that those who do manage to adapt to a new environment and the challenges it brings to the table are the ones that do not have to worry about their identities. However, the problem arises when a person’s sense of belonging is disrupted in this process. Many students who decide to embark on the study abroad journey, experience some kind of barrier or difficulty when trying to convey their real selves in a non-native language, which demonstrates how deeply intertwined identity and language are.

The ideas reflected in the quotes above were a motivating starting point of this research. After spending one semester abroad in Portugal and experiencing the complexities of language identity in study abroad context in practice, I have decided to pursue this topic as my MA thesis project. The advantage of this was that I could easily access respondents who would be willing to share their perspectives and experiences so that I could analyse issues related to language identities of students from Croatia who took part in Erasmus exchange in Portugal. Therefore, the main aims of this research were to find out how a new, unknown environment affects students and their identities, to find out how the study abroad experience influenced their ability to fully express themselves in foreign languages, and to show if they felt differently when using Croatian as opposed to English or Portuguese in the study abroad environment. An additional aim was to showcase whether they thought that their usage of a foreign language on a daily basis improved their language skills, and if they came across a certain barrier or difficulty while speaking any language other than Croatian. The analysis of these students’ experiences will aim to show whether individuals perceive themselves as the same person when using a different language to communicate their thoughts in a study abroad context.

In summary, this thesis aims to address the following questions:

- 1) How does the change of environment and close circle of friends and family in the study abroad context affect one’s view, beliefs and needs?



- 2) While studying abroad, do students perceive themselves differently while speaking a second language?
- 3) Do students participating in study abroad programmes perceive improvements in second language usage?

### 3. Literature review

As previously mentioned, language identity can be observed from various angles, and for this thesis, the focus is put on the study abroad experience and its influence on language identity. The topic of identity in a study abroad context is relatively new and can still be considered somewhat unexplored. In the beginnings of exchange programmes that enabled student mobility, there was some research as mentioned by Block (2007).<sup>1</sup> These early studies used questionnaire data that was transformed to statistics, which paints a very limited picture of how students lived and felt during their study abroad experience. In other words, at that stage of research into study abroad and language learning there is little, if any mention of the connection between language and identity.

On the other hand, as Block (2007) mentions, in the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a significant number of authors who, in addition to using questionnaire, decided to include field notes, interviews and diaries to fully capture the study abroad experience<sup>2</sup>. Even though these studies portrayed the shift that happened in subject positions from being a passive student to becoming an active participant in the learning process, they still did not put the focus on language identity.

Studies from these two stages represent the European scene of researchers of language in the study abroad context, but the largest body of literature with focus on study abroad experience comes from North America. Good examples such as Freed's collection (1995), where she gives great input about improvements of different aspects regarding communicative competence such as target language grammar, pragmatics and phonology, speaking and reading, and another more recent publication, edited by DuFon and Churchill (2006), majorly contributes to the improvement of target language communicative competence in the study abroad context.

When it comes to research on the connection between identity and the study abroad experience, according to Block (2007), an exception in the above mentioned studies is Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) study of European students crossing borders to engage in different programmes of studying abroad. She used both in-depth interviews and questionnaires to gather information about the participant's experiences during their study abroad semesters.

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<sup>1</sup> such as Maiworm, Steube and Teichler (1991), Maiworm and Teichler (1993), Teichler (1996) and many others that reported the experiences of Erasmus participants.

<sup>2</sup> such as Byram and Alred (1993), Parker and Rouxeville (1995), Snow and Byram (1997), Mubig-Trapp and Schnitzer (1997), Payne and Smith (1998), Roberts et al. (2001)

Another group of studies that explore identity in the study abroad context are studies such as Block's (2007), Byram and Feng's (2006), and Pellegrino Aveni's (2005), all of which investigate negative experiences while studying abroad, such as psychological problems, isolation and sexual harassment during the study abroad experiences.

According to Benson et al. (2012: 173) from the student's perspective, study abroad is a holistic and potentially life-changing experience with a range of possible outcomes. As is mentioned later by the participants of this research, study abroad really is a unique experience that changes a person from inside out. When a person decides to take on the journey of living abroad, he or she has to be prepared to face every obstacle that comes their way. It is a scary, and yet one of the most exciting experiences during one's university years. Students are faced with countless new opportunities, people, a mix of new cultures and information, languages, and food. One is faced with the whole wide world, and the boundary is where they decide to put it.

From the perspective of a student, studying abroad is almost always an experience recommended to others as a must-try during university years. However, from the academic perspective, it provides an interesting angle for observation of the connection between someone's identity and second language acquisition or improvement. As Benson et al. put it, "one of the challenges evaluating the impact of study abroad programmes that involve second language learning and use, therefore, is to understand the degree to which second language proficiency and personal development outcomes are interrelated." Benson et al. (2012: 174)

When it comes to the topic of language and identity, it has to be noted that contemporary perspectives cannot be easily isolated from historical ones. As Joseph (2016: 19) states, identity is in some sense rooted in the beliefs about the past; in heritage and sense of belonging to people, to a place, and simply in a way of life. There are many ways that can be used to signify such belonging, but what language one speaks and how one decides to use it, ranks at the very top of that list. People and places earn their names through language. The past and people's heritage is known to them because of recording and passing on information through language. That is the true power of language, and that is how it's directly connected to people's identities.

There are numerous studies that have dealt with second language learning and its connection to a person's identity. Some of them mentioned by Block (2007: 112)<sup>3</sup> give information about inter-language pragmatics of French students in Australia, German students in the US, Mandarin second language students in the US. These and many more studies try to reveal something new about this phenomenon, for it is becoming more and more relevant and important as societies break boundaries that once existed.

Each language changes on a daily basis, and homogeneous form of a spoken language does not exist. According to Joseph (2016: 19), the identity of a person is indexed and understood through diversity and change; who a person is or what they aspire to in life. The world is experiencing massive and uncontrolled development of communication, and yet this process has not put an end to differences in local language use, so when people speak, there are indications of where they come from. Different genders use language differently, generational differences are also noticeable, cultural differences including religious ones or even occupational. The reason why the differences have not ceased to exist, according to Joseph (2016: 19), is because the change doesn't happen on a grand scale; it results in something that can be seen as layers of time in a language.

Language represents an immense amount of power in shaping people's lives without them even noticing it. When a person talks and uses a language in a specific way, they create a certain invisible ethnical or even territorial boundary that marks their belonging to a certain group of people. However, as De Fina says, identity should be approached with caution because it's a complex phenomenon where language can be used to form various types of identities, not just one (2016). While researching identity, linguists came across various kinds of identity categories. For this particular reason, as De Fina states, it is not only helpful to recognize the difference between personal and social identities, but also to identify differences between individual and collective identities De Fina (2016: 163) Personal identities present aspects that an individual views as representing themselves as a certain kind of person, whereas social identities indicate being a member of a certain group based on ethnicity, age, gender and many other categories. With that being said, language can be used by a person to express their true selves, but can also be used to generate concepts of various communities and different social groups. In other words, identity has many dimensions, and these categories

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<sup>3</sup> Liddicoat and Crozet (2001), Belz (2002), Genung (2003)

help in understanding what it represents, but it must be noted that in practice it is not always easy to differentiate between those categories.

Another view on dimensions of identity is provided by Benson et al. (2012: 176), who states that the primary problem in the very conceptualization of the identity connected to a second language affects the different aspects of the private and public self to which that identity refers to. He mentions that there are at least five different aspects or 'facets' that should be taken into consideration when talking about identity. The first aspect refers to how a person feels about who they are; their true inner self, while the second represents identity he or she decides to show to others. The third aspect is identity perceived and ascribed to them by other people. While fourth represents 'imagined identities', the fifth are socially approved categories of identity. To further expand Benson et al.'s approach, the first and second aspects of identity are closely intertwined; especially when looked at from study abroad context. When found in a different environment, a person might feel 'lost' or less like themselves in the early stages of adjustment. The biggest barrier and thus problem presents the knowledge of the dominant language of the country where one studies abroad, or the lack of it. An example from real life was provided by Pellegrino Aveni (2015; 18), when American students felt lost and less like themselves during the early stages of their study abroad year in Russia as a consequence of them not knowing Russian language and not being able to use it to express themselves and their thoughts to native people in the study abroad setting. The result of not being able to fully express oneself affects both the inner sense of who one is, and how other people see them as well and consequently decide whether one is a fit for a certain social group or not. Interestingly enough, this process could go both ways, which is why it is of great importance to truly understand the complexity of language identity. Patron's observation about students from France (2007: 177) that said; "some students on their return to France experienced some discomfort as they felt that their new bilingual identities did not achieve the recognition they merited." A good example of the third aspect of identity, where the students did not feel as if they have been rightfully ascribed the new attributes they acquired during their study abroad experience.

When found in a new environment, study abroad students almost always have to speak a second language, and have no other option but to embrace and show their identities through that particular language. Benson et al. 2012: 177) state that the mentioned identities could be problematically connected to what they identify as their real selves, (the first aspect of identity-facet 1) and they could potentially be validated by interlocutors in the new

environment (which is in fact the third aspect of identity-facet 3). This is where the key problems regarding second language identity come into play. They involve, as Benson et al. (2012: 177) mention; “the projection and recognition of identities in a new environment and their correspondence with participants’ sense of self. These problems are likely to be present irrespective of whether or not study abroad involves a second language, but are also likely to be sharpened where there is a need to negotiate identities through second language use.” Another layer of complexity is added to these problems with the fourth and fifth aspect of identity. They are responsible for including the socially-approved part of identity. While the fourth aspect of identity introduces participants’ ideas of themselves in future, and even their hopes of how their identities could evolve as a result of studying abroad, the fifth aspect represents certain categories within which the study abroad identities are determined. Those categories are almost always connected with ethnicity, nationality or even gender. The desired and expected identities are related to student’s aims and expectations, or the ideal versions of themselves that they try to show through the second language in their new study abroad setting. However, it could be said that desired identities make it even harder to negotiate identities in study abroad context. According to Benson et al. (2012: 178), the projected identities could possibly have less to do with students’ sense of their ‘real selves’, than with desired identities that take account of their knowledge of the study abroad environment and adaptations that may improve their experience of it.

Students who decide to participate in some kind of the study abroad experience often find themselves in situations where their projected and recognized identities come into conflict. It is hard to achieve desired identities in a new environment when socially-conditioned perceptions exist and ultimately stand in one’s way of making them happen. Benson et al. (2012: 178) mention that many studies of gender and study abroad have demonstrated how easily people make assumptions about social identity categories, and how those views can be challenged by the study abroad setting and experience. As previously discussed, issues regarding identity are complex as students are forced to redefine their personal identities in terms of unknown and new interpretations of their social identities.

A large portion of research into the connection between language learning and study abroad context focuses on the development of language skills and overall proficiency and there is a taken for granted belief that the study abroad context will automatically result in student’s improved language skills.

Namely, when students decide to participate in a study abroad programme, it is usually expected to see improvement in every aspect of a language, because they are in one hand forced to use it on everyday basis. While improvements in vocabulary or spelling or even grammar are all positive and even measurable, they seem not to have an explicit impact on identity. Furthermore, as Podboj (2017) says, students in exchange programs often end up living in isolated exchange bubbles where they only interact with other exchange students in English and therefore are not exposed to the native language so language immersion is not likely to take place.

Another thing that can affect the second language identity in the context of second language proficiency is the improvement of pragmatic competence in the study abroad context, by influencing the participant's ability to express desired identities and to operate better with words. As Benson et al. (2012: 183) mention, language competence is an essential part for the revelation of any identity in a second language, but more importantly, participants' improvement and use of pragmatic competence does partially depend on the kinds of identities they decide to project to the new environment and the responses they get to them.

Study abroad experience has an effect on almost every aspect of a student's life. It enables the process of 'constructing the self', where a student can feel improvements in their self-esteem, self-confidence, communication, motivation, and many more. Ellis (2004: 543), uses the term *linguistic self-concept* to refer to how learners perceive their ability as language learners and their progress in relation to the particular context in which they are learning". Improvements in the mentioned areas include second language identity directly. They impact the students' sense of who they are as second language users, and their capability to express personal identities through the usage of a second language.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study aims to show different perspectives on the studying abroad experience and its influence on a person's identity. It aims to show how the change in a person's environment affected their own 'sense of self' by describing and illustrating participants' lived experiences during their semester abroad. To achieve the goal of this thesis, qualitative approach to analysing participants' testimonies about their experiences while studying abroad was used. The qualitative approach consisted of gathering and recording interviews, transcribing and analysing them in detail to fully grasp the different experiences and attitudes of the participants regarding their language identity. In other words, qualitative research was used in this study because it allows approaching the complex issue of language identity in the study abroad context from a broader perspective, compared to quantitative approaches.

For this study, interviews were chosen as a data collection method. Interviewing as a method of data collection enables researchers to gather a large amount of rich data for analysis, however the findings are limited to the cases studied and cannot be generalized, but can be indicative of a phenomenon, such as language identity in this case.

The study was based on one-on-one interviews with five students from different parts of Croatia, who participated in the Erasmus student exchange during the 2021/22 academic year. Erasmus+ is the European Union's exchange programme designed to promote education, youth and sport in Europe. It was designed in 1987 with an aim to connect European Universities on pedagogical, administrative, and philosophical levels. Until the year 2027, the main focus of the programme is put on the social inclusion, and promoting young student's participation in democratic life. Erasmus+ provides the opportunity to study abroad to students at all higher education levels. By participating, one gains a chance to immerse themselves into a completely new culture and gain skills that could be highly valued in the future. Most importantly, it allows student mobility across Europe and the world, enabling connections worldwide. It gives participants a chance to improve their language skills, become independent, and gain self-confidence (European Commission 2023).

The participants of this study were all students from Croatia who chose Portugal as their Erasmus destination for one semester during their BA and MA studies. The participants were three females and two males, together making a total of five participants.



The participants come from different parts of Croatia, which is why the interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. The time of the interview was individually scheduled with each participant depending on their free time. Regarding the form of each interview, it was semi-structured; meaning that there was a base of questions for each participant, but the order and the phrasing of questions were not rigorously set. The questions were open-ended in nature allowing both the interviewer and the participants a certain dose of flexibility. Each interview lasted differently with the average time being around 30 minutes. All the participants gave their informed consent to participate in the interview and allowed for them to be recorded and subsequent parts of the transcript to be included in the analysis.

The interviews were transcribed and the data was carefully examined in order to find shared themes and patterns. Each theme discovered was closely examined to better understand the findings; participants' motivations and experiences in relation to their language identity in the study abroad context. The semi-structured interviews chosen for this research and the findings arising from their analysis generally do not provide generalized results that can be used beyond the participants, which is on the one hand a limitation for this type of data collection. However, they do present a better understanding of the participants' experiences, emotions, and motivations, and therefore extend the knowledge of the phenomenon of language identity in the study abroad context, which is why they were ultimately chosen for the analysis.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of the following twelve questions, presented here in Croatian and translated into English below:

Interview questions in original, in Croatian:

1. *Kako to da si odlučilo/la odabrati baš Portugal kao Erasmus destinaciju? Jesi li htio/htjela usavršiti portugalski ili ga možda početi učiti?*
2. *Kako bi opisao/la svoje Erasmus iskustvo?*
3. *Što ti se najviše/najmanje dojmilo za vrijeme boravka u Portugalu?*
4. *Koji si jezik koristio/la u svakodnevnoj komunikaciji? Je li to bio hrvatski ili neki drugi jezik? Možeš li to malo opisati?*
5. *Jesi li koristio/la engleski i u kojim situacijama? (Pada li ti na pamet neka konkretna situacija u kojoj je bilo tako?)*
6. *Jesi li se služio/la portugalskim i u kojim situacijama?*
7. *Jesi li nailazio/la na neke jezične barijere i probleme u komunikaciji na stranom jeziku? Kako si ih rješavao/la?*

8. *Kako se komuniciralo s ostalim Erasmusovcima, cimerima...?*
9. *Uporabom kojeg jezika si se osjećao/la najprirodnije/ugodnije? (Pada li ti a pamet neka konkretna situacija u kojoj je bilo tako?)*
10. *S kim bi rekao/la da se provodilo najviše vremena? Zašto?*
11. *Možeš li mi malo opisati druge Erasmusovce, npr. s kim se druže, koje jezike govore, odakle su itd.?*
12. *Je li te i kako Erasmus iskustvo promijenilo? (U smislu vještina, znanja, stavova, poznanstava...)*

**Interview questions translated into English:**

1. *How come you decided to choose Portugal as your Erasmus destination? Did you want to perfect the existing knowledge of Portuguese language or perhaps start learning it?*
2. *How would you describe your Erasmus experience?*
3. *What were your biggest likes/dislikes during your stay in Portugal?*
4. *What language did you use in everyday communication? Was it Croatian or another language? Could you describe this in a few words?*
5. *Did you use English in any situations? If yes, can you name some?*
6. *Did you use Portuguese? If yes, in which situations?*
7. *Did you encounter any language barriers or difficulties while communicating in a foreign language? How did you manage those situations?*
8. *How did you communicate with the other students from the Erasmus programme and your roommates?*
9. *Which language did you feel most comfortable using? Does any particular situation come to mind?*
10. *Who would you say you spent the most time with? Why?*
11. *Could you say anything about the other Erasmus participants? Who did they hang out with? What language did they use?*
12. *Would you say that the study abroad experience changed you? (in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes, acquaintances...)*

## 5. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected through interviews with five participants from Croatia who studied abroad in Portugal during the 2021/22 academic year. To protect their identities, pseudonyms are used instead of their real names and each participant's interview is analysed in a separate section. Examples are presented in their English translation, while the originals in Croatian are provided in footnotes. Because the role and presence of the interviewer are a relevant aspect of the interviews, these parts were also included and marked in bold letters.

### 5.1. Sara

Sara, a student of French and Portuguese language in Zagreb is one of the participants of the Erasmus programme that took place in Lisbon in 2022. At the moment of our interview, she was finishing her third year of studies at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is very passionate about Portuguese language and culture, which is why she decided to choose Portugal as her destination for the semester studying abroad. She is one of the participants of this study whose proficiency of Portuguese is very high. In the following excerpt, Sara talks about her experience during her study abroad semester in Lisbon.

#### Example 1 (Sara)<sup>4</sup>

**T: How would you describe your experience in Portugal? What would you say?**

**S: Well, regarding Erasmus, the most stressful part was actually all the paperwork that was due before coming to Portugal. When you finally come to Portugal, you see that all that work more or less pays off...I mean, it depends from one person to another, but I was very happy to be in new surroundings, with new people...everything was new. Of course, you need some time to figure things out, to get used to everything, but...I really liked that whole experience. You learn how to do a lot of things on your own; you learn how to manage, but...**

**T: Do you think you had a certain advantage over us who didn't speak Portuguese, and because of it managed better or?**

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<sup>4</sup> **T: Kako bi opisala sveukupno iskustvo na Erasmusu/ u Portugalu? Kad bi nekome prepričavala, kako bi to opisala?**

**S: Pa, što se Erasmusa tiče, najstresniji dio mi je zapravo bila sva potrebna papirologija i to najviše prije samog dolaska u Portugal. Nakon što dođeš tamo vidiš da se više manje sve isplati...Mislim sve ovisi od osobe do osobe, ali meni je jako drago bilo biti u tom nekom novom okružju, s novim ljudima...nekako sve novo. Naravno treba neko vrijeme da se snađeš, da pohvataš sve, ali...meni se takvo iskustvo jako svidilo. Naučiš dosta toga odraditi sam, naučiš se snaći na neke načine, ali...**

**T: Misliš da si imala određenu vrstu prednosti nad nama koji nismo pričali portugalski, pa si se samim time i bolje snašla?**

**S: Paaa, čak i da. Čisto zato što sam često nalijetala na neke ljude što ne znaju engleski i često sam čula od drugih studenata da su imali problema u određenim stvarima jer ih osoba nije razumijela. Što se tiče, možda najviše što se tiče administracije na faksu u Portugalu, umm su ljudi nalijetali na ljude koji se ono...s kojima ne mogu komunicirati i onda je neke stvari normalno teže odraditi. Tako da eto, možda jedino u takvim situacijama, a van toga što se tiče profesora, stvarno mislim da su barem moji profesori bili dosta razumni u vezi svega, tako da čak i ukoliko studenti nisu bili toliko slobodni s upotrebom portugalskog, su nekako ulijetali i pomagali im u situaciji.**

**T: To je nekako bilo i za očekivati, ipak je to veliki plus, poznavanje jezika...**

*S: Well, I would even say yes. Mostly because I often ran into people who do not speak English, and I often heard from other students that they had problems with certain things because the person would not understand them. Regarding, well maybe mostly regarding the administration at the university in Portugal, umm, students ran into people who...with whom they couldn't communicate thus some things are normally harder to get done. Yes, so maybe only in such situations, but apart from that with professors, I really think that at least my professors were quite reasonable about everything, so even if students were not using Portuguese very freely, they would 'jump in' and help them in every situation.*

*T: Exactly what one would expect, it is after all a big plus, knowing the language...*

As mentioned, Sara is one of the participants in this research who knows Portuguese very well which, according to her, has made the adjustment to a new environment and culture much easier than to those who do not speak it. Even though she thinks everyone, including the professors, made an effort to help every student to adjust more easily, knowing the language of the country one is moving to certainly provides more opportunities and gives one a chance to fully immerse oneself into the study abroad experience. Another advantage of knowing the language of the country one is moving to, according to Stela, is a unique chance to be surrounded by the language every day and have a chance to speak to native speakers. It is the ultimate way to practice and improve one's language skills. This topic is discussed in the following excerpt from Sara's point of view.

#### Example 2 (Sara)<sup>5</sup>

**T: What language did you use the most in everyday communication?**

*S: Portuguese definitely. I mean, it was in one hand because it was my choice, and that's how I surrounded myself. I looked for subjects held only in Portuguese, so I didn't have...I was treated like an ordinary Portuguese student, I took all the classes in Portuguese, so, and communication in the university was completely in Portuguese. Umm, at home it was the same...because I came across; well I got lucky with roommates, because they all ended up being Portuguese, so at home our communication was in Portuguese. Outside, wherever I would go I would speak Portuguese, I would not force English...so, only when communicating with the other Erasmus students, would we speak in English. That's it; outside of that I did not.*

**T: You would say that you used English the most with other Erasmus students, and with us Croatians, Croatian?**

*S: Yes, yes, yes...that's right. The rest was really all in Portuguese.*

In Example 2, Sara explains how she aimed to surround and immerse herself as much as possible into the Portuguese way of life. She knew that the best way for her to practice the

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<sup>5</sup>**T: Kod svakodnevnih komunikacija, koji si jezik najviše koristila?**

*S: Portugalski definitivno. Mislim zato šta...to je nekako i bio moj odabir i tako sam se i okružila. Tražila sam kolegije koji su samo na portugalskom, tako da nisam imala...ono tretiralo me se kao normalnog portugalskog studenta. Slušala sam sve na portugalskom, tako da ovaj, cijela komunikacija na faksu je bila na portugalskom. Umm, doma isto...jer sam naišla, tu sam više manje imala sreće sa cimerima, jer sam naišla na sve Portugalce, tako da ono, i u kući je bila komunikacija na portugalskom. A vani sam, di god bi išla pričala bih na portugalski, ne bih forsirala taj engleski...tako da, jedino u komunikaciji sa drugim Erasmus studentima bi ono, pričali bi na engleski. Tako da eto, van toga nisam.*

**T: Znači rekla bi da si engleski najviše koristila s ostalim Erasmusovcima, a s nama Hrvatima, Hrvatski?**

*S: Da, da, da... tako je. Ostalo je stvarno bilo sve na portugalski.*

language and free herself from constraints while using it was to avoid using any other language. It truly is a unique opportunity to enrich one's knowledge of a language, because one gets a chance to hear and participate in every day communication, providing in that way an opportunity to practice every aspect of a language with the native speakers of a language. On the other hand, when it comes to fully immersing oneself into the whole study abroad experience, it is not unusual for students who participate in study abroad programs to create their own 'safe space' where they surround themselves with people from their country or only other exchange students, leaving them completely unexposed to the new environment, culture and most importantly native language, as mentioned by Podboj (2017). The dominance of English as a *lingua franca* among exchange students is also evident in Sara's answer, as she spoke English only with other exchange students. The result of Sara's efforts to emerge herself in Portuguese language and culture is talked about in the following excerpt.

### Example 3 (Sara)<sup>6</sup>

**T: Using which language did you feel most comfortable/ most natural?**

**S:** Uhh, well most natural, I think...ha I don't know, I mean since I was in Portugal, I liked using Portuguese the most. I mean, it cannot be measured with the fact that English is by far easier for me to use because I have been studying it for years, but...when it comes to let's say my favourite, since I was in Portugal, it was by far most natural to use Portuguese. Maybe because you constantly hear it around you, even if you are not communicating with anyone directly, you always hear it. It's always around you, so maybe in that moment it's the most natural option. Usually, when I'm not in Portugal, like right now I communicate with guests at the hostel in English of course, it's the easiest for me.

**T: For example, when we hung out as Croatians, we had a chance to communicate in a language that was the closest to us...but nonetheless you say that it was still the most natural option for you to use Portuguese? That's very interesting to hear.**

**S:** Well, I mean, maybe just because you feel somehow...okay I mean I get that it's a different situation with you because Croatian, it's the closest to you and you have people who speak Croatian, and then you feel...another group of people and there's another way, I don't know...but the thing is, you hear all those people talking Portuguese around you and that's why, it just sounds like the most natural option.

As Sara tries to explain, her aim was to practice and improve her skills in Portuguese. To 'feel Portuguese' was the best option to use while studying abroad, so she strategically

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<sup>6</sup> **T: Korištenjem kojeg jezika si se osjećala najprirodnije/ najugodnije?**

**S:** Uhh, pa najprirodnije, mislim...ha ne znam, mislim s obzirom da sam u Portugalu bila, najdraže mi je bilo koristiti portugalski. Mislim, ne može se mjeriti sa činjenicom da mi je engleski daleko lakše koristiti jer ga učim godinama, ali...što se tiče ono nekog ajmo reć mog favorita, s obzirom da sam bila u Portugalu, daleko prirodnije mi je bilo koristiti portugalski. Možda zato što ga stalno čuješ oko sebe čak i kad ne komuniciraš s nekim direktno, stalno ga čuješ oko sebe. Stalno je tu, tako da možda je to u tom momentu najprirodnija opcija. A ovako inače, kad nisam u Portugalu, evo sad komuniciram s gostima u hostelu i to onda naravno engleski mi je tu nekako najlakši.

**T: A primjerice, mi kad smo se družili ko Hrvati, imali smo priliku komunicirati na jezik koji nam je najbliži...ali kažeš da ti je ipak bilo najugodnije i najprirodnije koristiti portugalski? To mi je jako zanimljivo za čuti.**

**S:** Pa mislim, možda čisto nekako što se osjećaš...dobro mislim kužim da je druga situacija s tobom jer kao hrvatski, tu ti je i najbliži ti je i imaš ljude koji pričaju hrvatski, i onda se osjećaš ono nekako...druga je skupina ljudi i drugi je način nekako, ne znam...ali stvar je u tome šta čuješ sve ljude oko sebe kako pričaju portugalski i onda mi to nekako, nekako zvuči kao najprirodnija opcija.

surrounded herself with native language speakers so that even when she was not directly communicating with anyone, she was still surrounded by Portuguese speaking people. That kind of behaviour enables one to truly experience the immersive experience of the study abroad semester and improve language skills in the most natural setting possible. Even though Sara mentions on several occasions that using English in communication would be much easier, that wasn't the point of coming to Lisbon. As she claims, then she wouldn't have used Portuguese as much, and she wouldn't have been as happy with the amount of time she spent communicating in Portuguese. In the following excerpt, Sara talks about the impact the Erasmus semester in Lisbon had on her language skills.

#### Example 4 (Sara)<sup>7</sup>

**T: Do you feel the difference in using Portuguese at the beginning of Erasmus and now? Did you notice any improvements or do you use it more freely now?**

**S:** Uhh, well yes...I mean, I wouldn't again say that I came with bad knowledge of Portuguese and I could use it even in the beginning, in the end of course...umm, I just think that it was more about freeing myself, because in the beginning I was more worried, and I got a little bit more...umm, well I would think about the structure of a sentence, about the accent, and stuff like that. Uh, I was a little bit more worried in the beginning, but with time I became more and more free.

**T: Did you feel the same way using English?**

**S:** Uhh, well I'm not sure; with English I have already crossed that line a long time ago uhh, of being free, umm and now I even work at a hostel on reception where I constantly use English...I don't know, I crossed that line a long time ago...anyways, I use English very freely so it's not a problem at the moment. I don't know, maybe, well certainly there was a period when I didn't know the language as good, so it's normal to not use it as freely...

**T: Do you think people see us the same in different languages?**

**S:** Well it probably takes some time for that, that's I mean...almost certainly, at least in my head takes time, because umm I don't know...when I just started with Portuguese, we had a professor from Portugal, Lisbon, and of course the communication with her at the beginning was very hard, and she used her arms and legs and everything possible to explain it to us. This was because she didn't want to use English, and I'm glad she didn't, she'd rather used arms and legs and mimics, than using English. So yes, in the beginning she seemed a bit like she was not the most normal person in the world, but that's normal to get a wrong impression on somebody you barely know...umm, when you don't have a language through which you can easily communicate, so yes I think

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<sup>7</sup> **T: Osjećaš li razliku u korištenju portugalskog na početku Erasmusa i na kraju? Jesi li primjetila napredak i oslobađanje u korištenju jezika?**

**S:** Uhh, pa da...mislim, stvarno opet ne bih rekla da sam došla sa nekim lošim znanjem portugalskog i mogla sam ga koristiti i u početku, jeli na kraju naravno...umm, samo mislim da je više u meni stvar nekako bila tog oslobođenja, jer u startu sam bila malo više u grču i malo više sam se...umm a razmišljala o strukturi rečenice, o naglasku i tako nekim stvarima. Uh, ono malo više sam bila u grču nego jeli kako je vrijeme odmicalo onda sam se više oslobađavala.

**T: Jesi se tako osjećala i s uporabom engleskog jezika?**

**S:** Uhh, pa nisam sigurna; s engleskim sam već odavno prešla tu neku granicu uhh, slobodnog, umm a sad i radim u hostelu na recepciji gdje stalno koristim engleski...ne znam nekako sam već odavno prošla tu neku...ma uglavnom oslobodila sam se u korištenju engleskog tako da mi to nije neki problem trenutno. Ne znam, možda, ma sigurno je postojalo neko razdoblje ono kad lošije znaš jezik, pa normalno da si više u grču u korištenju...

**T: Misliš li da nas ljudi jednako doživljavaju na svim jezicima?**

**S:** Pa vjerojatno treba vremena, to je mislim...dosta sigurno barem u mojoj glavi da treba treba vremena, jer umm ne znam...kad sam tek počinjala s portugalskim, imali smo evo lektoricu koja iz Portugala iz Lisabona i, normalno da je komunikacija s njom tek na početku bila jako teška I ona je koristila I ruke I noge iiii sve moguće da nam objasni jer nije ovi, to mi je jako drago, ali nije tila koristiti engleski tako da rađe rukama I nogama I nekako mimikom nešto nego na engleski. Tako da da, u početku ti se (pari) čini malo onako da nije najnormalnija, ali normalno to je tako neki dojam koji dobiješ o nekoj osobi kad ne znaš...umm, ono kad nemate neki jezik kroz koji se lako sporazumit, tako da mislim da, da..normalno da ne možeš u startu iskomunicirati sve što osjećaš, kao što možeš na nekom jeziku kojeg koristiš dosta slobodno.

*that...it's normal that you cannot communicate everything you feel right from the start, as simply as you can in a language that you use very freely.*

In the above example, Sara mentions that she had a good knowledge of Portuguese even before coming to Lisbon, but this whole experience allowed her to free herself from certain worries while using Portuguese such as sentence order or accents of certain words. In other words, the study abroad experience boosted her confidence and enabled her to relax while using the second language. What is more, she mentions that there could have been a time she felt like that with English, but she overcame that barrier a long time ago because she was constantly surrounded by it. The same she aimed to do with Portuguese during her stay in Lisbon. Another interesting topic that she touched upon in this excerpt was whether she thinks people see others the same in different languages. Interestingly, she uses the example of her university lecturer of Portuguese, who insisted on using Portuguese in communication, regardless of her student's (lack of) proficiency and seemed weird because of that. The answer to whether people are perceived differently because of the language they use, according to Sara, was time. With time this could maybe be possible, but at first a person feels and seems different while using a language that they are not as comfortable with. Not being able to truly express oneself could be one of the most difficult things a person has to go through before getting comfortable with using a second language.

## **5.2. Luka**

Luka is a student of Italian and Portuguese at the University of Zagreb, who also chose Lisbon as his Erasmus destination in 2022. He came to Lisbon with his friend, another participant of this study, Sara. At the moment of our interview, he was finishing his first year of MA studies at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He made it clear that he loves Portugal and its culture, and although they practice Portuguese a lot at the home university, he thought that there is no better way to practice it than spending time among native speakers of the language, and so he did. Along with Sara (5.1.), he is also one of the participants of this study whose Portuguese language proficiency is at an excellent level. In the following excerpt, Luka talks about his experience during his study abroad semester in Lisbon.

## Example 5 (Luka)<sup>8</sup>

**T: How would you describe your experience in Portugal?**

**L:** Well, uh actually...all in all it was a unique experience; it was something that I absolutely had to do because it was amazing. I met so many people from all around the world and it really opened up many new perspectives for me. Even when it comes to languages, that was also great because I was able to speak Italian, English and even Portuguese...and there were no problems...I mean it became much easier to use, well...especially English because I haven't really used it as much before. So yes, all in all it was an amazing experience.

**T: So you would say that it met all your expectations?**

**L:** Well yes absolutely yes...I would even say it exceeded my expectations.

As seen above, Luka talks very highly of the whole study abroad experience. It sounds like he had an opportunity to enjoy the process to the fullest. Not only did he meet a lot of people and ultimately broaden his horizons, but he also had a chance to speak several languages, all of which he used in communication with native speakers. This is one of the many reasons exchange programs such as Erasmus are so popular. They provide students unique situations and settings that would otherwise be impossible in their home country. But what was really interesting in contrast to Sara's experience, Luka explained that he is not a very confident user of English. However, during his stay in Portugal, he frequently used it in every day communication, which ultimately helped him relax and use English more freely. Following that, Luka talks about improvements that he accomplished while using other, non-native languages in the study abroad context.

## Example 6 (Luka)<sup>9</sup>

**T: Do you see any difference in your language knowledge before and after Portugal? Do you feel as if you've excelled, especially when it comes to Portuguese?**

**L:** Well...I would say that I do, even though I don't notice it as much. I mean, more when it comes to English because I mean, I speak Portuguese quite often in university and I had a chance to practice it, but English wasn't a problem anymore. I could speak it normally. With Portuguese I mean, my vocabulary did expand, and generally I did learn some everyday sayings that I never paid any attention to in the past, that's for sure.

**T: So regardless you were in Portugal; you'd say you used English the most?**

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<sup>8</sup> **T: Kako bi opisao svoje iskustvo u Portugalu?**

**L:** Paa, uhh stvarno...sve u svemu ono jedinstveno iskustvo, baš nešto što sam apsolutno trebao napraviti jer je bilo odlično. Upoznao sam toliko ljudi od ono svugdi i baš mi je to otvorilo dosta perspektiva u biti. Ono i što se tiče jezika i to mi je bilo odlično jer sam mogao pričati i talijanski i engleski i portugalski...i bez problema ono mislim to mi je postalo dosta lakše, naročito engleski jer ga prije uopće nisam koristio. Tako da sve u svemu predobro iskustvo.

**T: Znači rekao bi da ti je ispunilo sva očekivanja?**

**L:** Pa je apsolutno, da...čak i više ja bih rekao.

<sup>9</sup> **T: Osjećaš li razliku u znanju jezika prije i nakon Portugala? Osjećaš li da si napredovao, pogotovo u uporabi portugalskog jezika?**

**L:** Paa... rekao bih da da, ma da ja to pretjerano ne primjećujem. Mislim, više za engleski jer doslovno mislim portugalski pričam često na faksu i ono njega sam imao prilike vježbati, a engleski mi baš sad više nije bilo problem pričati. Portugalski mislim je, proširio mi se vokabular, i ono općenito sam naučio neke fraze svakodnevne na koje nikad nisam prije obraćao pozornost to definitivno.

**T: Znači bez obzira što si bio u Portugalu, rekao bi da si najviše koristio engleski?**

**L:** Ma da, da...ali mislim da je to doslovno za sve tako. Ipak je samo nekolicina Erasmusovaca pričala portugalski, tako da je engleski dominirao.

**T: Uporabom kojeg jezika si se onda osjećao najugodnije?**

**L:** Pa, portugalski...to mi je bilo ludilo, bilo mi je super, baš mi je bio gust, da. Ma da i engleski mi je postao skroz okej, nije mi bilo na početku baš toliko ugodno koristiti ga, a poslije u redu skroz.



*L: Yes, yes...but I think it was like that for literally everyone. Only a few Erasmus students knew how to speak Portuguese, so English dominated.*

*T: Using which language did you feel most comfortable/ most natural?*

*L: Well, Portuguese...that was cool; it was amazing, right down my alley, yes. Even though, English also became completely okay, it wasn't very pleasant to use it in the beginning, but later it was completely fine.*

Unlike Sara, Luka feels as if he made some improvements in English language proficiency. It is a very subject feeling, given that there were no pre and post proficiency tests to measure the improvements, however, he moved from never using English to using it on the daily basis. As a result, Luka improved his self-confidence in using English, when it comes to both speaking it, but also in understanding what others have to say. When using a foreign language so often, it is almost inevitable to become more comfortable using it and more fluent in it. Luka also states that he used English the most, unlike Sara who used Portuguese because she wanted to adapt as much as possible in Portuguese surroundings. He explained that he did use Portuguese in everyday errands like supermarkets, coffee places, and in the university, but ultimately he would spend the majority of the day with other Erasmus students, and the best way for everyone to understand each other was to speak English. Luka's experience illustrates the obvious dominance of English in linguistically and culturally complex Erasmus student communities, confirming the previously mentioned findings about the difficulty to experience authentic language immersion while studying abroad. He continues on the topic of language use, but focuses more on the language of his preferences. As Sara, he too felt most comfortable and natural using Portuguese. Finally, in the following excerpt he shares some thoughts on the effect that the Erasmus experience had on him.

Example 7 (Luka)<sup>10</sup>

*T: Would you say that the study abroad experience had an effect on you? Did it change you? (In terms of knowledge, friendships, skills...)*

*L: Well yes, in terms of speaking and general improvements in languages then absolutely yes, it is easier and more natural to use them. But generally speaking, it was more eye opening; it opened many new horizons and possibilities that I could work on from some other perspectives, because I met a lot of different people. Now, I have more plans than ever in my mind about what I would like to do in the future.*

The excerpt presented in example 7 can help in understanding the importance of study abroad experiences. Not only did a semester spent abroad affect and consequently in this case improve participant's language skills, but it also positively affected his complete outlook on

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<sup>10</sup> *T: Smatraš li da te Erasmus iskustvo na bilo koji način promijenilo? (znanja, poznanstva jezične. vještina...)*

*L: Pa je, što se tiče pričanja i poboljšanja jezika apsolutno da, to mi je sad lakše i puno prirodnije. Ali općenito ono nekako više kao da mi je otvorilo skroz neke nove vidike i mogućnosti koje mogu raditi iz nekih drugih perspektiva, jer sam zaista upoznao puno raznih ljudi. Sad imam puno više nekih planova u glavi šta bih mogao i volio raditi u buduće nego što sam imao prije.*

future. He specifically states that after participating in the study abroad program, he realized that there is an immense number of opportunities and different perspectives from which he can build his career and his future.

### 5.3. Paula

Paula is a student of English and Portuguese language, making her the third participant of this study, along with Sara and Luka, who speaks Portuguese. She is currently finishing her MA studies at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. She took part in the Erasmus exchange program in Lisbon in 2022, mainly because she studies Portuguese and wanted to explore the country. She wanted to experience the culture and improve her language skills, hoping to become in a way closer with Portuguese since she did not use it at all outside of the university. Her aim was to use language more and connect it with something other than her university because she always had a problem of creating a certain aversion to the things she learned at school. In the following excerpt, Paula talks about the languages she used the most during her stay in Lisbon.

Example 8 (Paula)<sup>11</sup>

**T: Which language did you use the most in every day communication?**

**P: Well, I think...I spent a lot of time with Croatians...and I used Croatian a lot in my apartment because I was roommates with Sanjin, but...in reality, in speaking I probably used English the most. At home too, with my other roommate from Kazakhstan and with other Erasmus students...I mean I would speak English every chance I would get because I wasn't really feeling like using Portuguese, except maybe...I would use Portuguese in stores, cafeteria and other places at the university.**

**T: Okay, so you would speak Croatian with Sanjin and us (other Croatians), with the other roommate and Erasmus students; English...and then you would practice Portuguese just a bit in restaurants, stores and similar places?**

**P: Well I mean, in reality I mostly used Portuguese only when I would run into someone from Portugal. Like, literally in stores or when I would need to ask somebody on the streets for direction, that's more or less it.**

According to Paula, although she speaks Portuguese, she does not like to use it and prefers using English instead. Regardless of being in Portugal, she says she mostly used

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<sup>11</sup> **T: Koji jezik si najviše koristila u svakodnevnoj komunikaciji?**

**P: Pa mislim...puno sam se družila s vama Hrvatima...a koristila sam ono u stanu dosta hrvatski jer sam živjela sa Sanjinom, ali...realno sam koristila najviše engleski vjerojatno. I doma isto s ovim drugim cimerom iz Kazahstana i nekako s drugim Erasmusovcima, mislim s kim god bi mogla vjerojatno bih pričala na engleskom jer mi se ne bi dalo portugalski baš koristiti, osim ono...portugalski bi nekako čuvala za dućane, menzu i tako to nešto po faksu ono.**

**T: Aha, znači sa Sanjinom i nama si pričala hrvatski, s cimerom engleski i drugim Erasmusovcima i onda si portugalski malo vježbala po restoranima, dućanima i drugim mjestima?**

**P: Pa mislim portugalski sam realno većinom samo pričala baš s ljudima koje bi sreća, koji su baš iz Portugala. Doslovno to, u dućanima ili ako bi trebala nekog pitati za smjer ili tako nešto na ulici bi ono više manje pričala na portugalski.**

English or even Croatian, as she mostly surrounded herself with Croatians or other Erasmus students. As previously mentioned, this is a very common situation where a student decides to surround oneself with something familiar, close to home; in this case other Erasmus students from Croatia. On one hand situations like these help students feel more secure, but on the other hand they prevent genuine connections and experiences with the new environment, people, culture and ultimately the language. Paula is an example of this potentially restrictive phenomenon of the study abroad context, and she talks about it in the following excerpt.

Example 9 (Paula)<sup>12</sup>

**T: Do you think you spent enough time practicing Portuguese or do you think you could have done more?**

**P:** Well, I could have definitely done a little bit more, because...well I could have probably prepared a bit better before coming to Portugal. I wish I had, as stupid as it may sound, revised Portuguese because I never use it outside of the university so my knowledge of it goes away very easily...I just forget it temporarily. I would have preferred if I had prepared a little more, and also talked in Portuguese more. Because of that, I was just too embarrassed of not knowing it enough and I was uncomfortable speaking with native speakers in that 'broken Portuguese', especially since Sara and Luka were better than me which only made me even more uncomfortable.

**T: When you think of how you felt the first time you were in Portugal and if you were to go back again, do you think you would feel less uncomfortable while using Portuguese or would you limit the conversations to English again?**

**P:** Well, I mean it is possible that I would be less uncomfortable, I mean with time it started getting more comfortable than the first time I came to a store for example, and after three months there it kind of became normal to me to speak those three sentences in Portuguese. But, if I went there again, I think it would be harder for me again because I haven't spoken a word of Portuguese in...I don't know, a year.

In Example 9 Paula shows that even though she studies Portuguese and had a unique opportunity to improve her language skills by spending a semester in Lisbon, she did not have enough self-confidence to speak the language. The only times when she would use Portuguese were short dialogues at the store or on a street asking for direction. Instead, she spent most of her time speaking English or even Croatian. She constantly compared herself with Sara and Luka, who are according to her better speakers of Portuguese, which only made it harder to relax and practice the language. It is natural that speaking a second language in the very beginnings of a big move such as this one brings certain feelings such as foreign language

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<sup>12</sup> **T: Misliš da si provela dovoljno vremena vježbajući portugalski jezik ili smatraš da si mogla i malo više?**

**P:** Pa definitivno sam mogla malo više, jer...bilo bi mi draže da sam se vjerojatno malo bolje i pripremila za doć tamo. Voljela bih da sam onak malo više, koliko god glupo zvuči, ponovila taj portugalski jer ga ja doslovno nikad ne koristim van faksa i onda mi samo jako lako ode to znanje koje imam...onako zaboravim privremeno. Tako da bilo bi mi draže da sam se malo više pripremila, a i pričala. Ovako mi je samo bilo bed što ga ne znam dovoljno I mislim neugodno mi je pričati sa izvornim govornicima na nekom onom 'broken portugalskom'. Pogotovo zato šta su Sara i Luka bolji od mene bili i onda bi mi sam još više bio bed.

**T: A kad se sjetiš toga kako si se osjećala prvi put kad si bila u Portugalu, i da odeš sad, misliš da bi ti bilo manje neugodno u uporabi portugalskog ili bi opet razgovore limitirala na engleski?**

**P:** Pa, mislim moguće da bi mi bio malo manji bed, mislim i s vremenom mi je postajalo sve manje neugodno nego tipa prvi put kad sam došla u dućan i ono nakon tri mjeseca već tamo, nekako mi je bilo normalno da ću bar tu te tri rečenice što progovorim reć na portugalskom tamo. Ali, tipa sad da odem tamo, da me samo trenutno baciš, opet bi mi bilo teže jer nisam progovorila portugalski već...ne znam od kad, godinu dana.

anxiety to the surface. Being uncomfortable or even embarrassed in the first tries of speaking a second language with native speakers is almost inevitable for all non-native speakers, in this case of Portuguese. However, if given enough time feelings like that usually go away as one's language skills improve. Paula confirms this by saying that it slowly started feeling normal speaking Portuguese after some time. Another thing that is almost inevitable when it comes to using a second language is language barriers and Paula talks about her experience with that problem in the following excerpt (Example 10).

Example 10 (Paula)<sup>13</sup>

**T: Did you come across certain language barriers; problems in communication?**

**P:** Well, I mean in Portuguese, yes...it would be much easier...especially when I would for example ask someone for direction...it would be much easier to ask a question than to understand everything they have just told me. Like, I can somewhat understand but sometimes I was like, umm no. So yes, some situations...I don't know, I don't know...in Portuguese definitely.

**T: So you would try in Portuguese, if not; English or hands?**

**P:** Something like that, yes. I mean, I would try in Portuguese, and if I understand, great, if not...somehow, I don't even know...this is mostly because outside of the university I never use Portuguese, and then hearing it in the natural setting and with an accent or something...

**T: What about in English?**

**P:** I think...there were definitely some situations in which my roommate from Kazakhstan and I would not understand each other...I know there were certainly some things that Sanjin and I would try to explain, and he would get us wrong or something like that. For example...I know we once told him that Croatia is a very homogenous country and he understood that there are a lot of homosexual people. So yes, there were some situations. But, I think in general, it was easier to speak in English, mostly because majority of Erasmus students speak English very well.

The excerpt presented in Example 10 provides an illustration of the language barriers that often happen when people from all around the world meet and have to use a language that is not native to either of them, i.e. a *lingua franca*. In this case, Paula talks about a funny conversation with her roommate from Kazakhstan, where he misunderstood a certain word, which changed the whole meaning of the sentence. She says that she would genuinely try to explain something in Portuguese, but if it wasn't working, she would find a way to break through that barrier and 'deliver the message'. She explains that situations like that one

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<sup>13</sup> **T: Jesi li nailazila na neke jezične barijere; probleme u komunikaciji?**

**P:** Pa mislim, na portugalskom da, s obzirom da bi mi bilo puno lakše...pogotovo kad bi pitala tipa za smjer...puno mi je lakše postaviti pitanje nego skužiti šta su oni meni sve rekli upravo. Onako, mogu otprilike skužiti ali nekad sam ono...ne. Tako da, tako te neke situacije, ali ne znam, ne znam...za portugalski definitivno.

**T: Znači pokušavala bi na portugalski, pa kad ne bi išlo; engleski ili ruke?**

**P:** Pa tako nekako. Mislim, pokušavala bi na portugalskom, pa ako skužim, skužim. Nekako, ne znam ni ja...najviše je tako zato što nisam van faksa baš koristila i onda pogotovo čut jezik u tako nekom prirodnom okruženju i s nekim naglaskom još pogotovo ako imaju ili nešto...

**T: A u engleskom jeziku?**

**P:** Pa mislim...bilo je sigurno nekih onak situacija u kojima se nismo ful razumjeli tipa ja i cimer iz Kazahstana...znam da je sigurno bilo stvari koje smo mu Sanjin i ja išli reći, a on bi skužio krivo ili tako nešto. Tipa...znam da smo mu jednom rekli da je Hrvatska jako homogena zemlja, a on je to protumačio kao...aha, ima puno homoseksualaca. Tako da... bilo je takvih situacija. Ali da, mislim da se generalno bilo lakše snalaziti na engleskom, jer ono većina Erasmusovaca zna engleski prilično dobro.

happened all the time, whether in Portuguese or English, they were simply inevitable and a part of the journey. The next excerpt, which is also the last one from Paula's interview, briefly gives information about Paula's language of choice; the one she felt most comfortable using.

#### Example 11 (Paula)<sup>14</sup>

**T: Using which language did you feel most comfortable?**

**P:** *Well, I think it would be most natural and pleasant for me coming home, especially if I've been speaking English or Portuguese all day, to come home and talk to Sanjin in Croatian, because I don't have to think...about constructing sentences, or anything. Although it would be easier for me to think in English, as in my head... it was still easier for me to speak in Croatian. Some things just sound different to me if I think about them in English. Emotions or something...they sound a lot less pathetic in English...I don't know, but that's probably because I also watch movies and read books in English.*

In the above excerpt, Paula explains that even though she was in Portugal and studies the language, she never quite felt comfortable using it. When speaking Croatian or even English, it felt much more natural to her because it was easy. She didn't have to think about grammar or vocabulary...it was simple, and it was familiar. Unlike Sara, who, as portrayed in Examples 2 and 3, did everything to make sure she is in an environment that pushes her to speak and practice Portuguese, which ultimately lead her to feel very comfortable while using it; Paula represents her exact opposite. Paula liked being inside her safe zone and her foreign language anxiety certainly prevented her from speaking Portuguese often. Using mostly Croatian and English surely provided her some sense of belonging and familiarity.

## 5.4. Sanjin

Compared to the three participants who speak Portuguese from the previous sections, the fourth participant in this study, Sanjin, is one of the two students who didn't speak any Portuguese when arriving to Portugal for their semester abroad. Sanjin studies Croatian language at the University of Zagreb and at the moment of our interview, he was finishing his MA studies, like the rest of the participants, at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He and Paula were roommates which greatly affected their whole experience of studying abroad. Unlike the rest of the participants presented in the

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<sup>14</sup> **T: Uporabom kojeg jezika si se osjećala najprirodnije?**

**P:** *Pa mislim, bilo mi je najprirodnije i najugodnije doći doma pogotovo ono ako sam pričala engleski ili portugalski cijeli dan, doć doma pričati sa Sanjinom na hrvatski, jer o tome najmanje razmišljam...o sklapanju rečenice ili ičega. Iako bi mi bilo lakše razmišljati na engleskom, kao u glavi...ali lakše mi je ipak bilo pričati na hrvatskom. Kao neke stvari mi zvuče drugačije ako o njima razmišljam na engleskom. Emocije ili nešto...puno mi manje jadno zvuče na engleskom...ne znam, ali to je vjerojatno zato što i filmove i knjige čitam na engleskom.*

previous chapters, he did not decide to go to Portugal to improve his language skills or knowledge of it, but simply to explore it and to gain some new experience. In the following excerpt, Sanjin talks about why he chose Portugal as his Erasmus destination for studying abroad.

#### Example 12 (Sanjin)<sup>15</sup>

**T: How come you decided to choose Portugal as your Erasmus destination?**

**S:** Well, first of all, because it was a very distant destination, and I wanted to go as far as possible. On the other hand, I also wanted to go to a more southern country...Mediterranean, well maybe it's not really Mediterranean, but it has that southern vibe. The Portuguese language was always kind of interesting to me, and I said that I didn't really know anything about that country and simply decided to go to Portugal to explore it...so more or less those are the reasons.

**T: Okay, did you then have the desire and opportunity to learn Portuguese?**

**S:** Well, I had both. There was an offer to enrol into a course in Portuguese language, but in the end I did not enrol because you had to pay for it, and on the other hand I started thinking about what I could actually learn in one semester, in those five months...maybe introduce myself, say goody day, good night...I can do that on my own, so I decided not to go.

Sanjin is one of the participants of this study who came to Portugal, not only without any knowledge of the language, but without any knowledge about the country. He wanted to experience something new and explore an unknown world. He notes that Portuguese is an interesting language; however, beginners who were never in touch with such language often have problems with beginners' courses, because they tend to be very expensive. Of course that one can listen to native speakers and try to understand the basics on their own, but ventures like that usually take a lot more time than a usual Erasmus student has to spare in only one semester. Regardless of that, Sanjin really enjoyed Portugal and fulfilled his wish to go to a southern European country. In the Example 13 below, Sanjin talks about how he managed in Portugal and what language barriers he came across.

#### Example 13 (Sanjin)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> **T: Kako to da si odabrao Portugal za Erasmus destinaciju?**

**S:** Ovaj, pa...prije svega zato što je bila jako udaljena destinacija, htio sam dosta daleko otići. S druge strane htio sam u neku južniju zemlju, mediteransku, dobro nije možda mediteranska ali taj južnjački vajb. A i portugalski jezik mi je prije uvijek nekako bio zanimljiv, pa sam rekao da ne znam ništa baš o toj zemlji i onda sam odlučio da baš idem u Portugal da to istražim tako da više manje to su razlozi.

**T: Jesi imao onda želje i prilike učiti portugalski?**

**S:** Paa, imao sam i jedno i drugo. Bila je neka ponuda da možemo upisati tečaj portugalskog i onda na kraju nisam jer se plaćalo, a i s druge strane sam počeo razmišljati kao šta ću ja sad naučiti u jedan semestar, u tih pet mjeseci...predstaviti se, dobar dan, laku noć...to mogu i ovako sam, tako da sam odustao od toga.

<sup>16</sup> **T: Jesi li onda nailazio na neke jezične barijere?**

**S:** Pa bilo je par situacija, sjećam se kad sam pričao s jednom Njemicom, bila je baš Erasmus student iz Njemačke, i njezin engleski je bio onako dobar, ali malo čudan, pa je neke fraze onako čudno i koristila. Kao da je direktno prevodila s njemačkog na engleski i onda je baš i nisam nekada najbolje razumio kao što sa time želi reći. I jednom kad sam bio u klubu, bio je jedan Brazilac kojeg sam znao od prije i njegov prijatelj. Taj prijatelj nije znao ni riječ engleskog iako je bio mojih

**T: Did you encounter any language barriers or difficulties?**

**S:** Well, there were a couple of situations where I would talk to a German girl, I mean she was an Erasmus student from Germany, whose English was like good, but also a bit weird, and she would use some phrases in a really strange way. It was like she was directly translating from German to English so sometimes I wouldn't quite get what she was trying to tell me. Another time when I was in a club, there was a Brazilian friend of mine I knew from before and his friend. That friend of his didn't know a word of English even though he was my age, so he was 25 at the time, and then he asked me if we could switch to Portuguese because he doesn't speak English. That whole situation was quite bizarre to me, that a young person does not know a word of English, and that we cannot communicate. That's what comes to my mind.

As seen in the previous chapters with other participants, there were almost always situations where one would encounter a language barrier, no matter the language. Sometimes a barrier in communication can happen when people try to communicate in the same second language, but are unable to express a thought or use the right word for the sentence to make sense. Additionally, in some cases language barriers can happen when a person only speaks their native language, such as the person from the club with Sanjin. What is interesting to note from Sanjin's account is that he is surprised that a young person from Brazil does not speak English, which implies that he views English as the *de facto* global language and believes that it is as equally present and dominant in South America as it is in Europe. In fact, it is not that uncommon at all that young people from South America do not speak English, since dominant languages there are Spanish and Portuguese, both globally spoken, whereas access to education in English is limited to the wealthy and more privileged populations. This is especially the case for Brazilians migrating to Portugal, where they don't encounter language barriers as they would in other European countries and there is no need for them to invest in learning English (Darvin and Norton 2017, Podboj and Lujčić 2020).

In the following segment, he comments on the usage of languages and which one made him feel most comfortable.

Example 14 (Sanjin)<sup>17</sup>

**T: Which language did you feel most comfortable using?**

**S:** Well, the most comfortable, definitely with Croatian. I mean, my personal opinion is that when you speak English it is much harder in a way to actually connect with people because...I don't know how to explain it...English is somehow too general for me, and if you don't know these people well, it takes a lot more time to connect with them, to get to know them.

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godina, znači tad je imao 25, i onda me pitao ako možemo li preći na portugalski jer on kao ne zna engleski. Meni je ta cijela situacija bila onak jako bizarna, da mlada osoba ne zna engleski i da onak ne možemo pričat. To mi baš pada na pamet.

<sup>17</sup> **T: Uporabom kojeg jezika si se osjećao najprirodnije?**

**S:** Pa najprirodnije svakako s hrvatskim. Mislim moje osobno mišljenje i je da kad pričaš engleski da je puno teže u biti povezati se s ljudima, jer kao...ne znam kako bih to objasnio...preopćenit mi je nekako taj engleski i onda ako ne znaš dobro te ljude, treba puno više vremena da se povežeš s njima, da ih upoznaš.

In Example 14, Sanjin states that he felt most comfortable while using Croatian. Since one of his roommates was Paula, and he spent a lot of his time with other Croatians who were a part of the Erasmus experience, it is no wonder that he spent a lot of his time speaking it and thus maybe limiting his time to practice another language. However, he states that connecting with people tends to be much harder for him in English, because the language is in a way to generic to him. He is unable to fully express himself and his personality through English, because something always gets lost in translation, which is why he thinks it takes a lot longer for one to get to know someone through English, if it's being used as a foreign language. However, what is evident from Sanjin's, but also other participants' accounts, is that embarking on the journey of studying abroad almost inevitably guarantees the usage of a foreign language, whether it's one's second language or a *lingua franca*, such as English in this case. In these situations, students have no other options but to adapt to new circumstances and find a way to express their identities through the chosen language.

## 5.5. Ana

Ana is the fifth and final participant of this study who, along with Sanjin, does not speak Portuguese. She was a part of the Erasmus exchange program that took place in Portugal one year before the rest of the participants; in the 2019/2020 academic year, while she was finishing her MA thesis. At the moment of our interview, she had already graduated and started working for a company in Rijeka. She is the only participant in this study whose first choice in the beginning wasn't Portugal, but Spain, simply because of her wish of learning Spanish. However, she had an encounter with a former Erasmus student who praised Portugal and talked of it very fondly, which ultimately made her change her mind. After some research, Ana was set on Portugal and thus applied for only destinations in Portugal, which ultimately led her to her study abroad in Aveiro. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19 her study abroad experience was cut short after only three months. In the following excerpt, Ana talks about her Erasmus experience in general.

Example 15 (Ana)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *T: Kako bi opisala svoje Erasmus iskustvo?*

*A: Najljepša tri mjeseca u životu. Da me nije prekinula korona, bilo bi najljepših šest. Od kulture, ljudi, uhh...jezika, ne znam...mjesa, baš ono prvi put da mogu reći da sam se osjećala baš kao doma. Prva tri tjedna su mi trebala za priviknuti se, i taman kad sam se skroz opustila, morala sam ići doma, ali baš sam bila iznenađena i ljudi su mi bili baš pre...predobri. Znači nisam vjerovala da netko može biti toliko dobar i neiskvaren tako da me to najviše oduševilo. Isto tako imam osjećaj da*



**T: How would you describe your Erasmus experience?**

**A:** *The most beautiful three months of my life. If Corona hadn't interrupted me, it would have been the most beautiful six months. From its culture, people, uh...language, I don't know...places, it is the first time I can say that I felt right at home. It took me about three weeks to get used to everything, and just when I finally felt comfortable, I had to go home...but I was really surprised and the people there were just too...too nice. I did not believe that someone could be so good and uncorrupted, so that's what amazed me the most. I also have a feeling that compared to us, they have every day filled with some kind of events, entertainment...and it's never like in Croatia where you have to wait for one event in a month to go to it, instead something happens every day. I really liked that.*

As previously seen, all the participants of this study genuinely enjoyed their time spent in Portugal, and speak very fondly of their study abroad experience. Ana is no exception. She does not speak Portuguese, but in the end to her it did not matter. She did however experience some kind of a cultural shock, but in a very positive way. She said that while she was in Portugal, she experienced something that was unusual but amazing to her. The Portuguese students and locals had a certain event every day while she was there, unlike in Croatia where according to Ana, events and entertainment programs rarely happen. Another shock for Ana was the kindness of the people which actually took her by surprise. She states that they were polite to the point where she would simply not believe their behaviour. They were also very extroverted and encouraged all kinds of hanging out even if they only just met. That kind of behaviour was very strange to Ana at first, which she compared to very closed-off social groups in Croatia, but as time passed, she got used to it and enjoyed the differences. In the next excerpt she talks a bit more about the everyday communication and the languages she used during her study abroad semester.

Example 16 (Ana)<sup>19</sup>

**T: What language did you use in everyday communication?**

**A:** *English, but we were lucky enough to be offered a Portuguese course, which I went to because, for example, since we were in a smaller town...say in shopping centres or some smaller cafes; they didn't know a single word of English. Then for some things we first communicated with our hands and feet, and later when we learned what to say, we started using Portuguese because there was simply no other way. My friend and I learned to pronounce a few words fluently because our roommate had Portuguese friends and we practiced our accents with them to make it sound fluent.*

**T: Did you learn some Portuguese at that course?**

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*naspram nas da im je svaki dan bio ispunjen sa nekakvim običajem, zabavom...i nikad nije kao kod nas da čekaš jedan događaj u mjesec dana da tamo odeš nego se svaki dan nešto događa. To mi se ful svidjelo, i to mi je pasalo.*

<sup>19</sup> **T: Koji si jezik koristila najviše u svakodnevnoj komunikaciji?**

**A:** *Engleski, s time da smo imali sreću da nam je bio ponuđen tečaj portugalskog koji sam uzela i išla sam na njega jer recimo na nekim mjestima kako je to manji grad, recimo u trgovačkim centrima ili nekim manjim kafićima nisu znali beknut engleski. Onda za te neke stvari smo se prvo sporazumijevali rukama i nogama, a kasnije kad smo naučili šta trebamo govoriti onda smo krenuli i na portugalski pričati jer nije bilo druge. Par riječi smo naučile, frendica i ja, izgovarati tečno jer nam se cimer družio s Portugalcima i onda smo baš s njima vježbale naglasak da zvuči tečno.*

**T: Jesi li naučila nešto portugalskog na tom tečaju?**

**A:** *Pa jesam, dosta. Sad da mi netko krene pričati taj nekakav razgovorni...mislim da bih ga baš razumjela. Imali smo ga ta tri mjeseca šta sam bila gore tri puta tjedno, što nije bilo malo, plus konstantne zadaće. A onda smo imali priliku kako smo se vratili zbog korone, da i online slušamo...tako da smo svi cijeli tečaj završili.*

*A: Well yes actually, a lot. If someone were to start talking to me now in this kind of conversational way...I really think I would understand them. We had it for three months, three times a week, which was more than enough...plus constant homework. Then, we had the opportunity when we went back home because of corona, to continue the course online....so we all completed the course.*

In Example 16 above, Ana provides a good example of a study abroad experience where one invests effort and openly approaches every chance possible to immerse themselves in the culture and learn the language (Darvin and Norton 2017). She wholeheartedly took the opportunity to attend a course in Portuguese language, and now has not only good basic knowledge of the language, but also tips from the native speakers on how to fluently pronounce a lot of words. Experiences such as this are very unique and difficult or even impossible to achieve while learning the language at home. One could also say that there is no better place to start learning a language than in a native setting, because one is constantly surrounded with it and is in some way forced to use it such as Ana and her friend. However, she does talk about a certain side effects of using a language that is not native in a country, in this case English in Portugal.

Example 17 (Ana)<sup>20</sup>

**T: Do you think you improved your knowledge of English?**

*A: Yes, but it's also like it got a bit distorted. Umm...I always have a feeling when I go to a country that is not an English-speaking country that I have to change the accent and good pronunciation of words in order for them to understand me. I can't speak with an accent and that's a problem for me; I can't speak fluently with the right accents. Instead, I have to speak it as if I've only been speaking it for a year for them to understand me. You cannot use a complex vocabulary in the non-speaking English area; you have to simplify it to practically basic level if you want to be understood.*

Ana here describes a typical multicultural context where English is used as a *lingua franca*, where the language is simplified for a better mutual understanding. Ana is not the only participant with this remark. Some of the participants have reported on similar situations and called this problem 'broken English'. The problem here arises when people from all around the world meet, with different levels of proficiency and experiences in English and start conversing with each other, relying on the language as a *lingua franca*. In the process, more proficient speakers often have to simplify their language use to adapt to those less fluent. Proficiency levels in any language depend on many factors and differ from one person to

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<sup>20</sup> **T: Smatraš li da ti se poboljšalo znanje i engleskog jezika?**

*A: Je, ali kao da mi se i iskrivilo. Umm, uvijek imam osjećaj kad idem u tu neku zemlju koja nije englesko govorno područje da moram kriviti primjerice dobar naglasak i izgovor riječi da bi oni mene razumjeli. Ne mogu pričati s naglaskom to mi je recimo problem vani, ne mogu pričat onako lijepo tečno s naglaskom nego ga moram pričat onako ko da ga pričam samo godinu dana da bi oni mene razumjeli. Ne možeš ti koristiti u negovornom engleskom području neki vokabular riječi nego ga moraš spustiti na neku bazičnu razinu da bi te razumjeli.*

another, so it is to be expected that sometimes people will have to adapt and possibly 'dumb down' their language use. Situations like these happen very often in study abroad settings because there is always a great mix of people, and it would be unrealistic to think that everybody will share a common language spoken on the same proficiency level.

## 6. Conclusion

Building up on a relatively new, but a prolific field of research regarding language identity (Block 2007, De Fina 2006, Darvin and Norton 2017, Norton 2013) and the effect of the study abroad context on language acquisition and proficiency (Freed 1995, DuFon and Churchuill 2006), and identity (Pellegrino Aveni 2005, Benson et al 2012), this study focused on experiences of five students from Croatia, who spent a semester abroad in Portugal through the Erasmus exchange scheme. The qualitative analysis of one-on-one interviews granted valuable information regarding the connection between one's identity and usage of a language in the context of studying abroad and their perceived change of language proficiency. The following paragraphs summarize the answers to research questions presented in the second chapter.

Firstly, when it comes to the first research question, *How does the change of environment and close friends and family in the study abroad context affect one's view, beliefs and needs?*, the results of the study showed that the five chosen participants only had positive experiences during their study abroad semester, and they all agreed that they certainly feel the effect the study abroad has left on them. Namely, once students decide to switch everything familiar around themselves with the adventure of the unknown, it's as if they seek to feel and see the change in themselves as well. For example, Sara states that she got more responsible and resourceful during her study abroad semester. She learned how to manage in different situation but most importantly, she learned to rely on herself, and has never felt more self-confident. It's not easy to adapt to a completely new life and country, when you have to move away from everything that you have ever known, but those situations provide the most room for personal growth and change. On the other hand, Luka feels as if the study abroad experience mostly affected his views and beliefs. He states that new horizons and opportunities have opened up for him. He has more perspective and ideas about what he wants to do later in life, when he finishes his studies. All in all, the participants of this study spoke very highly of the whole study abroad experience and have all reported positive change that has come out of it.

Secondly, when it comes to the second research question, *While studying abroad, do students perceive themselves differently while speaking a second language?*, the study results show the following. While there was no explicit answer to the second research question from

the interview data, some implicit insights into the issue can be drawn from participants' answers. Sara and Sanjin have provided their opinions closely on this topic. For example, Sara states that it takes time for people to get to know the 'true you' when one has to speak any other language than their native language. At first it is hard to communicate one's thoughts and present oneself in the best light if there is a lack of a common language between speakers, or if one simply does not feel as comfortable using a second language to reveal their 'true self'. In that way, Sara thinks that it's normal that one is unable to communicate everything one feels from the very start like one can in a language that one feels comfortable using. That's why it's almost certain that a different aspect of a persons' identity emerges in situations when they speak a second language. Sanjin on the other hand expresses that the only way for him to communicate with other people in Portugal was through English, as he didn't speak Portuguese. Now, he states that for him it was a lot harder to connect with people because English as such is too generic for him, and does not allow him to express more nuanced meanings. According to him, it takes a lot more time to connect with someone on a deeper level when using English as opposed to Croatian. Maybe that's connected to how he perceives himself while using English; unable to communicate as easily as in Croatian which is why it takes him longer to connect with other people.

Lastly, when it comes to the final research question, *Do students participating in study abroad programmes perceive improvements in second language usage?*, all of the participants had remarks about their improvements in their second language proficiency. Some more positively than the others, but they all perceived positive changes in their language skills. For example, Sara thinks that she already came with satisfactory knowledge of both English and Portuguese; however, she does think that she freed herself from that feeling of doubt when using a second language and has ultimately become more comfortable when using Portuguese. As time passed, she stopped thinking about the sentence structure or her accent and just started speaking freely which is the biggest improvement for her. On the other hand, Ana notes that she also noticed a change in her knowledge of a second language, but not the local native language, Portuguese, but rather common Erasmus *lingua franca*, English. Still, unlike Stela, Ana noticed that in order to successfully communicate with people she encounters in the study abroad context, she had to 'dumb down' her knowledge of English. Now, if one does this temporarily, there should not be any major consequences because knowledge of a language constantly changes and grows, but it is understandable why one would not like this effect on their language proficiency. All of the participants said that they

have noticed a certain change or improvement in their second language usage, and are certain that such improvements are uniquely tied to experiences such as theirs on Erasmus.

To conclude, this study illustrated the complexity of identity expression in the study abroad context and confirmed findings in the existing literature. When put in a new environment, where one doesn't yet have a social group one belongs to, and has to find new ways to express themselves in a foreign language, it is inevitable to experience changes on every level; from the changes from within to the ones regarding the second language usage and proficiency. The study managed to provide answers to the research questions, but as this is a truly extensive topic that will almost certainly be the centre of the many linguistic studies to come, it has to be noted that there are a lot more questions that would need further exploration. One of the many would be if the participants of the study abroad programs such as Erasmus are aware of the limits they create if and when they find themselves in a certain social bubble where they only interact with other Erasmus students in English or even their native languages. Other research avenues could include focusing on how the students perceive the limitations they put on their study abroad experience when it comes to 'authentic' immersion, and what they miss out on when they decide to create such environment.

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