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Virtual Exchange: more than learning languages

Relatrice

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Introduction

Since people's lives have been affected by the Covid-19 virus in the past three years, their ways of working have also changed a great deal, and smart working has increased rapidly. Students also had to undergo changes: they had to fulfill all of their universities duties online. It is important to mention the advantages of technology in this case, as the aim of this dissertation is to explore whether virtual exchange could be a valid option when a cross cultural exchange is not possible. Moreover, the intention is to investigate the challenges and outcomes perceived by the participants of the Soliya Connect Program, focusing on the aspects of personal growth and acquired soft skills at the end of the path.

Firstly, here is an explanation of what is virtual exchange, how the notion was born, what are key features in order to understand how the Soliya Connect Program works: "virtual exchange involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmers and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators" (O'Dowd, 2018:5).

Chapter 1 starts with a description of the Soliya Connect Program, a Washington, DC-based "global nonprofit network", founded in 2003 (Elliott-Gower, Hill:2019). Moreover I present the participants' topics and tasks faced during the eight weeks of the program. At this point, attention is focused on one of the challenges faced by students: the comfort zone. As revealed by the study case in Chapter 3, the major challenge for participants was to feel confident speaking in English (as a Lingua Franca), and therefore the first chapter is completed with an explanation of the comfort zone (since in order to gain confidence, one has to get out of one's comfort zone and break down one's barriers) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

Chapter 2 continues by highlighting other challenges faced by participants and advantages obtained from such an intercultural experience, be it physical or virtual. As this Chapter gives great attention to Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC), it was necessary to explain the cultural dimension, which is the context in which virtual and Erasmus exchanges fall. In order to do so, there is the description of how understanding of the term "culture" has evolved: it is not only a fact of art, literature and philosophy but

it also refers to a population's habits, traditions and customs. The chapter also addresses the issue of stereotypes. By entering into a cultural dimension (for example by participating in a cultural exchange), stereotypes may be broken. For this reason, an intercultural education is needed, which includes the fostering of "Intercultural Communicative Competence" (ICC), or in other words: the competences to speak or write in appropriate ways with people from other cultural context in order to "predict misunderstanding that may arise from those differences" (Bennet, 2013).

Having explained some of the benefits of intercultural exchange, there follows an in-depth description of one of the major difficulties that students (in particular Erasmus exchange students) could face during their stay abroad: cultural shock and reverse cultural shock. The chapter concludes with an example of where such challenges and benefits could be effective: in cultural and intercultural cooperation.

The third and final chapter introduces a case study consisting of two surveys: one for Soliya Exchange students and the other for Erasmus Exchange students. The notion of two surveys has arisen to make a comparison between the two type of experiences, and to explore whether virtual exchange offers the same outcomes as the Erasmus exchange. To explore this, students that participated in the Soliya Connect Program and students that participated in the Erasmus exchange are taken into consideration. The aim of this case study is to gain greater understanding of what was explained in depth in the two previous chapters: how the virtual experience affected the participants, and in particular in the context of acquiring linguistic and cultural as well as personal skills.

CHAPTER 1

Virtual Exchange

The aim of this dissertation is to explore whether Virtual Exchange (VE) can be a valid alternative to physical cultural exchange. In the 21st century, our world is more connected thanks to the development of technology. In addition, we are living through a historical moment, because of the Covid-19 virus, in which technology is essential. Therefore, when it is not possible to experience cultural exchange in terms of physical mobility, it is possible to have a virtual experience. The University of Padua offers such an opportunity; one option is the Soliya Connect Program. It is a path in which students have the possibility to improve a language, to meet new people from all around the world and to enter in to contact with different cultures and traditions. There is also the chance for personal improvement and one can experience: comfort zone challenges; an increase in motivation; gained confidence; and the development of an open mind about social justice topics.

1.1 Telecollaboration: history and definition

According to Helm (2015:196):

“telecollaboration is the practice of engaging classes of geographically dispersed learners in online intercultural exchange using Internet communication tools for the development of language and/or intercultural competence”.

It is interesting to know how this idea developed and in what circumstances. The practice of virtual exchange is not something new. Helm (2015:7) explains that it all started in 1988, with the launch of the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunication Project. The project was linked to the need of young people from two different parts of the world to be in contact during a historical moment of tension, the Cold War. Therefore, a pilot program between 12 schools was established and students worked both in English and Russian on projects that were designed by their teachers. The program was then extended in the early 1990 to Israel, China, Austria, Spain, Canada, Argentina and the Netherlands.

Telecollaboration has also been called Online Intercultural Exchange and Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (Helm 2015:196). It is also referred to as virtual exchange. According to research that has been carried out by O’Dowd (2018), over the years “the activity of telecollaboration has assumed different terminology depending on the educational context and the pedagogical focus of its practitioners.” This led to both positive and negative consequences. O’Dowd (2018) gives some examples:

“on the positive side, it has meant that the basic methodology of online collaborative learning between groups of learners in different cultural contexts or geographical locations has been applied in a myriad of ways”.

This affirms that this type of connection and learning has spread to multiple geographical contexts, for numerous purposes and objectives.

However, Rubin (2016), a pioneer of the COIL initiative in the US, the Collaborative Online International Learning, which aims to expand higher education ties between the United States and Japan, states that the fact that this format is called by different names leads to a difficulty in understanding and implementing its practice. Moreover, O’Dowd (2018) explains that the term “telecollaboration” has been used especially in the field of foreign language education, but outside this field, it is a term largely unknown and it could sound outdated. We can easily say that the term “Virtual Exchange” is preferred and more widely used, particularly to describe such practice. This system of exchange has grown more and more over the years. In fact, on 12th July 2016, the European Commissioner Navracsics declared “I want to involve 2,000 young people in this ‘Erasmus Virtual Exchange pilot project’ by the end of 2017, and 200,000 young people by the end of 2019” (European Commission, 2017:24).

Having explained how practitioners passed from the term “telecollaboration” to the term “virtual exchange”, I would like to give a definition of the second term: “virtual exchange involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (O’Dowd, 2018:5). It is a life experience, and it is important to point out what are the outcomes and the challenges that students take home

after the whole program is finished. The goals are easy to deduce: fluency in speaking as students are involved in the conversations all the time and that way they practice language skills; knowledge about other realities, cultures and traditions as the students involved in the program come from all over the world, and hence they take their peers into their realities by dialogue; critical thinking, which is generated by observation, experience, reasoning or communication (Scriven, 1987); media literacy, that is the ability to analyze media messages and to use the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world. However, what is important to highlight are the challenges. The main challenges are leaving one's comfort-zone, gaining self-confidence, and increasing motivation in linguistic output, that is the desire to go beyond one's barrier and try one's best to improve. All of them may be achieved during the Soliya program.

1.2 The Soliya Connect Program

Soliya is a Washington, DC-based “global nonprofit network”, founded in 2003 and dedicated to resolving differences between the “West” and the “Muslim World” by improving understanding and shifting from a model of confrontation and coercion to a model of cooperation and compassion (Elliott-Gower, Hill:2019). Soliya argues that the norm should be “for students to have a profound cross-cultural experience as part of their education, whether it is in person or online” in the 21st century (Soliya, 2014). For this reason, Soliya have been experimenting with a low-cost, high-impact “virtual exchange” model (Elliott-Gower, Hill:2019). According to Elliott-Gower and Hill (2019), The Connect Program is Soliya's flagship Exchange 2.0 initiative and is the program firstly adopted at Georgia College and Kennesaw State University (KSU) in 2013.

The University of Padua offers students the opportunity to participate in the Soliya Connect Program. Over the years the number of student participants in such program has gradually been growing, and according to Helm (2018), the number has increased worldwide from several hundreds of students to thousands in 2018.

In order to start this exchange, students must sign up on the Soliya platform. They create their personal blog, where they post materials for assignments. Furthermore, since there are students from all over the world, and there could be time zone problems, they need to

indicate at what time they will be available every week, in order to make the meetings easily organized. Once the timetable has been indicated, students must respect it for two months, which is how long the program lasts.

Students attend the program for two months and have one meeting per week. They are paired into groups from eight to ten people with an equal distribution of gender and nationalities (Helm, 2018). The group is led by a facilitator, with the aim of making dialogues active and to make everybody feel comfortable while speaking and expressing their opinions about different topics. On the first meeting students introduce themselves to the group members and then some communication “rules” are set. It is necessary in order to avoid the risk of offending someone from other cultures while dealing with the different topics.

Afterwards, students define what topics they would like to discuss in the next meetings and the facilitator gives the group some assignments. During my own experience, my group’s first assignments were to present a power-point that shows more about ourselves. This was a way to talk by breaking down barriers such as shyness and insecurity, but also a way to know more about different realities and cultures. The dialogue is guided by a curriculum that includes readings, in-class activities, and an end-of semester video project (Elliott-Gower, Hill, 2019). The topics chosen were Gender Equality, Human Rights, Environmental Crisis, Coronavirus and many others.

In addition to the tasks set by the Soliya team, the modern-language students from the University of Padua, have to write a weekly diary, after every meeting, talking about how they felt, what they talked about, if they noticed some improvements during the dialogues as an additional task for their university. This way they improve communicative and reflective skills also by writing. Below is the calendar with the topics for discussion and suggested activities from my personal experience of the Connect Program from March to April 2021:

Week 1 of the online dialogue:

- Introduction of the group members.
- Meaning of dialogue.
- Social challenges in everyone’s community.

Week 2 of the online dialogue:

- Shared the assignments: bring an object and explain the history behind it.
- What is identity.
- Final Project topic decision.

Week 3 of the online dialogue:

- Shared the assignments: power-point presentation.
- Discussion over Human Rights, which was the topic chosen by the group.

Week 4 of the online dialogue:

- Shared some opinions about the material the group needed to read.
- Discussion over the second part of the Video Project, which is life during the pandemic.

Week 5 of the online dialogue:

- Discussion over Ramadan, fasting, diets and digital diets.
- Discussion of the topic chosen by the group: Gender equality.
- Decided next topic for the next meeting.

Week 6 of the online dialogue:

- The group was divided into couples in break out rooms discussing questions given from the facilitator.
- Discussed the weekly topic: Social Dilemma.

Week 7 of the online dialogue:

- Icebreaker of the session: pocket list.
- Break-out room's dialogues

Week 8 of the online dialogue:

- Icebreaker of the session: one truth and two lies game.
- Sharing everyone's embarrassing and adventurous stories.

Besides all the work we carried out through this experience, we had one more important task to accomplish: to record two interviews with two of ours' peers. Firstly, we decided a topic: the pandemic. It was our first choice as we are all living in the same historical period. Then, we decided two questions related to our topic. For the first interview the question was "What has been the most affected aspect of your life by the pandemic with Covid 19?". While for the second interview the question was "How far can the

government go with safety measures in times of crisis?”. Once the interviews had been conducted, students would discuss about different statements during the meetings.

At the end of the whole experience there is one last task that should be done. Students must write the Final Project Paper, which is a reflective document about this telecollaboration. According to Elliott-Gower and Hill (2019), the Connect Program’s purposes are to: establish a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others from around the world on important sociopolitical issues and the reasons why they feel the way they do; and develop “21st -Century Skills” such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and media literacy skills. Thanks to the variety of themes that are discussed, and to the way students are involved, communicative skills are the first to be improved. Moreover, students’ motivation increase, which is something that makes them want to interact more; they increase confidence during weekly dialogues which is something that led them to leave their comfort zone.

According to Helm (2018), the Soliya Connect Program was not developed as an English language program, but it has been adopted in advanced English language courses in various institutes in Europe and the Middle East. This leads to an opportunity for developing English language and also the program allows participants to develop media literacy, such as communicating in synchronous online video, using text and audio chat simultaneously, multi-tasking, and video production skills (Helm, 2018). However, Helm (2018) claims that the fact that English is the language of communication between participants means that about half of the participants are expressing themselves in their second, possibly third, fourth (or more) language, on controversial and emotional issues. For those students that are not so fluent in English, the facilitators’ role is crucial, as they support the students involved by summarizing conversations in text chats.

One of the biggest challenges that people face during this experience is related to identity. Every time learners speak, listen, read, or write, they are not only engaged in an exchange of information; they are organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation (Norton, 1997). Bilingual people may feel differently when they speak in one or another language. To give an example, as a Serbian girl, brought up in Italy I feel

like I have two kinds of humor when I switch the languages. This explains why Carroll (2000) claims “I knew who I was this morning, but I’ve changed a few times since then”.

1.3 Comfort zone and self-security

According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, the comfort zone is a place or situation in which you feel safe or comfortable, especially when you choose to stay in this situation instead of trying to work harder to achieve more. People feel comfortable staying where they do not feel judged and afraid to do or tell something. When they step out of their comfort zone, a process takes place that presents negative sides, but this may lead to positive outcomes. Staying in a bubble like the comfort zone may mean not feeling stimulated to grow personally, emotionally, and mentally. In fact, Bissell (2008:1697) observes that “to remain within our comfort zone is something that we are led to believe will at best impede our progress.” Even though it could feel frightening to cross the line of safety, what you can find across the street is what you need to evolve yourself. Brown (2008:3) explains that the comfort zone “is based on the belief that when placed in a stressful situation people will respond by overcoming their fear and therefore grow as individuals”. Therefore, the only way to break down this barrier is to do things you feel uncomfortable doing, and to challenge yourself every day. In fact, studies suggest that extending the boundaries of the comfort zone enables individuals to stretch their sense of self (Brown, 2009). According to studies that were carried out by Laura Prazeres (2016) about international student mobility from the Global North to the Global South, “students undertake an exchange abroad as a challenge to escape, leave or be outside of their comfort zone”.

People that study languages do this type of work on daily basis. To be precise, they are forced to talk, understand, and develop ideas in other languages that are not their native ones. By doing such activities a process takes place in which they must overcome the fear of judgement, of making mistakes while speaking, and shyness. Once they succeed in doing this, they immediately start to feel more comfortable, confident, and motivated to grow even more. Therefore, it could be said, that the negative sides, mentioned before of coming out of the comfort zone, are mostly characterized by the fear of risking.

Nevertheless, once the fear is overcome, the problem may be solved. From this perspective, the notion of the comfort zone highlights two things: that space and place are important for a sense of self; and, that the boundaries of a un/reflexive self are aligned with international borders of un/familiarity (Prazeres, 2016). Moreover, students believe that stepping outside the boundaries of their comfort zone is a path towards self-discovery, self-development and even self-change (Prazeres, 2016).

Indeed, this is one of the biggest results hoped for after an experience such as Virtual Exchange, where students are encouraged to talk, but what is even more important is that they have the possibility to compare themselves with other peers that might have different opinions or points of view. This is crucial: firstly, it is not easy for everyone to express themselves. They might be afraid that what they are going to say could be uninformed or that their opinions might be too conflicting, which in most cases generates social anxiety. Therefore, avoiding situations for fear of making mistakes or not being able to do something can lead to anxiety problems. According to Craske and Stein (2016) individuals with anxiety are fearful or avoidant of perceived threats in the environment or internal to oneself. Moreover, avoidance behaviours range from refusal to enter situations to subtle reliance on objects or people to cope (Craske, Stein, 2016). Fear and anxiety are common in every day life, but after participants are urged to outdo themselves, they start to gain awareness of who they are, what are their possibilities and how they can grow even more once they start to believe in themselves more than anyone else. As a matter of fact, by extending one's barriers helps one to defeat anxiety caused by insecurity and lack of experiences and leads to an open mind. After the whole semester of participating in the Soliya Connect Program, you step out of your comfort zone, because you try things you never tried before, and you learn things you never learned before. What happens to students when they come back from their exchange experience abroad is the same as what happens to students after the virtual experience: the experiences impact on their identity and professional and personal lives, they develop avenues for transnational new competences, skills and worldviews, which are increasingly valued by the students themselves as a profound identity transforming experience.

1.4 English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

According to studies carried out by Baker (2009), the cultural dimension of foreign and second language use and teaching has risen in prominence since the 1980s. In particular, English developed extremely and is an international language, which is used to communicate between people that do not share the same native tongue. This process takes name of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Thus, according to Seidlhofer (2011:7) “the term ‘English as a lingua franca’ is used to refer to any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option”. The term ‘lingua franca’ comes from a contact language used in the eastern Mediterranean from the 11th to the early 19th centuries (MacKenzie, 2014:2). Thus, we could say that ELF is spoken between people that are non-native English speakers and choose English as a language of communication.

The importance of English as a Lingua Franca evolved when it started to be used not only as a form of communication by tourists, or in simple forms, but for worldwide important interactions such as: international politics and diplomacy, international law, business, the media, and in tertiary education and scientific research (MacKenzie, 2014:2). Therefore, the term ‘Lingua Franca’ can replace terms as “English as an International/ global/ world language” and “International English” (MacKenzie, 2014:2). Moreover, English became a sort of “virtual language”, a way to express ourselves more freely without having to conform to norms which represent the sociocultural identity of other people (Widdowson, 2004: 361). This use of the language is characterized by the fact that ELF users are uninterested in the lexicogrammatical norms of any particular NES (native English speaker) speech community (Seidlhofer 2001b, cited in English as a Lingua franca by MacKenzie, 2014). According to Widdowson (2004: 361), since this form has not been encoded yet, and so, is not given official recognition, the modified forms of the language which are actually in use should be recognized as a legitimate development of English as an international means of communication. During the virtual exchange experience students can express themselves freely while speaking with other non-native peers. This happens because they raise awareness of the existence of plurality of Englishes and an understanding that English is not seen as the property of one culture or community (Baker, 2009).

Non-native students report being less anxious while interacting in English with non-native speakers, and that the use of a contact language can cement participants' feelings of proximity and mutual support (Guarda, 2013). Furthermore, there are some differences between native speakers English and ELF non-native speakers. Jenkins states that ELF involves both common ground and local variation (Jenkins, 2009). In fact, ELF's common ground inevitably contains linguistic forms that it shares with ENL (English as a native language), but it is also contains forms that differ from ENL and that have arisen through contact between ELF speakers (Jenkins, 2009). In fact, according to Ian MacKenzie (2014), spoken ELF contains a large amount of linguistic variation and non-standard forms. Research has been carried out at the level of phonology, pragmatics, and lexicogrammar. For example, even though speakers often do not use the third person singular present tense '-s' marking in their verbs, this does not lead to any misunderstandings or communication problems (Seidlhofer, 2005). Nevertheless, from an ELF perspective we all need to make adjustments to our local English variety for the benefit of our interlocutors when we take part in lingua franca English communication (Jenkins, 2009).

The virtual exchange experience is, therefore, something more than just learning a language, as it involves for sure a common language participants have to interact with (ELF), but it also presents a lot of challenges that improve oneself professional and private identity. Furthermore, by doing such an experience, participants learn how to cooperate and to deal with different cultural identity.

CHAPTER 2

CHALLENGES AND COMPETENCES OF EXCHANGE STUDENTS

As already said, virtual exchange is an experience that offers many benefits, but it is important to point out what kind of work students and teachers have to do in order to make it positive. This means that it is not only an experience that concerns students talking in another language, but it involves more. Firstly, approaches to intercultural learning have changed over the years. Culture does not simply concern the art, literature and philosophy of a nation, but also customs, traditions and the habit of its population. The competences of an international speaker have evolved, the leading to greater understanding of the differences one can encounter, to greater respect for other cultures, and to the breaking down of stereotypes. Moreover, by participating in such experiences, students acquire linguistic competences, in particular Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC), which are fundamental in order to be able to speak and write in an appropriate way by being respectful of others and which are also required in international cooperation.

Nevertheless, participants may encounter some difficulties, for instance cultural shock. It occurs mostly for students that participate in cross-cultural experiences, for example when they move to the host country for a short or long period, and they have difficulties in adapting in a new cultural context. Another difficulty may be the reverse cultural shock, which is the difficulties and challenges of re-adapting to one's own home culture after one has lived in another cultural context. However, cultural shock could be also positive, because after one gets used to the host culture and learns something new about it, one may review one's stereotypes. All of the challenges that one has to deal with and the new competences that one can learn and achieve during such an experience are useful for personal improvement.

2.1 The Cultural dimension of language learning

Learning a language is not only about being able to express oneself to someone, but it concerns more. It is not enough to be able only to speak and exchange information, but other abilities are required, some of which fall within the cultural dimension. Over the

years, thanks to the globalization, the world has become more connected, more united. People are willing to explore more, to try new opportunities in other countries, to travel. In other cases, people are forced to move from their homes looking for a safer or a more comfortable place where to live. All this leads to a single result: people from different cultural backgrounds must learn to coexist respectfully.

Having said that, it is necessary to define what culture is. Thomas (2010) states that by 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn had found over 150 definitions of culture. Nevertheless, he also affirms that culture is a universal phenomenon. Therefore, culture can be defined as a set of rules, attitudes, traditions, symbols, values, beliefs and clothing shared by a group of people that are part of a country. It is, thus, clear that the world is characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity, which is the marvelous aspect of a varied world, but that may lead to misunderstandings, conflict, racism, and other unpleasant situations. It is interesting that Byram (2002) claims that the “concept of ‘culture’ over the decades has changed: it is not only about art, literature and philosophy but it regards the shared way of life”.

The fact that the meaning of culture has evolved and it is no longer linked only to the part of a country that people can study and analyze, for example as just mentioned literature, philosophy and art, but also to the part of a country that exists thanks to its population’s habits, presents both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspect is for sure greater acceptance of people that come from foreign countries and greater respect for their customs, habits and beliefs. However, this often leads to the negative aspect. The fact that a group of people is recognized as belonging to a culture may establish a negative judgment of behaviour of that culture. To explain better, if a group of people representative of a foreign country behave in a certain way, people from another country may assume that this behaviour is typical for their country. This is how stereotypes originated.

Firstly, according to Serrani (2021), there are five common types of stereotypes: gender, cultural, social, racial and religious; each of them can be associated to a group of people that belong to a nation. In this case, it is important to focus on cultural stereotypes. As states Serrani (2021) sometimes stereotypes become so prevalent that people may jump

to conclusions without realizing it. Stereotyping involves labelling or categorising particular groups of people, usually in a negative way, according to preconceived ideas or broad generalisations about them (Byram, 2002). According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, stereotype is "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing." Much of the time, stereotypes provide a negative image, idea, thought and beliefs about people that come from different nations, and therefore, about people who are deemed to be foreigners. While stereotypes are not necessarily always a negative thing, they are rarely accurate or beneficial (Serrani, 2021). This type of behaviour may give rise to prejudices that lead to hatred and misunderstandings, and in order to acquire new cultural competences, which are involved in the so called cultural dimension, there is the need to break down stereotypes.

Many researchers have advocated the use of telecollaboration to develop intercultural understanding and reduce stereotypes (Bohinski, Leventhal, 2015). In fact, Helm (2013) states that it is also important that foreign language education be concerned not only with instrumental aims but also humanistic ones, and promote also intercultural dialogue and understanding. Moreover, in 2008 the Council of Europe published the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, where defines intercultural dialogue as:

a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse world views and practices, to increase co-operation and participation, to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for other.

O'Dowd (2006) affirms that 'telecollaboration' contributes to intercultural learning: in fact he explains that it results in positive attitudes and increases intercultural awareness. Hence, there is the need to take into consideration the cultural dimension so as to interact effectively with people that do not share the same language, both for tourism and culture. In order to adopt a good communication approach between people from different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds "today's society demands an intercultural education that promotes equal opportunities and the inclusion of minority groups at risk of social

exclusion” (Salgado Orellana, et al., 2019). Moreover, the aim of such education is sustainability, equity, peace, and social cohesion (Salgado Orellana, et al., 2019).

2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

An intercultural education includes the fostering at “Intercultural Communicative Competence” (ICC). Bennett (2013) defines communication as something that is “much more than a simple transmission of information: it is the mutual creation of meaning.” The concept of communication becomes more complex when it involves the intercultural level. It is not enough just to transfer knowledge, but it is necessary to pay attention on how this should be done. Therefore, intercultural communication becomes also “the mutual creation of meaning across cultures” (Bennett, 2013). According to Byram (2000) someone with some degree of intercultural competence is someone able to see relationship between different cultures, and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. Furthermore, Byram’s (1997) definition of intercultural communication comprises five dimensions: knowledge, attitude, critical cultural awareness, interpretation and relational skills, and skills of discovery and interaction. In other words, it is “the language learners need to acquire not just grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is 'appropriate' language” (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey, 2002). Byram (2002) additionally states that it is essential that the linguistic approach goes beyond the grammatical criteria, to avoid misunderstandings.

In modern language teaching, learners develop linguistic competences that are necessary in order to speak or write in appropriate ways (Byram, 2002). The international dialogue between speakers from different cultures is based on these linguistic competences because the interlocutors have to be respectful of the differences they encounter, for example of different ways of expressing oneself and customs. In order to ensure respect during the cooperation between different cultures “intercultural communication incorporates particular strategies that encourage one to attribute equal humanity and complexity to people who are not part of our own group” (Bennett, 2013). Intercultural communication implies communication (forms, means and disruptions) under conditions of cultural overlap while the communication partners’ cultural differences strongly

influence the communication episode in terms of process and outcomes (Thomas, 2010). However, through telecollaboration, the virtual version of the cultural contact “automatically results in positive attitudes and increases intercultural awareness” (O’Dowd, 2006).

In international cooperation, mediators have an essential role. The language used by them is an essential tool for transferring knowledge, values, experience and corporate goals (Thomas, 2010). The tasks of interpreters is, thus, crucial, since they have to formulate the message in the target language in a way that approximates the original language as closely as possible (Thomas, 2010). Nevertheless, their job includes many challenges and difficulties that they have to manage. For instance, if they have to translate a word that does not have an equivalent in the target language, they have to “circumscribe the definition in a way that still conveys an idea of the meaning” (Thomas, 2010). Another difficulty is that communication is influenced by the interplay of situational and sociocultural conditions (Gumperz, 1992). Wierzbicka (1994) gives an example: when using a lingua franca for communication in a multicultural team, participants intuitively transfer their own culture-specific rules when communicating in a foreign language with other-culture individuals.

Furthermore, according to Bennett (2013) the strategies that mediators need are: “to recognize cultural differences that are relevant to short-term communication; to predict misunderstanding that may arise from those differences”, for instance because of lack of information, incompatible goals and expectations, mood and situational interpretation (Thomas, 2010); and “to adapt their behaviour as necessary to participate appropriately in the cross-cultural encounter” (Bennett, 2013). Even though language holds a key position in intercultural communication, language competency as a linguistic tool is not enough for acquiring the increasingly important intercultural competence, which above all requires a familiarity with the culture-specific rules of interaction (Thomas, 2010).

Students also develop other intercultural competences, because in order to communicate and interact effectively, learners need to understand a different perspective on the world and a critical reflection on oneself and the society in which one live (Byram, Planet, 2000). According to Byram (2002), intercultural competences involve knowledge, skills

and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. Through the intercultural attitude, which is curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, stereotypes may be broken down (Byram, 2002). Intercultural competences, and intercultural communication, "the communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction" (Byram, 2002), are the main bases of international education, which is fundamental when it comes to developing human relationships with people of other languages and cultures.

2.3 Cultural shock and reverse cultural shock

Student Exchange programmes offer students the possibility to live for a long or a short period of the time in another country, the host country. During this period, students live with the host family, attend classes in the new school, socialize with people from the place and they could even attend some work programmes. Even though it looks like valuable opportunity and students can achieve a great deal after such a cross-culture experience, there are some difficulties along the way. One difficulty is the so called cultural shock, which happens "when individuals leave their country of birth and settle in a country that is foreign to them, such persons will experience considerable difficulties understanding and adapting to their new environment during the initial phase" (Thomas, 2010). Cultural shock "has been viewed as the process of initially adjusting to a new cultural environment" (Pedersen, 1995). This leads to a difficulty in adapting to the new culture and environment that one is experiencing. Thomas (2010) defines culture as "as a system of orientation that provides individuals from the same country with meaning and, to a great extent, defines their sense of belonging", and therefore, students could feel lost and lose the sense of belonging in another country, with the result that psychological and, to some degree, physical well being are particularly affected during this phase (Thomas, 2010).

Several theories have been formulated to explain why cultural shock occurs. Culture shock has been studied in the context of higher education particularly among international students (Pedersen, 1995). One of the major difficulties is dealing with anxiety when exchange students have to speak in a second language, in other words, when it comes to

socializing. Moreover, cross-cultural students have to face the stress of adapting to what is different from their routine, their native country and their usual behaviour. The impact of changing one's habits for example living with a new family, can affect the psychological and physical well-being of exchange students since they have to face the unknown and unfamiliar. However, once students adapt to a new routine and interacting with people of the host country, the psychological and physical pressures, will subside and the sense of well-being will gradually improve and stabilize (Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, participants develop their overall understanding of the target country through daily exposure to social interaction with members of the host culture (Czerwionka et al., 2015).

According to Presbitero (2016), adaption has two dimensions: psychological and sociocultural aspects. He further states (2016) that the psychological aspect consists of a sense of identity, mental health and overall life satisfaction, while the sociocultural aspect consists of an ability to cope with daily stress at school, work and society in general. Thus, whenever one of the two dimensions fails, students face cultural shock. If an international student experiences culture shock, the likelihood of achieving a sense of identity and overall satisfaction is lower. Similarly, the likelihood of coping with the daily stress at school, home and society at large are also lower (Presbitero, 2016).

Every beginning is difficult, but with time to adapt to new differences it becomes easier and it helps one to go out of the comfort zone. In fact, the longer the stay in the foreign environment and the more the individual adapts and acquires coping skills, the easier it becomes to interact with people of the host country and soon the psychological and physical pressures, too, will subside and the sense of well-being will gradually improve and stabilize (Thomas, 2010). Similar to cultural shock is reverse cultural shock, namely, the difficulties and challenges of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural context (Gaw, 2000). In the context of international students, a recent study demonstrated the presence of reverse culture shock among students returning from a six-month overseas educational program (Dettweiler, 2015).

Nevertheless, through the learning experience and intercultural skills, teachers may work to ensure that the culture shock is productive and positive, and not overwhelming and negative, and to help learners to analyse and learn from their responses to a new environment (Byram, 2002). The positive side of such experience is that having learned more about the target culture, participants may review any negative stereotypes that they held with regard to the target culture (Bohinski and Leventhal, 2015), gaining more openness to cultural diversity and higher levels of global-mindedness (Clarke et al., 2009), as well as patience toward, flexibility in, and acceptance of different perspectives (Root and Ngampornchai, 2013). Last but not least, through telecollaboration and exchange, students can also develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

2.4 Cultural and international cooperation

All the competences that are achieved during a cross-cultural experience are useful for one's personal improvement, but above all they are important in one's career. For instance, when it comes to international cooperation these competences are fundamental. People can have different beliefs of what cooperation is and there are several definitions that explain what is it. For example, according to Thomas (2019), cooperation generally refers to specific behaviour that aims to achieve set goals and ensure the well-being of a group or collective on a sophisticated level. Instead, Barnard (1938) states that cooperation is a central organizing process with important implications for organizations (Barnard 1938). The fact that the world is divided into several cultures that differ from one another can cause some challenges and difficulties when it comes to cultural and international cooperation, since in there "there is substantial contextual variability and complexity" (Keller and Loewenstein, 2010).

The world has been connected for a very long time, firstly, due to economic exchange and raw materials exchanges. In fact, Thomas (2010) states that "history has shown that there have always been times when transcontinental movement for political, economic, expansionist, religious and other reasons was on the rise. Diverse intercultural encounters were a natural outcome." Then, over the years, the connection became stronger, and with the circulation of goods, money and people becoming more frequent, a process took place,

which is globalization. Such a phenomenon is supported by social and network development, which continues to increase in importance.

Therefore, in order to operate in international cooperation, some prerequisites are required. Firstly, the prerequisite for effective cooperation is the ability to deal with a large number of culture-based variables during the change processes; then a person must have a well-founded understanding of environmental issues. It is important, then, to identify cultural standards that come into play during an intercultural encounter in order to avoid the biggest problem in cooperation, the problem solving methods that may be different in every culture. This usually happens because individuals normally assume that the way they behave is also the way others all over the world behave (Thomas, 2010), which is something that leads to misunderstandings and unexpected reactions.

Moreover, each country believes that their problem solving strategy is more successful. Here the role of mediators and interpreters is essential in order to face the “cultural overlap”, which occurs when the two countries that cooperate together have different systems of orientation. For that reason mediators have to find a “third culture” in the course of their interaction that combines thought patterns and behaviour of both parties (Breitenbach, 1975). Third cultures are virtual conditions that come into existence for the purpose of intercultural communication and then dissolve when that communication is not active (Bennett, 2013). Interpretation is particularly important for cooperation because cooperation entails ongoing social interaction and reciprocity (Fehr and Gintis 2007).

Keller and Loewenstein (2010) in their analysis to assess which types of situations people categorize as cooperation, conceptualize cooperation as a cultural category. People’s understandings of cultural categories are shaped by a large number of experiences interacting and communicating with others, learning socially legitimated ways to identify and interpret experiences and direct action (Harnad, 1987). Because of that, Keller and Loewenstein (2010), follow a theoretical approach to culture centered on examining knowledge structures and by doing that they ask how people understand situations within their own culture. However, if between two organizations that cooperate there is confusion about what cooperation exactly is, or there are different beliefs about it, it can

lead to a negative result of that cooperation. Thus, despite the members' intentions to cooperate, their different beliefs about what cooperation means prevent them from sustaining cooperation and lead to negative consequences (Keller and Loewenstein, 2010).

The general picture of a cross-cultural experience, whether it is virtual or physical presents challenges and outcomes. It gives a new perspective of culture, and how the cultural dimension has to be taken in consideration in all types of socialization and also jobs, by achieving new intercultural competences. An example is given by the international cooperation, where in order to cooperate are essential communicative competences, and many others are essential. Lastly, even though students could experience cultural shock, it is not necessary something negative, because on the other hand it provides positive results, for instance participants can correct any negative stereotype they had about the target culture.

CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY

In an attempt to show in practice some of the challenges and benefits achieved by students that experienced intercultural communication I conducted a survey with the aim of understanding to what measure and with what differences this developed in both Erasmus and virtual exchange. The polls were carried out on seven students that participated in the Erasmus exchange, and on eight students that attended the online intercultural encounter, the Soliya Connect Program. The polls present same questions in order to find if there are some similarities or differences.

3.1 Introduction to the case study

The students interviewed for both surveys, the Erasmus and Soliya surveys, are attending the University of Padua. They are heterogeneous in terms of gender, ages and nationalities and all the results are anonymous. In first place, the aim of this surveys, is to identify if virtual exchange could be a valid option when the physical cross cultural experience is not possible. Secondly, the surveys were conducted to understand if students that participated in virtual exchange developed the same outcomes and benefits that students that lived abroad did, despite the fact that Soliya students may have been limited because they had to have such an experience virtually. Moreover, another purpose of this case study is to show how this experience has affected personally students' lives, in terms of self confidence, language competences and skills and interaction with people from all over the world. Lastly, the polls want to explore if participants have gained intercultural competences and if their way of expressing themselves has been affected in some way.

3.2. Survey results and analysis

Intending to make a comparison between the answers from Soliya and Erasmus students, the two surveys present same questions. Below we can see the results of the surveys. Firstly there are the Soliya students' results, and to follow the Erasmus students' results.

1. When did you participate in the exchange?

I participated in Spring 2022.

Spring 2021.

I participated in the Soliya exchange of Spring 2022.

Autumn 2021.

March 2021.

This semester, second semester of 2021/2022.

2nd semester 2021-2022.

1. When, where and for how long did you participate in the Erasmus exchange?

3 years ago in Eichstätt for six months.

From September 2021 to January 2022 in Liverpool.

2021-2022. Cork, Ireland. 9 months.

2021/2022 to Italy the whole academic year.

I've been in the Erasmus project from September 2021 to January 2022.

second term 2022 (February-June) Prague.

I went to London from September 2019 to April 2020.

From the 30th of January to the 5th of July, in Santiago de Compostela (Spain).

The students interviewed participated to the Soliya Connect program in the years 2021-2022, and also almost all the students interviewed went on an Erasmus exchange in the same years, with only two exceptions: two out of seven students went on Erasmus in 2019. This leads to more precise results also from the point of view of the time because the information is more reliable at the time of the dissertation writing.

2. What were your expectations of the exchange before the first meeting?

I expected to find a very friendly and free environment, to feel welcomed and appreciated. I also expected getting to know about other cultures and realities.

Being in the middle of the quarantine my only hope was to be able to talk to someone from a country other than my own and to practice English.

I was expecting to find people with lots of different life experiences and opinions from me.

I didn't know what to expect, but I knew surely I would have improved my ability in expressing myself in English language and that I would discover a lot of new things on other cultures.

Meeting new people and learn something new about other cultures.

High expectations because I had the opportunity to talk with students from all over the world.

Practice my English, learn something new and meet new people.

2. What were your expectations of the exchange before going abroad?

To improve my German.

A totally new life, more open minded people.

Better English at the end of the exchange. Meet new people. Learn more about Ireland's heritage.

I had very high expectations.

Meeting new people from different countries, enrich myself and growing up personally, speaking English almost every time.

To have a lot of fun and university to be easier.

My aim was to improve the language and meet new people and cultures (besides taking the last exams, of course).

My expectations were improving my Spanish, traveling a lot and meeting a lot of new people from all over the world.

Both the Erasmus students and Soliya students had the same answers on the second question, which shows what is the aim of such experience, be it physical or virtual. The main expectations are related to improving language skills, knowing more about other

cultures and realities and lastly growing personally, enriching oneself and developing an open mind. An interesting fact is that the Soliya students' expectations were more focused on knowing new cultures, realities and people, and then improving their ability in speaking a second language, even though, as explained in Chapter 1, according to Helm (2018), the Soliya Connect Program was not developed as an English language program, but it has been adopted in advanced English language courses in various institutes in Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, the fact that the Soliya groups are made up of the majority of participants who are non native speakers, has demonstrated that non-native students are less anxious while interacting in English with non-native speakers, and that the use of a contact language can cement participants' feelings of proximity and mutual support (Guarda, 2013). On the other hand, Erasmus students' expectations concerned firstly learning better a language they are going to speak in the host country, and then learning more about the context they are going to live in for a certain period of the time.

3. What were your first impressions of the exchange after the very first meeting?

I was extremely happy and I immediately understood I was doing something extremely special and important.

I was hopeful and excited at the new experience since the people I met were very open minded.

At the beginning we all were a bit shy but the impressions were good.

I didn't like it much and it was weird.

Very good, the group was amazing and we talked a lot even if it was the first meeting.

I was excited and worried, but very happy that we were facing important problems and I knew I was going to learn something.

3. What were your first impressions of the Erasmus exchange in the first weeks?

Full of expectations.

I thought I had found my place to live.

You need to be in a very specific mindset, otherwise it will be very hard. Friendships are mostly very occasional and won't last.

Everything was quite different to my country.

The first weeks have been really hard for me: I couldn't adapt myself to the culture and especially to the food of the country.

I was excited about my new life in Prague.

I was thrilled, I was living alone for the first time in my life and I felt free.

I felt a little bit confused and lost because I hadn't realized yet what I was doing.

When asked the question about first impressions, students of both experiences answered almost the same, positively. Participants were excited at the beginning of their path and also full of expectations. This is important because it shows that first of all telecollaboration is a valid option for a cultural exchange. In fact Soliya argues that the norm should be “for students to have a profound cross-cultural experience as part of their education, whether it is in person or online” and for this reason, Soliya have been experimenting with a low-cost, high-impact “virtual exchange” model (Elliott-Gower, Hill:2019). Secondly, it shows also that a significant minority have faced some difficulties in adapting during their stay abroad. These difficulties are found in the cultural shock, which happens when students found several differences in the target country and because in particular they have a problem in adapting to another cultural context, as one student declared “I couldn't adapt myself to the culture and especially to the food of the country” and another one further stated “You need to be in very specific mindset, otherwise it will be very hard.”. In the online experience a minority also found some difficulties at the beginning, because of shyness.

4. How would you describe the interaction between people from different cultures?

I would describe it as enriching.

Everything was very organized and I realized that for the first time in my life I had real contact with people from all corners of the globe.

It was fun, enriching and life changing (for the better).

Maybe it's sometimes a little difficult.

I would describe it as an exchange of traditions, culture and different point of views.

Challenging because you are talking to a person with a different mindset and who's coming from a different cultural background.

Actually simpler than it seems.

4. How would you describe the interaction between people from different cultures that you engaged in during your exchange?

It helps you to know a different culture and to open your mind.

The best thing you can have during your exchange.

Everyone is very interested in learning more about foreign cultures and people never judge based on where you come from. However, nobody is interested in learning about you, all they really want is to go out and have fun, it doesn't really matter with who.

In my case, most of Italians didn't know English, so it was hard to communicate before I learned Italian.

Erasmus student have all something in common, so starting to talk and making friendship with someone that you have just met is far easier.

Enriching. I learned so many things, both linguistic and cultural.

The differences between cultures are really evident, even if the countries are similar to each other, culturally talking (like Italy and Spain).

Even though coming into contact with new people and new realities can be difficult, as a minority of those interviewed declared, students faced it with a positive mindset. A great majority described the interaction with people from other cultures as enriching and life changing. Moreover, it is important to point out that some of the Soliya participants highlighted that the interaction was an exchange of traditions, culture and different points of view, hence they learned both linguistic and cultural aspects from this experience. This student's statement is important since according to Bohinski and Levenathal's studies (2015) many researchers have advocated the use of telecollaboration to develop intercultural understanding and reduce stereotypes. Moreover, as mentioned in the Chapter 2, Helm (2013) states that it is also important that foreign language education be

concerned not only with instrumental aims but also humanistic ones, and promote also intercultural dialogue and understanding.

5. Did you feel that you had to be more respectful than usual and that you had to pay attention to other's cultural backgrounds? Did you feel respected?

Absolutely! I felt like I needed to be more respectful than usual because I obviously didn't want to offend others or to create a bad environment. I felt extremely respected and I hope others did too.

I certainly found myself talking directly about very sensitive issues with people from the Middle East for the first time, but I always felt respected.

I felt respected and listened by the others and my experiences have never been undermined because that went both ways. We were all paying attention and we had great interest and curiosity to learn more about the other. It was fascinating. There was no need to be more respectful, we were all respectful and had many things in common, given we were all more or less of the same age.

Yes, I felt that sometimes I had to pay attention to the words that I used while talking about other cultures. Yes, I felt respected in every moment.

Respect is the key when you meet people with different backgrounds. I was trying to express my ideas and point of view without offending others and their culture. At the same time, I felt respected even though I knew some people didn't agree with what I had said.

Yeah of course, I always had to think twice before talking but then the group was really open to ask me questions and interact with me.

I try to always be respectful, so I didn't feel the need to try to be more respectful. I felt very respected.

5. Did you feel that you had to be more respectful than usual and that you had to pay attention to other's cultural backgrounds? Did you feel respected?

Yes, I did. In truth, not only because I came from a different country, but also because things have been generally changing. That means when you meet people you have to ask for their gender, be respectful, but also don't translate things from the mother culture.

I behave in the same way both with Italians and with foreigners

No. Yes, I did.

I felt respected.

Sometimes yer, but not that much. There was a lot of respect between us. I felt like home.

No, for I don't feel entitled to judge someone based on their nationality so I never do it. I did feel respected and included.

I felt like they didn't like that I couldn't speak Italian properly.

In some cases yes, in particular when religion was the main topic in the conversations. I felt respected.

In intercultural communication the basis of the interaction is respect. In fact, in 2008 the Council of Europe published the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, where it defines intercultural dialogue as: “a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect”. As explained in Chapter 2, the means of expressing oneself should change, paying more attention to who one is talking to and what is his/her background. This is also shown by the answers of those interviewed. All the students of the Soliya exchange questioned considered that they felt the need to pay more attention while speaking with their peers, in particular when it came to sensitive issues.

Nevertheless, they all agreed that they always felt respected by the others and that everybody collaborated in order to create a positive approach and interaction. On the other hand, the Erasmus students questioned gave different answers. Only one out of seven students interviewed answered positively: in particular it is interesting that one stated that one “should not translate things from the mother culture”. This is important because developing intercultural awareness means that one should take into consideration the identities of one's interlocutor also in order to “develop a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures” (Byram et al., 2002). Two out of eight students stated that they were attentive while speaking with others only in the case of specific topics, for instance when religious topics were discussed. A great majority of students claimed that they behaved the same way as they behave with Italians, as they do not judge anyone by

their nationality. Nevertheless, almost all of them felt respected, and only one out of seven participants felt judged because of his/her linguistic skills.

6. Did the way you expressed yourself change during the exchange?

Yes, I strongly think that going on with the sessions I became more confident and calmer when I couldn't find the words to express myself in English. I became more friendly and more serene in general.

I don't think so.

Not really, we established ground rules at the very beginning and we all respected them. We were all very comfortable with one another.

Yes, I surely improved it.

Not really, because I tried to be careful about what I was saying from the beginning.

Absolutely yes! At beginning I was a bit scared because I thought my English level was not good enough, but then I realized that my group understood me so I was less anxious and I was able to talk more.

Yes, I was more opened, at the end it was like having a conversation with friends.

6. Did the way you expressed yourself when speaking to people from different cultures change during the exchange?

No.

Probably, yes. I honestly don't know.

Yes, a bit.

I think the exchange helped me a lot with my fluency

No, I just tried not to talk about politics or religion

Yes, absolutely. When I speak to non-Italian people I tend to be much more private. It is something I cannot control.

Yes! It mostly depended on who I had in front of me, if that person made me feel comfortable or not, and then also my speaking abilities improved during the various months.

Expressing oneself can be a challenge one faces and a benefit at the end of the path. Four out of seven participants of the Soliya exchange agreed that this experience changed the way they express themselves: they gained more confidence and improved their speaking skills. Instead the minority claimed that they did not change their way of expressing themselves as they were careful to speak appropriately from the beginning. For the Erasmus students instead is the opposite. The majority of those questioned stated that the cross cultural experience had changed the way they express themselves. The fact that one of the benefits gained from this experience is the changing of expressing oneself means that both the Soliya and Erasmus exchange fall in the intercultural dimension, where learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey, 2002).

7. What are the most important challenges for faced and benefits you took home from this experience?

I would say that the most important challenge is the one I had to fight with myself and my low self-confidence. I started believing much more in myself, I stopped being afraid of my accent or embarrassed when I couldn't express myself clearly. I took home lots of facts about other cultures that I didn't know, friendships I built through a computer screen and wider view on lots of topics.

Knowing how to listen is very important and I could really get to know certain local phenomena that only with a project like this could have been understood. Also, in September I might be visiting a girl in Morocco that I met thanks to this project.

There were no major challenges, I think it was a surprise to us all that we connected so deeply with one another and had many things to share. However, now I feel more aware of my surroundings and I realize that although similar, there are so many different shades of Grey in the world and cultures aren't monoliths.

I learned how to address to foreign people when talking about their culture, I improved my knowledge of the English language and understood many cultural aspects I previously ignored.

I learned new things about different cultures and I realized that if something may seem wrong to me, it may be important to other people because we all have different cultural backgrounds.

Trying to come up with a topic to discuss. I took home the ability to express myself in different ways and the ability to listen carefully to what people are saying.

That what you know or see or think of other cultures or people from other parts of the world, is not always the truth, sometimes the ideas and the things you know about them are just rumors and prejudices.

7. What are the most important challenges for faced and benefits you brought home from this experience?

Erasmus changed me in a lot of ways I can't summarize, because I was away from home when the pandemic started. Erasmus and Covid together, they made me grow up and the adult I feel I am now. The challenges I had to face were mostly university- related, as the teaching and exam system is completely different... but it turned out just fine.

More friends from all over the world and lots of good memories.

Of course the fact that a different reality from yours exists.

Linguistic competences and many new friends.

Being that faraway from home made me more responsible, but it's been obviously challenging, especially because I have an old great grandmother and a boyfriend. But the experience made me grow a lot.

I learned to be alone and don't feel too sad about it. I learned independence and I hope I have less social anxiety now.

A big challenge for me was getting used to the different way of teaching-learning at university: it is really different and I understood its technique just after the exams. The major benefits are for sure the cultural impact and also every little thing I learned/saw/heard from all the people I met.

The most important challenges were the oral exams and the benefits the people I met.

Each path leads to changes, improvements and reflections. At the end of these similar but different experiences students gave their opinions about what were their major challenges they faced and the benefits they brought home. Even though there are many similar statements, there are also some important differences. The similarities are found in the fact that both virtual exchange and Erasmus exchange led to same positive results: students faced different realities, they learned more about new cultures and points of

view; thanks to both experiences students made new friendships, and one of the most important benefits that concerns this dissertation is related to the students going out their comfort zone, and feeling less social anxiety and having an open mind.

The curious fact is that Soliya students mentioned the gaining of language skills as a benefit more frequently than Erasmus students. This could be explained by the fact that Erasmus students found it more difficult to adapt to a new reality, a new routine and being all alone in a place they do not know. For that reason, Erasmus students' challenges are mostly related to the adaptation to a new type of life, with the consequences that the benefits are related to personal growth: to be more responsible, independent and to deal with social anxiety. Moreover, three out of seven students during their cross cultural experience cited the different way of teaching-learning at universities as challenging.

In opposition, the main benefit gained by Soliya students is the improvement of language skills, specifically more fluency in speaking and learning how to express themselves with foreign people. Soliya's participants did not relate much to the educational system used as Erasmus' students: on the contrary, the only clarification about it was positive. In fact one student declared "everything was very organized". Challenges were found in low self confidence, shyness and insecurities about one's language skills, for example pronunciation.

3.3 Analysis of the emerging themes

Having analyzed the results, in this dissertation it is interesting to analyze the recurring themes emerging in the surveys. The themes are: improving/practicing a language; knowing more about other cultures and realities; and lastly the educational system. All the themes can be linked together. However, the theme regarding practicing the language and improving students' abilities in speaking is the one that has emerged the most; in particular as regards the students that attended the Soliya Connect Program. It is important to underline that it was the major benefit gained by the online participants as one of the aims of telecollaboration is for sure to help students develop more confidence, fluency and awareness in speaking during intercultural communication. Indeed O'Dowd (2018) explains that the term "telecollaboration" has been used especially in the field of foreign

language education. Therefore, as the students questioned participated in online intercultural encounters during the pandemic with Covid 19, the Soliya Connect Programme gave them the opportunity to improve their English getting in touch with other realities virtually in a period in which this was impossible to accomplish. In fact, one student states that “being in the middle of the quarantine my only hope was to be able to talk to someone from a country other than my own and to practice English”.

Practicing and improving a language is also related to how one’s ability and way of expressing oneself changes. Two questions of the surveys were in fact related to this:

-Did the way you expressed yourself change during the exchange?

-Did the way you expressed yourself when speaking to people from different cultures change during the exchange?

The results have shown that most of the students interviewed answered positively. Both the virtual exchange and the Erasmus exchange students experienced an impact on their way of expressing themselves. Nevertheless, greater attention will be paid to the answers of Soliya’s participants, as this dissertation focuses on a qualitative research of the challenges and benefits of a virtual exchange. It is clearly important to focus on this part of the survey as developing the ability to interact with people from all over the world is one of the intercultural competences gained. In order to create a relationship between people from different cultures one has to be able to communicate in an appropriate way.

A small majority of students surveyed agreed that what changed their way of expressing themselves is the improvement of the ability to speak with people from other realities in a second language. They improved their ability to express themselves because session after session they became more confident and open minded. Indeed one student states “I took home the ability to express myself in different ways and the ability to listen carefully to what people are saying”, and also another participants reported that he/she “learned how to address to foreign people when talking about their culture”. The cross cultural experiences such as the Soliya Connect Program, or the Erasmus exchange give the opportunity to develop intercultural education, which today’s society demands in order to promote equal opportunities and the inclusion of minority groups at risk of social

exclusion” (Salgado Orellana, et al., 2019). Part of intercultural education is Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC). Achieving communicative skills, not just in the grammar of a language but also the in ability to express oneself in socially and culturally appropriate ways is the main goal for students that decide to start this experience.

The possibility to get in touch with new cultures and realities is the next theme analyzed. In this case I have paid more attention to the point of view of students that attended online intercultural encounters. The second biggest participants expectation was to meet new people, to learn better about other cultures and realities. Since Helm (2015:196) defined the telecollaboration as “the practice of engaging classes of geographically dispersed learners in online intercultural exchange using Internet communication tools”, the expectation is highly achievable. It is important to underline this theme because first of all, one more time, it demonstrates that virtual exchange can offer many similar opportunities that Erasmus exchange offers. Even though the intercultural contact is virtual, it has an important impact and it is strongly perceived by the participants.

In fact, in order to understand how that kind of intercultural interaction impacted on participants the questions asked were:

-How would you describe the interaction between people from different cultures?

-How would you describe the interaction between people from different cultures that you engaged in during your exchange?

The answers reveal that the interaction was seen to be enriching; the fact that one student described it “as an exchange of traditions, culture and different points of view”, demonstrates that the interaction between cultures is real despite the fact that the contact is virtual. In fact, another participant states “I realized that for the first time in my life I had real contact with people from all corners of the globe”. Gaining new linguistic competences and entering into contact with new people from all corners of the globe improves communication that is no longer only an exchange of information but “the mutual creation of meaning” (Bennett, 2013).

After becoming more confident in interacting with others, without worrying anymore if someone's accent is pronounced wrong, if someone does not know every single word while expressing his/her opinion, and after breaking down shyness, the intercultural contact becomes more open, more interactive and has a greater impact on participants. The exchange of opinions, traditions and cultures can sometimes be difficult and challenging as one participant declares that he/she found the interaction "challenging because you are talking to a person with a different mindset and who's coming from a different cultural background". Moreover, Helm (2018) claims that the fact that English is the language of communication between participants means that about half of the participants are expressing themselves in their second, possibly third, fourth (or more) language, on controversial and emotional issues. However, for those students that are not so fluent in English, the facilitators support them by summarizing conversations in text chats. Nevertheless, "students undertake an exchange [...] as a challenge to escape, leave or be outside of their comfort zone" (Laura Prazeres, 2016), and once the challenges are overcome, participants develop an open mind as an outcome of such an experience.

The last theme that is about to be analyzed concerns the educational system. Although the previous two themes were focused on the Soliya students' point of view, this time more attention will be paid to the answers of Erasmus students. First of all, this will be done because the Erasmus students faced many challenges related to the university system. In fact one of them explains that "a big challenge for me was getting used to the different way of teaching-learning at university: it is really different and I understood its technique just after the exams". This could be related to a difficulty in adaptation to a different cultural system, in this case an educational system. Secondly, this is one of the main differences between virtual exchange and Erasmus: during the stay abroad one could face cultural shock, or reverse cultural shock when the experience is finished and students go back to their country, while it is not possible for this to happen during online intercultural encounters.

No matter how challenging it could seem to participate in an experience such as the ones that have just been analyzed, every student that has the possibility to take part in it should do it. Facing one's fears and insecurities (for example: fear of speaking because of shyness or insecurities, fear to live in another country all alone) is already work one is

doing on oneself. If it is done by participating in online intercultural encounters or Erasmus exchanges, students also gain many other benefits. Moreover, it is a great opportunity to develop competences that may be useful for one's career, to meet new people, build long friendships and maybe even fall in love.

Conclusion

The surveys carried out among students from the University of Padua, who participated in the Soliya Connect Program or an Erasmus exchange, showed that participating in a virtual exchange (e.g. the Soliya exchange) can lead to almost the same outcomes as participating in a physical cross cultural exchange. Therefore, the validity and effectiveness of such an experience, despite being virtual, can be considered confirmed by the participants' statements. In particular, students highlighted the improvement of communicative competences, and also fluency in speaking, as they were speaking in a second, maybe third (or more) language (Lingua Franca). Moreover, participants mentioned that feeling more comfortable in speaking, by not being judged during the online intercultural encounters, and by breaking down their own insecurities, such as shyness, helped them to go out of their comfort zone and to gain more confidence, and therefore to improve their language skills, as discussed in Chapter 1.

As introduced in Chapter 2, communicative skills do not concern only the ability to improve one's fluency in speaking and to broaden one's vocabulary. An experience such as the intercultural exchange falls into the intercultural dimension, which gives students the possibility to develop intercultural communication, and specific intercultural communicative competences. Those competences can be reached when one comes into contact with new cultures and realities and they involve one's way of expressing oneself and interacting in an appropriate way with people from other cultural contexts. To demonstrate in practice what these studies have documented, participants answered the following questions:

-Did the way you expressed yourself change during the exchange?

-Did the way you expressed yourself when speaking to people from different cultures change during the exchange?

The common answer was positive, and in particular participants specified that they were concerned to be more careful to avoid misunderstandings during the dialogues with their peers.

The difficulties explained in Chapters 1 and 2 were confirmed by the questionnaires too, in particular the initial problem of insecurity for Soliya Connect Program participants, which at the end of the path transformed into a benefit (developing into self-confidence) and the cultural shock for Erasmus exchange participants. In fact, some of the students questioned stated that they found some difficulties in adapting to a new cultural context, food and education system.

Despite taking into consideration the research conducted and the results of the study case in Chapter 3, a clarification is needed: the surveys were conducted on two small groups of students and the results are based on their personal opinions, and therefore the responses are subjective. Moreover the surveys were conducted only among Italian participants, who attend the University of Padua. Indeed, more research should be done perhaps on larger groups of people, and also on students from other countries that have taken part in online intercultural meetings. However, even though in recent years the practice of virtual exchange has increased considerably and successfully, I also believe that the topic should be addressed more often as still many young people and students are not aware of its existence, or they know something partially. In fact, I personally was unaware of the possibility to participate in the Soliya Connect Program which is provided by the University of Padua, and many university students I met were unaware too.

Finally, I believe that more knowledge should be spread on the practice of virtual exchange since it is much more than learning languages: students do not only develop their soft skills and are more aware of the cultures and realities that surround them, but they also meet new people, gain confidence, become more open minded, and there is also the chance to build long friendships and perhaps even fall in love.

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Riassunto

Nel ventunesimo secolo, il mondo è sempre più connesso grazie allo sviluppo della tecnologia. Quest'ultima ha dimostrato la sua importanza soprattutto durante il difficile periodo storico che il mondo ha dovuto affrontare negli ultimi tre anni a causa del virus Covid-19, in quanto lo smart working ha reso possibile a molte persone di continuare a lavorare. Pertanto, l'obiettivo di questa tesi è di ricercare se lo scambio virtuale può essere una valida alternativa allo scambio culturale fisico. Quando non è possibile entrare in contatto con un'altra cultura, paese e tradizione direttamente è comunque possibile farlo virtualmente. L'università di Padova rende possibile agli studenti di vivere un'esperienza virtuale attraverso degli incontri interculturali online organizzati dal Soliya Connect Program. Si tratta di incontri organizzati in gruppi di 8-10 persone provenienti da tutto il mondo con cui gli studenti interagiscono. Durante tali incontri gli studenti affrontano sfide, soprattutto personali, e ottengono anche benefici alla fine del loro percorso: migliorano la conoscenza di una lingua, diventano più sicuri di sé, attraverso l'incontro con persone provenienti da contesti culturali diversi sviluppano una mentalità più aperta.

Prima di descrivere dettagliatamente quali sono le sfide e i benefici ottenuti dagli studenti, nel primo capitolo si trova la spiegazione dettagliata di cosa sia lo scambio virtuale: “lo scambio virtuale prevede il coinvolgimento di gruppi di studenti in lunghi periodi di interazione interculturale online e collaborazione con partner di altri contesti culturali o località geografiche come parte integrante dei loro programmi educativi e sotto la guida di educatori e/o facilitatori esperti” (O'Dowd, 2018:5). Un esempio di scambio virtuale è il Soliya Connect Program, ovvero una rete globale senza scopo di lucro con sede a Washington DC, fondata nel 2003 è dedicata a risolvere le differenze tra “l'Occidente” e il “mondo musulmano” (Elliott-Gower, Hill:2019).

Durante lo scambio virtuale, uno dei benefici che gli studenti traggono è quello di uscire dalla propria zona di comfort. Questo avviene in quanto gli studenti devono fare qualcosa che non sono abituati a fare di solito: parlare con persone che non conoscono nella loro seconda, o terza (o più) lingua. Incontro dopo incontro, gli studenti iniziano a sentirsi più

a loro agio nel loro modo di comunicare, soprattutto quando vedono dei risultati che riguardano le loro competenze linguistiche: più scioltezza nel parlare, meno timidezza, più curiosità nello scoprire cose nuove. Alla fine del percorso realizzano che uscendo dalla propria zona di comfort si sentono più sicuri di sé.

Uno dei benefici maggiori, tuttavia, riguarda sicuramente le competenze linguistiche degli studenti. Innanzitutto, il miglioramento della lingua in cui stanno parlando (inglese, in questo caso), che è vista come lingua franca. La lingua franca si ritiene quella lingua parlata da studenti e/o persone che non condividono la stessa lingua madre.

Nel secondo capitolo prosegue la descrizione di altri benefici e sfide affrontate dagli studenti. Dato che sia lo scambio virtuale, che lo scambio culturale fisico fanno parte della dimensione culturale in cui è necessario conoscere il modo appropriato per interagire con persone provenienti da diversi contesti culturali, gli studenti ricevono un'educazione interculturale durante gli scambi, di cui fanno parte le competenze comunicative linguistiche. Questo è importante in quanto comunicare non è più uno semplice scambio di informazioni, ma si tratta di un atto in cui bisogna tenere in considerazione dei fattori precisi, come per esempio il contesto culturale da cui proviene la persona con cui si parla. Dunque, le competenze comunicative linguistiche sono necessarie innanzitutto per saper come parlare e scrivere in modo appropriato, riducendo incomprensioni e sviluppando un maggior rispetto nel dialogo con persone di culture diverse.

Un'altra conseguenza positiva che deriva dallo sviluppo di competenze linguistiche acquisite durante un percorso come lo scambio virtuale (o anche scambio culturale fisico) è quello della riduzione di stereotipi. Prima di tutto è necessario precisare che il significato di "cultura" si è evoluto nel corso degli anni: la cultura non è caratterizzata più solo dall'arte, musica e filosofia di un paese, ma è anche costituita dalle tradizioni, abitudini, usi e costumi di un paese. Questo è un dato che da un lato mostra quanto il mondo sia caratterizzato da una vasta diversità culturale che lo rende speciale, ma dall'altro è un dato che la storia ha dimostrato che ha portato numerose volte a conflitti, razzismi, incomprensioni e altre situazioni spiacevoli. L'evoluzione del termine ha conseguito anche allo sviluppo degli stereotipi, ovvero se un gruppo di persone di un paese si

comporta in un certo modo, le persone di un altro paese possono presumere che questo comportamento sia tipico del loro paese. Secondo alcuni studiosi, come Bohinski, Leventhal (2015) e Helm (2018), per ridurre gli stereotipi è necessario sviluppare una comprensione interculturale, e l'insegnamento delle lingue deve stabilire anche scopi umani oltre che strumentali, e promuovere il dialogo interculturale.

Le competenze linguistiche sono una delle competenze richieste nella cooperazione internazionale, dove i mediatori hanno un ruolo fondamentale. Il loro compito non è solo quello di trasferire conoscenza, valori e obiettivi aziendali, ma devono anche essere in grado di comunicare informazioni nella lingua in cui mediano che si avvicini il più possibile alla lingua originale. Inoltre, uno dei prerequisiti per un'efficace cooperazione è la capacità di affrontare un gran numero di variabili culturali durante i processi di cambiamento, per cui una persona deve avere una comprensione ben fondata delle questioni ambientali.

Le sfide principali da affrontare per gli studenti che partecipano a uno scambio virtuale sono la timidezza, insicurezza e paura di sbagliare, mentre per quanto riguarda gli studenti che affrontano uno scambio culturale fisico la sfida principale si rivela nello shock culturale e shock culturale inverso. Lo shock culturale si verifica quando gli studenti trovano difficoltà ad adattarsi al nuovo contesto culturale in cui devono vivere per un periodo di tempo, mentre lo shock culturale inverso si verifica quando al ritorno dalla propria esperienza all'estero, gli studenti riscontrano delle difficoltà a riadattarsi al loro paese d'origine.

Il terzo capitolo presenta due sondaggi, uno condotto sugli studenti che hanno partecipato al Soliya Connect Program e uno sugli studenti hanno partecipato allo scambio culturale Erasmus. Entrambi i sondaggi presentano le stesse domande in quanto l'obiettivo è di capire quanto sia valida l'opzione di uno scambio virtuale ove uno scambio culturale fisico non sia possibile. Inoltre, con questi sondaggi si vuole anche ricercare quali siano le differenze e le similitudini tra le due esperienze.

Le risposte degli studenti intervistati portato a dei risultati quasi uguali per entrambi i sondaggi, il che conferma la validità e l'efficacia dello scambio virtuale, nonostante esso sia virtuale. In particolare, i partecipanti hanno evidenziato il miglioramento delle

competenze comunicative: più scioltezza nel parlare un'altra lingua e il sentirsi a proprio agio a parlare in una lingua che non è la loro lingua madre. Il fatto di non essersi giudicati durante gli incontri interculturali online gli ha aiutati ad essere più sicuri di se stessi e uscire dalla propria zona di comfort. Anche le competenze comunicative linguistiche spiegate nel secondo capitolo, sono state confermate dalle risposte degli studenti in particolare alle domande:

-Il tuo modo di esprimerti è cambiato durante lo scambio virtuale?

-Il tuo modo di esprimerti parlando con persone provenienti da differenti culture è cambiato durante lo scambio?

La risposta generale è risultata positiva, in particolare gli studenti hanno specificato che hanno cercato di stare più attenti ed evitare incomprensioni durante i dialoghi con i loro compagni, soprattutto quando si trattavano argomenti di tipo politico o religioso. Anche le difficoltà presentate nei Capitoli 1 e 2 sono state confermate dai sondaggi: in particolare l'iniziale problema di insicurezza per i partecipanti del Soliya Connect Program e lo shock culturale per gli studenti dello scambio culturale Erasmus, infatti alcuni studenti hanno specificato di aver trovato difficoltà ad adattarsi al nuovo contesto culturale, cibo e sistema educativo.

Partecipare a uno scambio culturale offre molto più che imparare semplicemente una lingua: si fa un lavoro profondo su sé stessi, migliorandosi, si sviluppano e migliorano competenze linguistiche, si incontrano nuove persone, si è più consapevoli delle realtà che ci circondano, si costruiscono nuove amicizie e ci si potrebbe anche innamorare.