INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION: THE CASE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

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Abstract: The cultural background of people that interact at an intercultural level has a strong impact on the manner in which this type of interaction takes place. Cultural diversity should not be regarded as an obstacle to communication and a threat to the specificity of one particular culture. On the contrary, the development of intercultural exchange is an opportunity to enrich one's cultural horizons and also the horizons of the community that he/she belongs to or that he/she interacts with. The impact on a pre-established identity is inevitable and the challenges generated by the process of globalization focus mainly on the ability to adapt and, at the same time, not to lose specificity. The case of international student exchange programmes is an important factor in the process of intercultural interaction, as it forms a strong perception both on the students in international exchange programmes, and on the members of the host country, or the county of origin, regarding the other. Their manner of integration will be analyzed in this paper, focusing on the benefits that can be obtained due to the exchange programmes and the way in which those benefits can be increased. A case study on international mobility of Romanian university students in Bordeaux has the aim of reinforcing the ideas presented in the paper.

Keywords: globalization, intercultural adaptation, international student exchange, communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural contact, largely developed nowadays due to the intense process of globalization, creates the frame for numerous points for discussion. It is impossible to draw a line and to conclude what are the advantages and the disadvantages that each culture, or each individual of one culture, can obtain from this increased contact, or whether the balance is in favour of the advantages or of the disadvantages. But, as this process is inevitable, one should try to benefit as much as possible and to see the opportunities that hide behind the difficulties. This article has the aim of presenting a way of obtaining benefits from the intercultural contacts, through the international student exchange programmes, and it focuses on three aspects: ERASMUS student mobility programmes, the identity of the stranger in intercultural contact and the case of 30 Romanian students in Bordeaux, France.

2. STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES

According to the data provided by UNESCO, referring to the period 2000-2010, France is the main destination of study for Romanian students that take part in short-term study mobility programmes abroad. In the academic year 2008-2009, the number of Romanian students in study mobility was of more than 22000,[1] and this number makes the study of their adaptation and integration justifiable. The number of students that chose Romania as host country was of 1206, among which the largest number was represented by French students. [2]

The ERASMUS programme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of

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[1] See full report at: http://ressources.campusfrance.org/publi_institu/etude_prospect/stats_pays/fr/roumanie_fr.pdf, 04.03.2011.
[2] See full report at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table109.pdf, 20.02.2011.

University Students) is a programme that enjoys a great success in the European area. According to the official website of the European Commission in December 2010, more that 2.2 million students have been beneficiaries of this programme since its launching in 1987. More than 4000 institution of higher education from 33 courtiers participate within the programme.

Mainly, the programme involves the students in study abroad exchange programmes, but the students are not the only ones that can participate to this exchange; teaching staff or administrative staff can also benefit from the programme, the aim being of developing inter-universities cooperation.

In order to frame the situation of Romanian students, according to the last statistics available, that refer to the academic year 2008-2009, 10 Romanian universities found their place in the top of 500 institutions concerning outgoing study and placement mobility; the first three places have been occupied by *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University on the 79th position, *Babeş-Bolyai* University on the 144th position and the *University of Bucharest* on the 164th position. Spain is the leading country in outgoing study and placement mobility[3].

The programme may have not reached all its initial objectives, but the large number of beneficiaries is a proof of the example of good practice that it represents in the field of intercultural development. *"(...) the biggest gains, not surprisingly, are in learning the language, understanding the new culture, and in the development of a more international perspective. It is also an excellent opportunity to learn about yourself."* (Hansel, 2007:3).

As most studies focus on the positive aspects of the programme, it is worth mentioning the observations made by Magali Ballatore, author of a study on Erasmus mobilities in the years 2004-2005. She points out the fact that only 1% of the European students are beneficiaries of the programme whereas the goal of the European Commission is of 10%. (Ballatore 2008:2) She does not deny the strong points of the programme, but

she draws attention on the fact that the objectives set by the European Commission have not been reached.

"For the Erasmus population, as for the international service class, we could say that their aim is a social, economic rather than a cultural integration. The Erasmus student doesn't mix up with the host population as a whole. In fact the Erasmus students are part of global society through the simply act of mobility." (Ballatore, 2008:5) Ballatore considers that the main benefits of the programme are those obtained by each individual at their personal level and the benefits that are harder to be noticed are those at the European level.

Still, the impact at the European level of the students involved in an exchange programme has conducted to the perception of a so called *"ERASMUS generation"* quoting the political scientist Stefan Wolff, in a speech referring to the future leaders of Europe (Bennhold, 2004).

Further on, I will enlarge the topic from the international student exchange programmes to more general issues regarding the implications and risks involved in intercultural contact and the statute of the stranger in the intercultural environment.

3. INTERCULTURAL CONTACT AND IDENTITY

When two individuals belonging to different cultures enter into contact, it is not easy to find the common codes that are most appropriate in order to communicate effectively. For the individual that is outside his cultural environment it is important to feel that he belongs to a certain group in order to communicate properly and to express his true self.

The process of self identification and construction of the feeling of self is constructed on the bases of three polarities: *"identifying the other, identifying with the other, being identified by the other, the other making reference in this case both to a group of people and to an individual as member of*

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[3] See full report at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/studiesout0809.pdf, 20.02.2011.

the target group"[4] (Ferréol, Jucquois, 2005:19).

Fred Dervin, a specialist in the field of intercultural communication and education, separates the concept of stranger into three categories that can be useful to a better comprehension of the situation of foreign short-term students:

The first category is represented by the *solid strangers*. Solid strangers are not just passing through a foreign country, but they intend to remain in that country and to find a suitable long-term place there. *"They usually manage to get a job and get involved with 'locals', learn the local language(s), etc. In other words, they become 'attached' to the host country and fit in (but of course, they are free to 'leave' any time)"* (Dervin, 2009:123).

The second category identified by Dervin, and the one that I focus on in my paper, is represented by the *liquid strangers*. We can place short term foreign students in this category, as they occupy a transitory, temporary position and their stay in the foreign country is limited by the duration of the programme they are involved in.

The third category of strangers is the one of *effervescent strangers*, who *"may be just passing or staying longer"*. In higher education, the difference between liquid strangers and effervescent strangers is the one between short-term and long-term international students. As long-term students stay at the foreign university in order to obtain an entire degree of study, they are more involved in the local environment and are closer to the category of solid strangers (Dervin, 2009:123).

Returning to the category of liquid strangers, reference should be made to Zygmunt Bauman, who introduced the association of the term "liquid" with the one of "modernity". In a society belonging to liquid modernity, individuals are receptive and adapt easily to change and to different exterior factors; it is a society that perceives the

relativity of space, a globalized society. *"We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and exterritorial elite"* (Bauman, 2000:13).

In the book *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*, Bauman describes the European culture as having a way of life that is not only inclined towards crossing the borders, but that is in fact *allergic to border*. (Bauman, 2004:7).

According to Levi-Strauss, the stranger can enjoy a privileged place in the intercultural group, due precisely to his statue of stranger. *"The stranger benefits from the prestige of the exotic and he symbolizes the opportunity, provided by his presence, of enlarging the social network"*[5] (Levi-Strauss, 2001:133).

Levi-Strauss makes a beautiful comparison between cultures and trains that move with different speeds, each in their own directions. The trains that move in a rhythm and in a direction similar to the train we are in, are easier to be noticed, but when interacting with a train that has different rhythm and directions, we can only throw a glance at the passengers, that is more likely to be unclear and sometimes even disturbing, as it disrupts the habitual contemplation. (Levi-Strauss, 2001:140).

Having presented some aspects related to the particularities of the ERASMUS student mobility programme and to the intercultural encounters in a globalized world, I will move to the practical part of this article and discuss the particular case of 30 Romanian ERASMUS students in Bordeaux

4. CASE-STUDY: ROMANIAN STUDENTS IN BORDEAUX, FRANCE

As long-term outcomes of student exchange programmes are difficult to observe, to measure or to evaluate, my goal in this article is limited to observing their perception regarding the study mobility, more precisely their experience as foreign students and the immediate impact. To this end, I have

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[4] Author's translation from the original : « *identifier l'autrui, s'identifier à autrui, être identifié par autrui, autrui referant ici aussi bien à un groupe de personnes qu'à un individu en tant que membre du groupe visé.* »

[5] Author's translation from the original : « *l'étranger jouit du prestige de l'exotisme et incarne la chance, offerte par sa présence, d'élargir les liens sociaux* ».

distributed a questionnaire of 32 questions to the Romanian students that were doing their studies in Bordeaux within the ERASMUS programme, in the first semester of the academic year 2010-2011. The students were studying at three of the four prestigious universities gathered under the name of Université de Bordeaux: Bordeaux 2 – Victor Segalen, Bordeaux 3 – Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux 4 – Montesquieu.

The students involved in the study, 23 girls and 7 boys, 21 to 25 years old, were all living in the hostels put at their disposal by the universities, through an institution that is in charge with both local and foreign student accommodation. The questionnaires have been given at the end of the first semester, so that they have sufficient time to be able to answer properly the questions concerned.

Also, the interaction with the students did not take place only through the questionnaires, but also through participant observation throughout their period of mobility. As this part of the research is focused mainly on the use of questionnaires, it has the form of a quantitative research, but with a qualitative dimension, as appreciatively half of the 32 questions are open-ended questions.

The fields of study of the 30 students varied from medicine to anthropology, psychology, economics, political science, sports and geography, but since there were no notable differences between the answers depending on their fields of study, I will not put special emphasis on this aspect.

It is true that many of the problems that a foreign student might experience can be predicted (for example problems related to language, food, unfamiliar habits, discomfort, culture shock etc.) and possible solutions to facing those problems can be accessed by the students from numerous sources (books, the internet, other foreign students, family, teachers, etc). Literature in this field is very rich, but since the purpose of this paper is to present the particular experiences of particular individuals, I will refer only to the case of these 30 students.

It is interesting to see the answers given by one of the students to the question referring to whether the perception regarding her home

culture has changed. Most of them admitted that it has indeed changed, but I would like to present just one of the answers: *"The perception regarding my own culture has changed as I had the possibility to see it from the exterior. So, I became more tolerant, as I realised that no culture is perfect. (...) Regarding my field of study, the classes that I attended here opened new concepts of research that I could apply in my own culture."*[6]

Regarding the perception towards the host culture, the case of this student is the one of the individual who over idealises the culture of the host country; the expectations she had before the study mobility in Bordeaux proved to overpass reality. It is one of the typical problems that a foreign student may be faced with. *"The difficulties students face in this period stem often from their expectations about the experience. Some students do not expect very many differences, or have learned about the culture in school or from film."* (Hansel, 1997/2007:63) In the case of this student, the differences between the two cultures have proven to be fewer and less significant than she had expected, and she was disappointed to see that some things that she considered to be as weak points in her culture, like the conditions of accommodation in student hostels, existed in the place of mobility as well.

As a result, the disappointment from this point of view was the response she gave to the question regarding her first week in Bordeaux: *"First of all, I was disappointed by the conditions offered by the student hostels, even if later I understood that they were also one of the cheapest (...) I missed home, the city did not attract me in any way, I saw only the negative aspects."*[7]

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[6] Author's translation from the original : „*percepţia în legătură cu propria cultură s-a modificat pentru că am avut posibilitatea să o privesc de la distanţă. Astfel, am devenit mai îngăduitoare, dându-mi seama că nicio cultură nu este perfectă. (...) În ceea ce priveşte domeniul meu, cursurile de aici mi-au deschis noi concepte de cercetare pe care aş putea să le aplic în cultura mea.*"

[7] Author's translation from the original : "*am fost foarte dezamăgită de condiţiile pe care le oferă căminele studenţeşti, chiar dacă ulterior am înţeles că sunt şi cele*

20 out of the 30 subjects stated that their perception towards their home culture has changed, and this fact is relevant to the impact of this type of study motility, especially since the students have been in mobility for just a couple of months.

Another important mention on this topic is that 37% of the respondents feel 70% adapted to the cultural environment of the host city, and 46% feel more than 70% adapted, after just a few months on mobility. This is not an evidence that they have indeed adapted to such an extent, especially taking into consideration that the contact they had with the local cultural environment was limited, but that they have reached a degree of comfort that gives them the impression of adaptation; this is an evidence that the negative aspects of the experience have been left behind in a great measure.

Further on, I will set into the details of the negative "symptoms" experienced by the students during their study mobility. The symptoms that I made reference to in the questionnaire are some of the symptoms of culture shock (Oberg, 1960; Triandis, 1994; Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001).

The manifestation of these symptoms in the case of the 30 subjects has been declared to be as follows: home sickness 66%, stress 55%, loneliness 48%, anxiety 34%, confusion 34%, sadness 34%, disorientation 31%, frustration 31%, lack of confidence 24%, isolation 24%, helplessness 14%, depression 10%, feeling of loss of identity 7%, physical discomfort7%, other symptoms14% (percentage of respondents).

The problems regarding communication did not occur so much at the level of language, though some students expressed uneasiness in producing in a foreign language, but more at the level of common codes shared by the subjects involved in conversation.

Here are some of the coping techniques used by the 30 students: self motivation, trying to understand the behaviour of others and learning more cultural codes, perseverance,

mai ieftine (...)îmi era dor de casă, oraşul nu mă atrăgea cu nimic, vedeam numai părţile negative."

getting involved in a lot of activities, socializing, trying not to overrate the problems encountered, thinking that in a student hostel most students are foreigners, focusing on the benefits brought by the scholarship and on the positive aspects of the study mobility, focusing on the purpose of leaving the home country and on the fact that this departure is just for a limited period of time, and one must try to make the best out of it, keeping in touch with family and friends back home and with the organizations that were involving foreign students in different cultural activities.

Mention should be made that some of the students found comfort in going to church. The Romanian students in Bordeaux are privileged from this point of view, as there is an orthodox church, where the service takes place both in French and in Romanian. The Romanian community that attends this church is large and very active, and many of the students go there to find a place of belonging and of support, even if they did not attend church that often at home.

Even if the changes in perception, the symptoms of culture shock or the coping techniques bring nothing new to the literature available in the field, the results presented in this study can be useful, as they reflect a concrete and contemporary situation and they make a step from general to particular situations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

All in all, one of the advantages of short term student exchange programmes, widely developed in the contemporary era of globalization, is that the period is short enough not to alter a pre-established identity, but long enough to offer the opportunity of perceiving oneself from a different perspective, in offering a point of comparison.

Also, since this mobility takes place at the beginning of the process of maturing, the impact of an intercultural encounter puts the person into contact with the reality generated by the increased process of globalization that he is indirectly and inevitably exposed to. The fact that this encounter takes place in an institutionalized context, and for a limited and

short period of time, puts the student at a safe distance, as he or she has a certain freedom of choice regarding the degree of immersion in the intercultural environment. In a way, the student is an explorer of others and of self. The benefits in the academic field and for the professional formation of the students cannot be ignored, as this widens their horizons and they bring back home part of the achievements of that experience.

I will end with a quote from the book *Modernity and Ambivalence*, by Zygmunt Bauman, where he discusses the attitude of modern society regarding the stranger. His words can sum up the proper attitude one should have in front of the intercultural challenges of globalization: "*One needs to honour the otherness in the other, the strangeness in the stranger*" (Bauman, 1991: 235).

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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