**Acquisition of English as a second language**

**Research among exchange students studying in a country where English isn’t the native language**

The idea of multiculturalism in contemporary political discourse and in political philosophy is about how to understand and respond to the challenges associated with cultural and religious diversity[[1]](#footnote-1). Whereas outside the political discourse *multiculturalism* is the phenomenon of multiple groups of cultures existing within one society, largely due to the arrival of immigrant communities, or the acceptance and advocacy of this phenomenon. In other words, multiculturalism is an aspect and a consequence of migration where different traditions and cultures can enrich society[[2]](#footnote-2). Naturally, multiculturalism has one prominent feature and that is language or more precisely multiple languages meeting at the same curving point. But above multiculturalism and above all the languages being brought together, there is the omnipresence of English language which in this case we can call “the enabler of multiculturalism”.

As a ‘living organism’ language constantly evolves and grows with us – humans. When we speak about ‘language contact’, we are therefore talking about people speaking different languages coming into contact with one another. There are various reasons for speakers of different languages to come into contact such as: politics, natural disaster, religion, culture, economy, education, technology, etc. Physical movement isn’t completely necessary when it comes to language diversity which we can experience in the same country and even in smaller communities. For the sake of the current study I will focus on the following reason which brings together speakers of different languages – exchange programs.

The object of my study will be the students coming from non-English speaking countries to spend time on exchange programs in a country where English language isn’t the native or the official language. I will try to understand how exchange students go through a process of linguistic adaptation in a country where English isn’t the native language and the establishing of English as a lingua franca leads to their linguistic and academic achievement and their improvement of the Language 2 English proficiency. The importance of this topic lies in the tendency that English isn’t likely to back down from its position as an international means of communication and thus making it crucial to study the ways it is being acquired in different countries and later on how it is being used as a learning tool in a non-English speaking country especially when English can be the only criteria for being accepted into a certain exchange program.

By ‘exchange program’ I will mean a program in which students from a secondary school or university study abroad at one of their institution's partner institutions. In this case a student exchange program involves international travel. The exchange program in question will be the Erasmus+ program which gives the opportunity to students from European countries to spend one or two semesters abroad in a European university. In most cases English language is the only requirement in order to be accepted for the program which in a way turns English language in the “tool of the trade”.

The idea is that English, in its character of the cliché as a global language, becomes the kickstarter in an immigrant community of foreign students even before they arrive to the country in question. This I think explains the importance of understanding how English is acquired as a second language and how it is being used and treated for various purposes. One of these purposes is using English as an immigrant language where a self-made multicultural community establishes it as their means of communication. In this case the word “immigrant” loses its negative connotation.

Upon not finding any research previously done on exchange students and their English language acquisition and development in a country where English is not the native and/or official language I will try to explain my research questions one by one. Thus explained I will present 8 questions and for each one I will present briefly a certain study or experiment done previously on the topic, in this case question, of choice. By tracing the questions posed in my research project, I will try to achieve the following tasks.

I. To outline the process of linguistic adaptation in a country where English isn’t the native language;

II. To prove that English as a lingua franca leads to the exchange students’ linguistic and academic achievement and their improvement of the Language 2 English proficiency;

III. Bilingualism improves in the right environment.

My tools for examining the object of this project are:

1. Observing the exchange students over a period of 5 months (September, 2017-February, 2018) in their so-called “natural habitat” which in this case is a student dormitory primarily with Erasmus students;

2. I have done interviews with the students rather than letting them fill in strict questionnaires;

3. Observing the perception others have of those exchange students in their small community and outside of it which in the case of this project is Prague, Czech Republic;

The current project posed the following questions seeking answers to them in order to explain the beforementioned tasks. The questions will be stated one by one: ***What are the most common ways of acquiring English as a second language in different cultures according to exchange students’ experience?***

In her study “Acquiring a second language for School” Virginia Collier presents a conceptual model with four development components or processes in acquiring a second language: sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive. I asked this first question to the participants in my study after mentioning this conceptual model and its stages. I speculate that the way the language (in this case English) is acquired has an impact on the attitude the student will develop later on toward the language. Out of the 15 asked participants, there are 3 different ways how English was acquired: during the school education; on some kind of exchange program; with the help on private lessons.

Not surprisingly school education is the most common way for acquiring a foreign language from a young age. Although here the factor of the mandatory element is present and it shouldn’t be ignored. People who mentioned the public educational system as their source of learning English expressed their complaints of it and stated why it is not nearly enough to study English just at school. Although, they started learning English from the ages of 7-8 years, the structure is focused on grammar and memorization. There is a lack of effort put in pronunciation and the school scheme doesn’t incorporate all aspects of language education thus resulting in students incapable of proper “real-world” language interaction. Furthermore, the answer “private lessons” supposes exactly the opposite: that the student had a personal desire and motivation to pursue studying the language in question which is a reason for his/her positive associations with it later on.

Exchange programs present the smallest number of answers I received but they entail the most natural way of acquiring a language through creating a setting, “a safe environment” where the level of language proficiency is not of importance but the willingness to use the language. The participants who answered like this have taken part in an earlier exchange program where English was the community language. Thus they not only raised their proficiency in the language but also developed some kind of motivation to pursue this way of “non-formal” educational method of acquiring a language. Hence the reason why they are currently doing another exchange program.

The second question was: ***What is the status of the English language in different cultures?***

It may seem that the answer to this question is implied but that is not the case. I emphasize on the word *culture* not *country* mainly because students come from communities and cultures, they do not necessarily represent their whole country where as we know we might find a great diversity of cultures within the same country. According to the participants’ country of origin, the following cultures were mentioned and explained.

Italy: More than 8,000 dialects can be found on the territory of Italy with village to village using their own form of the official language – Italian or the way it is called, proper Italian. There is a distinctive division between North and South Italy not only language wise but within matters of culture and social status. A particular trait shown by the South Italian participants was the *shame* of using English. South Italian accent and especially Neapolitan has a very strong sound and differs significantly from other dialects. Students coming from small villages in the area are used to speaking only in Neapolitan and they are being ridiculed for using proper high Italian which they learn at schools. This way of exclusion forces them to stick to the acceptable spoken language which is the dialect of the region. Even worse become the reactions when a foreign language like English is used. English has the status of the “skill which the North people have”. People don’t see English as that important because they can survive without it. This gives the impression of a self-made cast system where the higher cast speaks the language of the “rich” whereas the lower one sticks to the common language.

Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia: These three countries are grouped together because of their similar characteristics concerning English language. Eastern European and Slavic countries are mentioned as “countries who have no other choice but to learn English”. This statement, of course, is relevant to the younger generation for whom English is considered to be a way to escape their original country. Here what is noticed is the encouragement that older generations show to the younger ones as to show the importance of English. There is a strong motivation in these countries for reaching a higher standard of life and English happens to be an asset for this through tourism and international relations. This is the reason why Bulgarian, Romanian and Slovenian students go on exchange programs well-prepared with a good level of English.

Spain: In Spain English has quite the same status like in Italy although the dialects are not as many as 8,000. However, there is another reason for Spanish speakers to neglect English. More than 400 million people in the world speak Spanish making it the second most common native language after Chinese. In Spain English has the status of the “tourist” language and its acquisition is directly related to the students’ desire to work abroad or stay in their country and work in the hospitality sector.

Portugal: In spite of being in such a close proximity to Spain, Portugal seems to value English more. As a smaller country with worse economic state Portuguese students see English as a mandatory skill needed for better opportunities. English language education in Portugal is viewed as a field where more financial support should be invested.

The third question has two parts. The first one is: ***What tools are exchange students using to advance in their English language?***

Three tools were mentioned: the Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support; extra classes in English and communication with other exchange students.

Exchange programs such as Erasmus offer tools for improving the level of English of the involved students. Erasmus uses the Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support which is an online platform for language learning. No matter how useful the idea for creating this platform may be, it is the least common tool for improving English language knowledge. The participants classify it as “artificial” and too similar to the school system focused on grammar.

Classes in English language on a university level tend to steer away from the school methods which make them more enjoyable for the exchange students. On the other hand, the difficulty of the language becomes higher and it becomes somewhat of a challenge for the exchange students. Once again communication with other exchange students proves to be the most natural way of improving the English language thanks to the real-life language education which I mentioned before. Hearing your own mistakes whilst talking as well as the mistakes of others in a non-formal interaction is building the student’s capacity of the English language level.

The second part of the question is wondering ***if the aforementioned tools for improving English proficiency have any correlation with academic and linguistic achievements during the students’ exchange and afterwards?***

Apparently there is such a correlation because what begins to drive the exchange student to start using English on a regular basis and also to improve oneself is beyond any linguistic theory but fear. Being scared of making mistakes and being excluded from the self-made exchange community. The desire to communicate and be accepted in a community you identify yourself with motivates you to use whatever tools you have in your disposal: in this case – language. Overcoming the barrier of communication builds confidence in the communicator and developed the desire to continue working in an international environment as stated by 10 of the 15 participants.

The following question is: ***If we define English as an immigrant community language – what characteristics does it have?***

First and foremost, it’s a mandatory skill to fit it. Exchange students who are grouping together according to language similarities and stick together (Spanish, Italians, Portuguese tend to do it more often) are being labeled as chauvinistic. The exchange student community doesn’t tolerate *consistent deviations* which in this case can be defined as “consistent usage of the native language which differs from the community language”. As an established immigrant speech English is a trait and a skill which you must possess if you want to be a part of the exchange community.

At the same time, English can be a sign for being foreign, different and a tourist. Although it will be still used as an immigrant community language but outside of the small “safe” community, English can be seen as an unwelcome skill which differentiates you from the locals who are the majority. This can be seen as unfortunate because the exchange students often initiate contact with locals in order to experience the environment. Often, however, this can be received with suspicion and unwillingness to communicate.

Another trait of English as a community language develops to be the *fluidity*. English changes according to the communicators. It adapts according to their level of proficiency; their primary interests; their country of origin; and their environment. This exact trait is code-switching or borrowing and will be mentioned in the next question.

**Is code-switching a helpful activity when it comes to linguistic development?**

Blom and Gumperz[[3]](#footnote-3) distinguish between two main functions of code switching: situational and metaphorical. In situational code switching, which seems to be similar to the notion of diglossia, the speaker’s choice of language is constrained by factors external to her/his own motivations, for example, the status of the interlocutor, the setting of the conversation, or the topic of conversation. In fact such studies prove that code switching is a complex, skilled linguistic strategy used by bilinguals to convey important social meanings above and beyond the referential content of an utterance.

Half of the participants in my project who answered point that code-switching is actually a helpful activity and it helps you improve your English level as well as the better understanding of your own language. For improving the English: by elaborating what you try to say to people who don’t understand you or by explaining a word or a concept you are unfamiliar with – storytelling proves to be the most useful activity for vocabulary expanding and pronunciation. For understanding your own language: this can occur when an exchange student is interacting with a person who speaks a native language of his/her language family. Slavic language speakers mention this to be the case with examples like Bulgarian-Slovene; Bulgarian-Czech and Bulgarian-Russian. Observing how one word is portrayed in one language and tracing its origins to a familiar word in the native language of your own, increases the linguistic capacity of the student and broadens his/her linguistic horizon.

If exchange students build an immigrant community in a non-English speaking country then the next question should naturally be: **What role does the environment play in English language improvement? What constitutes for a right and/or encouraging environment?**

Three answers were mentioned from all the participants: University offering classes in academic English; Willingness of the locals to communicate; Willingness of the exchange community to improve.

Besides the positive outcomes from building an exchange community with English as its tool of the trade, the lack of proficient and native speakers of English can sometimes lead to deteriorating of the English language in the community participants. If a better speaking student tries to catch up with a poor English speaking student, this may cause disturbance and misunderstandings. Thus the better speaker is forced to lower his/her level of English in order to be understood. So there must be a willingness of the exchange community to improve their English speaking skills in order for the community to thrive. University offering classes taught in academic English is another crucial aspect which plays a role in the student motivation. Professors who are not proficient in English and try to convey an important message and material can contribute to the student’s lowered level of English.

The willingness of the locals to communicate is the hardest task to be achieved. Since all the participants in the project are exchange students in Prague, their impressions about this matter are reflections from Czech locals. Their observations as well as my personal are that Czech people are not so likely to open up socially even in a casual conversation. Part of every exchange program is the international experience to try to be a local in a different country. This would be impossible if the student doesn’t use English initially to approach the locals who refuse to communicate in a language which is not their own.

The next question deals with ***any suggestions from students who have already been on exchange programs to improve English language acquisition in their own countries?***

The only consistent answer was received to this question and it is: the school educational system should remove the extensive focus on grammar. Real life language acquisition should be promoted in order to encourage students to actually be willing to take part in a conversation in English. This way the culture shock can be removed and it’s another step forward to promote multilingual education from an early start. If there is more information provided on exchange programs, more students would take part. If the educational authorities observe a kind of “readiness” to dive into English language, why not encourage it and nourish it by presenting English not as a foreign language but as a “tool of the trade”.

For the last question I was interested to see ***if there are major differences in the way exchange students perceive the development of English as an immigrant community language according to their fields of studying***.

The most prominent answers are as follow:

Linguistics student: ”We are using English in a state of bilingualism without diglossia and simultaneously in bilingualism with diglossia. Building such an exchange immigrant community shouldn’t stop within the community but expand and reach the locals. Otherwise, it wouldn’t make any sense in order to spend this amount of time in a foreign country if we don’t explore the linguistic, cultural and social aspects of the real community who was here before us.

Architecture student: “English is absolutely mandatory if you want to complete your project. It’s not just a skill but an asset if you want to be a professional. As an exchange student of architecture I can see how without English I wouldn’t be able to present my project in front of the class, the professor wouldn’t accept it and I won’t pass the class. But this will go beyond just my exchange semester. I will carry my improved technical English with me when I leave and apply it during my practice.”

History student: “Thinking about English as an immigrant community language makes me think about the colonization years of British India or French Morocco because it’s like: you don’t speak my language (in this case English)? Fine, then I’ll force you to learn it and exclude you if you don’t cooperate. It’s the same here in Prague for example. We have no other choice but to colonize them.”

After examining all these answers and based on my observations I do suggest that there is a great importance of bilingual education and especially acquiring English as a second language. Bilingualism can be improved in the right encouraging environment regardless of the way any of the languages were acquired beforehand. Exchange programs should be encouraged and supported because they contribute to building a multicultural society and expanding linguistic borders.

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1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Multiculturalism <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Multiculturalism> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Code-switching, Blom and Gumperz [↑](#footnote-ref-3)