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**USE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN LANGUAGE AND
CULTURE SHOCK RESEARCH**

**FOKUSA GRUPU IZMANTOŠANA VALODAS UN
KULTŪRAS ŠOKA IZPĒTEI**

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Anotācija

Tā kā studenti apmeklē augstskolas ārzemēs, viņiem nepieciešams pielāgoties jaunai videi. Kā liecina iepriekšējie pētījumi, vairumā gadījumu viņu pieredze tiek papildināta ar valodas un kultūras šoka pieredzi. Izmantojot fokusa grupas intervijas, šajā pētījumā analizēta valodas un kultūras šoka ietekme, to izraisītāji un vispārējās sekas, kas rodas starptautiskajiem studentiem pielāgojoties čehu kultūrai. Fokusa grupas izmantošana ļauj iegūt kvalitatīvus un padziļinātus izpētes datus. Pētījums tiek pētīts, kā studenti tiek galā ar nepierastām situācijām apmaiņas studiju laikā un kāpēc tiek pieredzēts šoks. Pētījumā secināts, ka iecietīga pieeja jaunajai videi un atbalsts apmaiņas laikā var mazināt pārpratumus, kā arī negatīvās sekas.

Atslēgas vārdi: valodas šoks, kultūras šoks, fokusa grupa, starptautiskie studenti.

Abstract

As students attend institutions of higher education abroad, they are required to adjust to a new environment. According to previous research, in most cases their experience is accompanied by a language and culture shock experience. The present study analyzes the impact of language and culture shock, what triggers them and the overall consequences it may have on the adjustment process of international students to the Czech culture via focus group interviews. Focus groups allow obtaining qualitative and in-depth research data. The study investigates how students cope with unaccustomed situations and why there is shock in the first place. The study concludes that a mindful approach to a foreign environment and some support during the exchange may alleviate misunderstandings and, thus, negative consequences.

Key words: language shock, culture shock, focus group, international students.

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Introduction

The present study aims at researching what provokes language and culture shock for international students in their environment during their first foreign exchange programme and how they deal with their new challenges and surroundings. The flow of students has been increasing, and previous studies, e.g. Pelling (2000) and Baier (2005) prove that undergraduates are in need of help during their adaption period and do not entirely receive it, thus, struggling with the demands of the new environment. These sojourners are likely to experience difficulties with language and culture differences, adaption to academic demands and social peculiarities, and endure negative consequences, such as, stress, depression, disorders or others.

In order to understand language shock, it is important to understand what culture shock is. Adler (1975) defined that 'culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences' (1975:13). Language difference is regarded as one of the main factors that lead to culture shock. 'As culture and language are closely linked, cultural shock can be caused by linguistic differences' (Fan, 2010). 'Language shock is a challenge of understanding and communication in a second language in an unfamiliar environment, and confusion about the norms of behaviour in a new cultural setting' (Velliaris and Coleman-George, 2016). Therefore, to understand these phenomena require thorough research and is best achieved via focus groups - research method with in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small number with carefully selected people (Stewart, et al., 2007: 17-19).

The initial period of the experience may seem exciting as these students learn to perform in their new environment, deal with host culture encounters, to work with other international people, adjust to the academic environment and face new challenges. Thus, via focus groups the study aims at developing the understanding of how students encounter and deal with linguistic differences, as well as how they perceive the host culture and its peculiarities. The findings demonstrate how differently individuals approach a foreign language and diversity, as well as their adaption and coping abilities.

The **aim** of this study is to gain an insight of factors and causes for language and culture shock, as well as how international students during their period of study in Czech Republic cope with the new environment and host culture.

The **research questions** are as follows:

What factors motivate international students to study in Czech Republic?

How do students perceive cultural differences of the host culture?

How do students develop culture shock?

What are the coping and adaption strategies of international students?

What are other notable language and culture shock aspects?

The **enabling objectives** are:

1. Study the relevant theories about language and culture and related difficulties that may arise when encountering a new foreign culture;
2. The preparation and design for a focus group study with international students;
3. Focus group interviewing and transcription of audio recorded interviews;
4. Analysis of data and interpretation of findings;
5. Summarization of ideas and making relevant conclusions.

The research methods used are triangulation of methods – first of all, an analysis of theoretical sources then, focus group interviewing with a total of 15 international students divided into 5 groups. All of the participants were international students part of a study exchange program enrolled in Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic; finally, qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews.

Chapter 1 compiles the summary of theories exploring language, culture and related confusion and difficulties with the two when going abroad. These terms are explored by Smalley (1963) and language shock, and Nida (2003) and language differences. Chapter 2 looks at how language and culture are related through understanding what is culture, as well as cultural adaption - Kohls (1984) and Pedersen (2005) explore culture and culture shock related terms and theories. Chapter 3 describes the journey of international students and related statistics with Oberg (1960) and Pelling (2000) demonstrating how individuals adjust and cope with new environments. Chapter 4 explains the research methodology by describing qualitative analysis, focus group interviews and the validity of findings with Stewart et al. (2007) and Cyr (2019). Finally, Chapter 5 reports the process of focus group interviewing and the interpretation data.

1. Theoretical Basis of Language

Language is a means of communication, thus commonly seen as an integral part of life, society and culture. For people it is the primary medium of communication for conveying or exchange emotions, opinion or ideas. The present chapter explains how people can use language as instrument for communication, the process of language acquisition and what language shock is.

1.1. Language as a mean of communication

Researchers regard language as a fundamental part of who we are and it shapes our communication, development and culture. In essence, language can be described as a tool ‘is a tool that aids in the expression and conveyance of thought and feelings of two individuals’ (Online 1). Through one’s language, the use of sounds and symbols people may convey feelings and thoughts. Other aspects of language include not only written and spoken words but also gestures, signs and even posture (Online 1).

Language in different contexts is an important part of human interaction and communication. People of different regions, communities or cultures use specific languages for communication and brings order, sense and coherence to conveyed information (Baker, 1988). Respectively, communication is about action and it is ‘a process of exchanging ideas, message or information from one individual (the speaker) to another (the receiver) through signs or words (language) that are comprehensible between the two parties’ (Online 1) Communication is fundamental for communicating between friends, family, community, school or at work in order to go about (Online 2)

1.2. Language acquisition

The language people use is gradually acquired and cannot be inherited. In terms of family context, one is brought up surrounded by a certain environment and acquires the first language naturally (Hickey, n.d.:1). A general agreement between linguists exists that a first language is obtained, that is, the knowledge is stored unconsciously. Whereas, a second language is learned, i.e. ‘that knowledge is gained by conscious study of the second language’ (Hickey, n.d.:1). When an individual becomes a user of a language and becomes competent at a certain level. To a certain extent, the level of competence can be measured and a language acquired with second language acquisition depends not so much on the time spent learning a language as the time at which one begins (Hickey, n.d.:1). As seen in appendix 5, the competences of a language are indeed comprehensive, thus, a person becomes truly fluent

when these aspects are naturally met, such as, peculiarities of context, sufficient vocabulary, grammar and specific expressions.

In Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference is used to evaluate language proficiency (Online 3). 'It's a six-point scale, divided into three main groups: basic user (A), independent user (B) and proficient user (C). These are then each split into two sub-levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, and C1 and C2' (Online 3). The common scale is effective when needed to assess and compare one's language knowledge either for work or academic purposes. A first language may be easily verified at the original environment, e.g., country, however, commonly people decide to uptake better opportunities abroad and knowledge of additional languages are beneficial (Online 3). Namely, nowadays when applying for education at universities abroad a definite criterion for admittance is a good understanding of English or the host institutions functioning language.

Bernard Spolsky (1978) developed a model for evaluating bilingual education, seen as appendix 6 (1978:350). It is a comprehensive evaluation covering all aspects and factors of learning a second language. The upper part of the model suggests that the situation in the community where one tries to learn the second language implying that the decision of learning a foreign language, first of all comes as a decision after considering social, cultural, etc. factors. (Spolsky, 1978) The second part of the model addresses the attitudes of closer influencers, such as, interest groups or parents, which lead to and appear as one's motivation in level three. The fourth level of the model implies the personal factors and circumstances, which the potential learner takes into account when considering level five – the learning opportunities. Finally, when engaging in learning a second language, the final level of Spolsky's (1978) model illustrates the outcome level when the learner is succeeding and getting some results. In addition to this, the figure in appendix 5 should be taken into account when measuring the outcome, as well as competence level of the second language. As a part of language competence, the originating culture of the language has influence on the use of it and mastery due to its specifics. (Hickey, n.d.:2)

1.3. Language shock

Language has a great influence on intercultural competence. It determines the success of processes - negotiations, international students, business ventures and intercultural relations. Nida (2003) discusses that language difference has been emphasised as one of the main factors that lead to culture shock. As culture and language are closely linked, cultural shock can be caused by linguistic differences (Nida, 2003). However, Nida (2003) describes language shock as one of the less recognised aspects of cultural shock as 'its emotional impact

is not so overtly strong that it could cause great harm or destruction to individuals who experience it (ibid.).

One of the first to describe language shock was Smalley (1963), referring to the term as ‘a challenge of understanding and communicating in a second language in an unfamiliar environment’ (Smalley, 1963). The writer describes it as one of the basic ingredients of culture shock, however, rarely recognized as a separate one (Smalley 1963). The traveller experiences ‘shock’ because of the sudden lacks of the most essential element for communication – language. In other words, language shock is one of the less recognised aspects of cultural shock as its emotional impact is not so overtly strong that it could cause great harm or destruction to individuals who experience it (Smalley, 1963). One of the stress factors for international students going abroad is their ability to communicate in the host culture’s language (Baier, 2005:38)

‘In learning a second language, we tend to treat the new language in the lenses of our own language’ (Nida, 2003). Nida (2003) goes on that factors, such as, entities, events, states, process and characteristics of one culture ‘have a strong influence on the content of the language spoken in this culture. Not only cultures have an impact on the languages, but also the languages relatively have great impacts on the cultures that they are embedded in.’ The theory that languages do affect its users’ world-views and mental activities is named linguistic relativity by researchers (Kramsch, 1998). Therefore, it is possible to state that language and culture are two closely related determinants that influence one another in various and complex ways.

Language, as an important component of culture, also has a great influence on the intercultural competence of international students and any other people who initially moved to another language background. Language is commonly seen as an integral part of culture (Nida, 2003). Nida (2003) argues that factors, such as entities, events, states, process and characteristics of one culture have a strong influence on the content of the language spoken in this culture. Not only cultures have an impact on the languages, but also the languages relatively have great impacts on the cultures that they are embedded in. The theory that languages do affect its users’ world views and mental activities is named linguistic relativity by researchers (Kramsch, 1998). To demonstrate the relationships of two cultures and the languages spoken in them see Figure 1.1. below. What may be observed in the figure is that culture shock occurs when people are transferred from one culture to another, thus, a linguistic kind of shock would exist when the language environment is switched to another language environment.

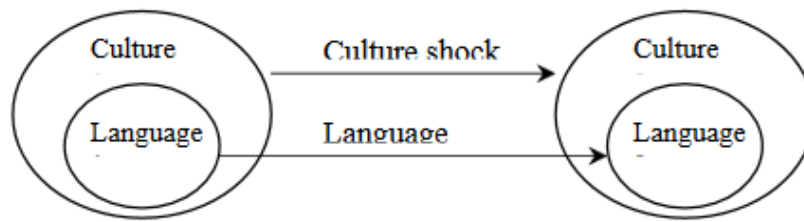


Figure 1.1. Language shock as a part of culture shock (Fan, 2010:43)

From one perspective, language shock can occur at different linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Akmajian, et al., 2001). On the other hand, as each culture has its own ways of expressing thoughts, feelings and of sharing speakers' inner world (Alptekin, 2002), the different ways in which speakers of different cultures and languages talk about the values and this could be a source of language shock. (Hinkel, 1999; Gass and Selinker, 2001) According to Schumann (1981: 34) if language shock and cultural shock are not overcome 'and if the learner does not have sufficient and appropriate motivation and ego-permeability, then he will not fully acculturate and hence will not acquire the second language fully.'

To some up, language and culture are closely related, culture can have a great impact on language shock and this is clearly evidenced from the linguistic aspects and the aspect of sociolinguistic (Fan, 2010:44). Language is a way of communication through words and other ways. People acquire the first language naturally and learn it from birth, whereas a second foreign language can be acquired by systematically learning it. As seen from Spolsky's model (1978) one may become proficient at it if the right circumstances and motivations are in place. Subsequently, the language competence can be measured with a standardised scale. What we need to do when we want to adapt our behaviour is to become mindful and pay attention to the interactions in which we find ourselves. There is no better way of going through this adaptation process than trying to live with one's own culture along the other one.

2. Theoretical Basis of Culture Shock

Culture is notably difficult to define. It exists on many levels, in different forms, changes over time and varies between territories and people – perhaps that is why the complexity of coming to a common definition. Dating way back to 1952, two anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, reconsidered theory and understanding of culture, and managed to assemble a list of more than 160 different definitions. Apte (1994), in the *Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*, confirms by stating: ‘Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature’ (1994:2001).

The author of the Paper would like to point to three comprehensive definitions of culture and consider their common characteristics:

1. ‘Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (Tyler, 1870: 1 quoted in Avruch 1998: 6).
2. ‘Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves’ (Schwartz, 1992 quoted in Avruch 1998: 17).
3. ‘Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour’ (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 3).

When analyzing the many definitions of culture one may notice some similarities that characterise the term. First of all, culture is embodied at/in different levels of depth meaning that culture may affect values, behavioural patterns, assumptions, and even physically apparent features, for example, dress code or manners. A second common trait is that culture influences one’s behaviour and interpretation of others’ behaviour. Hofstede (1991) explains that the manner one may **conduct** oneself may not be apparent to a newcomer: ‘their cultural meaning lies precisely and only in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders’ (1991:8).

Other features of culture that are worth mentioning include the manner of how culture is transmitted – it is not inherited, rather learned. *Culture* cannot be genetically inherited but learned and derived from a specific social setting. It cannot exist on its own, but is always shared by members of a society (Hall, 1976:16). Furthermore, culture exists between social groups. ‘Shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing from those of another group’ (Damen, 1986). Culture resides in individuals, society and exists globally. Finally, the author would like to indicate that culture gradually changes and culture

experiences shape it as it is passed down from person to person and continually changing due to each generation interpreting and adding something of its own.

From definitions and related terms, all in all, the theories mutually describe *culture* as having a sense of collectiveness, having sets of values and common features the society shares.

2.1. Culture shock

Nowadays, people travel, explore and expand business abroad, thus inevitably encountering other culture representatives. *Culture shock* occurs from the impact of unfamiliarity or moving from a familiar culture to one that is unaccustomed to. Oftentimes people experience the feeling of uncertainty, uneasiness or anxiety when roaming, doing business or living in a society that is different. The loss of fluency in the familiar ways in which people interact in daily social situations may trigger culture shock. These situations may include the way people greet others, make food, situations or small talk in public places, joking, thanking someone, driving, working at a culturally different environment, when to take people seriously and when not to, and so on. Experiencing a foreign culture may lead to unforeseen feelings ‘causing persons to re-evaluate the new host and their own home culture’ (Pedersen, 1995).

The first to use the term *culture shock* is an anthropologist named Kalvero Oberg back in 1960; he has done profound research over the years and in 1986 he describes culture shock as an experience of disorientation for those who might suddenly be subject to change of country, exposure to an unfamiliar culture, way of life or set of attitudes. (Oberg, 1986) Moreover, culture shock is characterised as ‘more or less a sudden immersion into a non-specific state of uncertainty where the individuals are not certain what is expected of them or of what they can expect from the people around them. It is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment.’ (Pedersen 1995) Moreover, in 1986 Oberg writes culture shock being an extensive bewilderment that does not strike suddenly. Rather, it is ‘cumulative, building up slowly from a sequence of small events that are hard to identify.’ Culture shock is not only a psychological concern but may also have ‘emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physiological’ impact on individuals, characterized by certain symptoms. Some of the very common symptoms that may be observed in severe cases of culture shock, as noted by Kohls (1984), are: homesickness, boredom, withdrawal (e.g., spending excessive amounts of time reading; avoiding contact with host nationals), need for excessive amounts of sleep, compulsive eating, compulsive drinking, irritability, exaggerated cleanliness, tension and conflict, stereotyping of host nationals, hostility toward host nationals, loss of ability to work

effectively (1984:65 quoted in Pelling, 2000). Pedersen (2005) adds his observations by naming anxiety, depression, sleeping problems, fatigue, irritability, loneliness, forgetfulness, nostalgia, and feelings of not fitting in as other typical signs of culture shock (Pedersen, 2005).

Of course, not every sojourner will experience serious culture shock. Most of them may only experience a few of the above mentioned symptoms. Depending on their mindset and individual characteristics most people can handle the change of the environment successfully and cope well. However, for some, culture shock is a harsh reality. Kohls (1984) warns travellers to be aware of:

1. the symptoms listed above might occur,
2. culture shock is something that to some degree is inevitable, and
3. the reactions from culture shock are emotional and are not easily manageable.

(Kohls, 1984).

Similarly to associated concepts such as *jet-lag* and *alienation*, culture shock is a term, or a kind of label used to describe specific inconveniences of travel (Furnham and Bochner, 1986:47). However, Furnham and Bochner (1986) continue that some anthropologists agree about calling the concept 'a generic expression' used as an excuse for certain reaction and behaviour. This peculiar statement acknowledges culture shock but does not support the fact it justifying the state of remaining shocked without adjustment till returning home and having only negative consequences (1986:47).

Recent researchers theorize that culture shock may be applied to any new situation 'a new job, relationship, or perspective requiring a role adjustment and a new identity. In a broader and more general sense, culture shock applies to any situation where an individual is forced to adjust to an unfamiliar social system where previous learning no longer applies' (Pedersen, 1995:1).

When migrating, travelling or going for study reasons abroad it is paramount to remain open and consider 'going with the flow'. It is problematic mainly due to psychological reasons, like, doubt, fear, stress, prejudice and stereotypes (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002). Pedersen (1995) has gone into depth and recognized culture shock resulting from external changes and differences, for example, climate, transportation and food. Respectively, the five typical stages of culture shock regarding immigrants: are:

'(1) the immigrants feel euphoria about the exciting new culture, (2) failure to succeed leads to extreme dissatisfaction with the host culture. This is the period of psychological transition from back- home values to host-home values, (3) persons begin to understand the host culture and feel more in touch with themselves, (4) the host culture is viewed as offering both positive and negative alternatives, and (5) the immigrants return home and experience reverse culture shock' (Gopaul-McNicol, 1997:16).

Others who have researched the matter have tried to improve on Oberg's definition of culture shock. Guthrie in 1975 used the term *culture fatigue*; *language shock* by Smalley (1963), *role shock* by Byrnes (1966) and Ball-Rokeach (1973) offered *pervasive ambiguity*. With these offered changes, researchers proved and identified other problems -language, physical irritability, and role ambiguity - rather than trying to determine how, why or when people experience culture shock (Furnham and Bochner, 1986).

2.2. Cultural Adaption

Research shows that while encountering foreign culture individuals may experience language and culture shock in certain gradual stages. First to develop the U-curve hypothesis was Lysgaard (1955) to describe the adjustment patterns of international students in a host culture. Lysgaard (1955) states that there are usually four stages in the process of linguistic and cultural adaption - Honeymoon stage, Culture Shock stage, Adjustment stage and

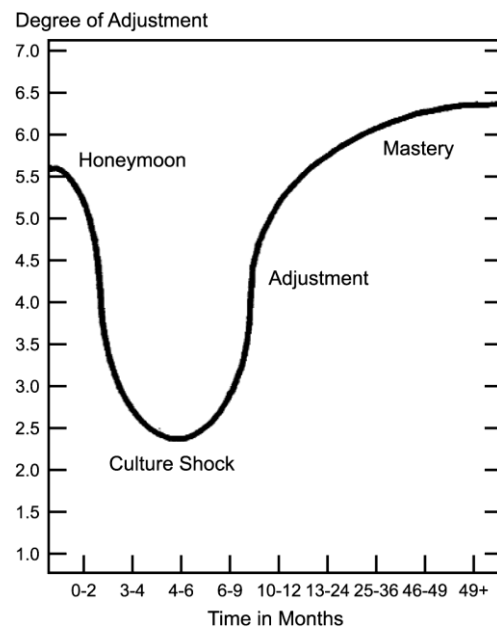


Figure 2.1. U-curve hypothesis visualization (Lysgaard, 1955)

Mastery stage. Respectively, he developed the U-Curve Hypothesis seen in Figure 2.2.1., which shows these four processes, in which international students discover the shocks, experience the shocks, recover and learn about the cultures and finally adapt to the new environment. Other scholars have given different names for similar patterns, for example, Richardson (1974) names the four stages as 'elation', 'depression', 'recovery' and 'acculturation'. Adler (1975) on the other hand, defined the stages as 'contact', 'disintegration', 'reintegration', 'autonomy' and 'independence'. However, all these statements of stages of language and culture shock are compliant with Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve theory. Re-entry poses a potential for reverse culture shock, and students are rarely prepared for the unfamiliarity of returning home (Adler, 1975). The model might just apply well to the experience of international students' experience abroad.

The initial U-curve theory was broadened by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963). The Gullahorns, Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012: 93) along with other researchers suggest the W-shape adjustment model consisting of seven stages: the honeymoon, hostility, humorous, in-sync, ambivalence, re-entry culture shock and re-socialization stages. The W-shaped model is similar to the 4-stage model, however, more explicit. Researchers point out that the use of

models is dependent on context and differs between individuals. Moreover, they suggest that it is almost inevitable that each individual will experience at least the four stages of culture shock as described above. The experiences will be different and the length of time in each stage will vary, but if one remains in the host country long enough he/she will inevitably reach the fourth stage of 'adjustment' (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012: 93).

Researchers conclude that language or culture shock does not happen suddenly. Respectively, the recovery comes slowly. Progressively, individuals start noticing more differences between themselves and the people of the host country. During the last stages of shock people struggles with these differences as with actual problems rather than noticing the similarities. It may be accepted that this is when culture shock has set in as at this stage the person is in great distress. 'This is the period when the host culture becomes the scapegoat for all the problems and difficulties that the individual encounters' (Kohls, 1984, quoted in Pelling, 2000).

To sum up, language and culture are two closely related factors that influence each other in varies and complex ways. Culture and language shock may be experienced due to a variety of circumstances and these behavioural patterns may best be described through different adjustment models. Through coping mechanism, people try to overcome the state of shock and if the period of stay is long enough, the person may manage to adapt.

The four typical stages of language and culture shock could be used as a guide when designing the question sets for the focus group interviews as the participants may have went through similar phases. The stages gradually go from first encounters to adaption and coping, which may be applied to the experience of the international students.

The following chapter shall look at individuals who willingly go abroad and live among other cultures all in the name of education.

3. Research context

Going abroad is all about new experience and adventure. Every migrant has their reason for moving as well as students do when seeking knowledge abroad. According to Kaplan (2003) travel allows and stimulates the exchange of culture (consciously or unconsciously) since ‘obviously, travel generates a complex system of cultural representation’ (Kaplan, 2003:5). Upon returning home the impact of exchange of new culture remains within. However, it is usual that one’s culture is taken for granted and assumed to be correct because it is the only one, or at least the first, to be learned (Hofstede 1980, 21).

Paige (1990) has observed that the trend affects most countries since there is an increasing presence of international students in the higher learning institutions and a rising interest from students wanting to study abroad (1990:1). Chege’s (2013) observations imply the current increasing ease of travel, new technology of long distance communication and the economic globalization, some individuals maintain ties and commitments to multiple countries at once. These kinds of individuals have been named *transnationals* (Basch, Glick-Schiller, Szanton- Blanc, 1994). An international (overseas or foreign) student is only a type of transnational (Adler, 1975). According to Paige (1990), international students are individuals who temporarily reside in a country outside their country of citizenship to participate in an educational program.

3.1. Students - Sojourners

Some researchers, e.g. Hamann (2001) and Siu (1952:34) compare students to *sojourners*. They are a type of people who spend from a couple of months to several years of their lifetime in a foreign country without trying to adjust, Hamann (2001: 37), or those individuals who deliberately spend some time abroad with the intention of returning at some point to their home country (Furnham, 1986, Hamann, 2001). Hamman (2001) distinguishes temporary sojourners - international students- being different from other immigrants who purposely travel from their home countries to work and live in other cultures (2001:37). Thus, these nuances create unique circumstances for their foreign contact, relevant to their ‘being in transition’. International students alike are ‘in transition’, especially the ones that are part of the Erasmus program since they have to return to their origin to finish their studies.

To sum up, with the increasing ease of crossing borders and a drive for knowledge, more students choose institutions of higher education abroad. One of the possibilities and support from the EU is to partake in the Erasmus+ exchange program. The following chapter introduces the adjustment and coping processes that are the final stages of experiencing a form of shock.

3.2. Students adjusting and coping

A life abroad is definitely a marvellous experience; however, for nearly all students and sojourners this experience shall also include a few difficulties. International students experience adaptation to certain language barriers, academic demands, and cultural peculiarities. Coping with these circumstances is a form of getting through language and culture shock. 'They are inevitable to some degree and there is no absolute solution as to how to avoid it.'(Pelling, 2000) However, there are certain things students can do to adapt to their new environment.

When meeting someone new, people receive an introduction and start building the relationship. Beforehand familiarization of the foreign peculiarities and culture may be beneficial. In accordance with Baker (1988) it is commonly accepted that the first 6 to 8 weeks after arrival are the most crucial in the adjustment process, and a time in which sojourners need the highest level of support. Oftentimes, the necessity and process is undervalued and overlooked. Upon arrival Erasmus + students are typically advised to partake in an introductory week. This includes city and faculty tours, acquainting with other students and a presentation about the local culture. However, this whole adjustment process heavily relies on a person's capability of self-representation and leaving a friendly impression, conveying interests and values, and expressing needs. It depends on the interest 'putting oneself out there' and to delve into the unfamiliar. The sojourner becomes an observer of local cultural values, beliefs, behaviours, and norms of the new society (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Stress and adjustment will not have 'one-fits-all' culture specifics; rather the process will be worked out by individuals on a person by person basis.

Certainly the initial adjustment period can be very challenging for students. While everything may now seem far and foreign, luckily, most students have access to internet services. In their initial adjustment period it is considered to be particularly important providing them with social support to reduce the risk of feeling isolation that they experience (Huxur et al., 1996:12). Online support groups are expanding as the general public becomes more comfortable using computer-mediated communication technology (White and Dorman 2001). Moreover, the World Wide Web is accessible 24/7 and social

networks with old friends to chat with are just a click away. Online support can be a useful adjunct to more traditional support groups (Finn, 1995 quoted in White and Dorman, 2001). Social support networks reduce stress by providing students with information and emotional support (Furnham, 1997:18).

When encountering linguistic or cultural differences, the best students can do is to understand what is happening and how they are able to deal with it. Due to the peculiarity of volunteering to study abroad and the stay being temporary, 'students may only adjust themselves to certain demands from the new learning culture, the selected aspects for instrumental reasons' (Furnham, 1987 quoted in White and Dorman, 2001). When the individuals realize that the problems and difficulties arise from their own absence of comprehension and willingness to understand the surrounding culture they can start approaching and learning. 'The sooner that an individual accomplishes this, the sooner culture shock will disappear' (Oberg, 1986).

So how does one get over language and culture shock? Oberg (1986) says that an excellent way to start is by getting to know the people in one's new environment. Naturally, this is also a difficult task due to cases of language barriers or individual characteristics that may get in the way of the process. As Oberg (1986:8) comments 'this task alone is quite enough to cause frustration and anxiety, no matter how skilful language teachers are in making it easy for you'. Upon learning to speak and communicate with locals that the students encounter on a daily basis and being able to get around the area by themselves, the more safe and hopeful they will feel with their new surroundings the more the enjoyable the experience will get. Gradually, they will be able to understand the culture of the 'other' people better. But as Oberg (1986) states:

'the visitor should never forget that he or she is an outsider and will be treated as such. He or she should view participation as playing a role. Understanding the ways of people is essential but this does not mean that you have to give up your own. What happens is that you have developed two patterns of behaviour' (1986:9, as cited in Pelling, 2000).

Kohls (1984) with his research outlined five distinctive steps for dealing with the reality of language differences and cultural adaptation. Originally, the guide was written for an American audience, whereas, this may be adapted and applicable to any foreign national entering a new and different culture. Kohls (1984) writes:

1. 'Know Thy Host Country'. The author encourages trying to gather incoming information attentively. As one of the best antidotes to the confusion despite being surrounded by the new environment and the overwhelming feelings – it is important to know as much as possible about where one is.

2. The author suggests to consciously starting to look for logical reasons behind everything in the host culture. To look for reason behind everything that may seem strange, difficult, confusing, or even threatening to the newcomer. Even if the story behind it may seem 'weird' to the sojourner, it is important to remember that despite one's judgment it is important to the host culture. This way of expressing friendly interest and a wish to understand will reinforce the positive attitude towards the new. Moreover, it will be easier to perceive and accept these peculiarities since there is a logical explanation behind the things observed in the host culture. By taking the aspect of one's experience and looking at it from the perspective of the hosts it will reveal patterns and interrelationships. 'Relax your grip on your own culture a little in the process. There's no way you can lose it but letting go a bit may open up some unexpected avenues of understanding.' (Kohls, 1984:69)

3. It is important not to surrender to the temptation to belittle the host culture. Resist making insulting or stereotypical jokes and comments which are intended to illustrate a bad side of the locals. The 'sickness' these contemptuous jokes are spreading is far worse than any language or culture shock one will ever experience.

4. Kohls suggest identifying a host national. May it be a neighbour, someone at work, a friendly student but who is sympathetic and understanding of the situation. Try talking with that person about specific situations and about the feelings related to them since the problem lies in one's relationship to the host culture. Resolving these issues and clearing things up might improve the perception of local traits and enhance the overall exchange experience.

5. 'Above all, have faith - in yourself, in the essential good will of your hosts, and in the positive outcome of the experience'. (Kohls, 1984:69)

To sum up, initial adjustment to a new culture is important as is it would to any new relationship. The process relies on both the culture and the individual for choosing how they will adjust. The well-being and satisfaction requires a good coping mechanism and willingness to learn and adapt. The process is well described by many authors and guide students how to receive the new information. With mindfulness and an open heart one may improve the overall experience and manage to befriend the unknown. The following chapter introduces the research methodologies associated with the inquiry.

4. Research Methodology

The study was designed with the purpose to document the impressions of international Erasmus+ students as participants studying in the Czech Republic during the spring semester of 2018 via focus group. The research explored the determinants that lead to culture and language shock, how participants of the study endure culture and language shock, as well as coping (with) and adaptation to the host culture. Focus group interviewing shall be employed as a qualitative research method. In the first part of the chapter, the study's methodology and procedures are described, followed by the preparation and development of data collection tools.

4.1. Qualitative research

Qualitative research is a fundamental method and particularly traditional in social science. Kirk and Miller (1986) put it as research based on observing people in their own habitat where they interact in their own language, on their own terms (1986:9). The empirical part of which the present research will be based on is a qualitative approach, specifically, focus group interview.

Qualitative research is an exploratory method to look for and consider the reason behind social phenomena and programs. Qualitative research comprises of several research strategies (Mohajan, 2018:2). These methods include ethnography, phenomenology, discourse analysis, qualitative case study, autobiography, grounded theory, and others (Cibangu, 2012 quoted in Mohajan, 2018:2). It tries to help understand the social world in which we live, and for what reasons things are the way they are (Mohajan, 2018:2). It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour, emotion, attitudes, and experiences (Tong et al., 2012 quoted in Mohajan, 2018:2). According to Miller (1986), through the use of conceptualization qualitative research is carried out by analyzing word expression in depth and the collection of them result as non-standardized data that needs sorting and classification further on, finally, then ready to be analyzed. All in all, the common notion of qualitative research is - it seeks a better understanding of the people and processes we live among through academic exploration and qualitative content analysis.

4.2. Focus group interviews

The intent of focus group interviewing is to capture the viewpoint of 15 international students studying at Masaryk University, Czech Republic and their reactions to cultural and linguistic challenges of a new environment and how they coped with culture and language shock. In the present section, the concept of focus groups and using them as a data collection procedure is explained as well as the system of analysis is presented.

Focus groups or, equivalently, group depth interviews are among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences (Stewart, et al., 2007). The group-based data collection method is highly effective at studying topics and related processes in depth. The tool is a comprehensive, face-to-face interview that is commonly used to gather thoughts from participants, their experience and opinion about specific matters (Connaway, 1996:231). 'Focus groups are useful for studying groups who share a common identity or shared norms and goals' (Merton 1987:555 quoted in Cyr, 2019:21). As it is typical for each set of participants share a common identity and the groups themselves are the subject of the study, in this case these are Erasmus+ exchange students studying at Masaryk University that show some degree of culture and language shock. Focus groups allow participants to share their experiences, discuss and relate with one another while allowing the moderator to approach certain topics with the particular groups (Cyr, 2019:22).

Dunn (2005) describes an *interview*, as a verbal methodical exchange where the interviewer attempts to obtain information from another person (Dunn 2005:79 quoted in Clifford et al., 2016:145). All the same, in order to demonstrate the differences between group depth interviews or focus groups and similar data collection methods, Goldman (1962) explored the meaning of the related words. Goldman defined *group* as a 'number of interacting individuals having a community of interest' (1962:61); whereas *depth* implicates 'seeking information that is more profound than is usually accessible at the level of interpersonal relationships' (1962:63); and an *interview* signifies the functions of a moderator who 'uses the group as a device for eliciting information' (1962:64). In addition, the word *focus* indicates the limited and small number of issues in an interview. (Stewart et al., 2007:37) As a part of obtaining information, Goldman (1962) highlights the peculiarities of *group interviewing*: 'the term will be limited to those situations when the assembled group is small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members' (1962:59).

The focus group interview approach can be used alone or with other qualitative or quantitative research methods. Most typically, they are combined with other qualitative

research methods, such as individual interviews or in some cases with ethnographic research (Cyr, 2019:29). Using combined qualitative methods, for example, individual and group interviews, the investigator may reveal how differently participants express themselves in a private versus public setting (Paluck and Green, 2009). On the whole, focus groups supply with data on a variety of topics whereas interviews add greater depth on those topics (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). Similarly, using focus groups with quantitative methods for research has its own benefits (Paluck 2010) and disadvantages (Stewart, et al. 2007) Most often, with an increase over the recent years, focus groups are used in combination with survey work (Baier, 2005). However, it is more likely for a researcher to experience and get the chance to experience different manners of communication about a subject via focus groups, ‘ including jokes, debates and/or arguments - communicative devices that are unlikely to be utilized’ in other qualitative or quantitative techniques. Therefore, the use of focus groups seemed like the most appropriate data collection tool for the present study.

4.3. Organization of the study and selection of participants

The analysis was developed by firstly, recognizing the research problems that were the concern of the study. The mentioned problems involve international students arriving in the Czech Republic at Masaryk University for a study semester and experiencing a range of difficulties during this period. The initial period in a foreign country may be exhilarating and gratifying, whereas for some it results as a frustrating experience due to some degree of culture or language shock and inability to cope. Secondly, the definition of the aim through enabling objectives and research questions were important to have guidance through the study. Thirdly, a theoretical framework was formed by studying primary and secondary sources. Then, the preparation and organization of five focus group interviews with the participation of Erasmus exchange students. And finally, transcribing of audio recordings and thorough analysis were done in order to recognize cases of culture and language shock.

The research process took place in Brno, the Czech Republic. The participants of the study were a part of the Erasmus exchange program and enrolled along with more than 200 other foreign students for the 2018 spring semester at Masaryk University. The selection of participants for the focus groups was based on observations of students showing some typical indications that they had or are having some degree of culture or language shock. As Connaway (1996) put it, it is important to first screen the participants and carefully choose them with regard to the research purpose. Moreover, it is considered useful for the

interviewers to contact more interviewees than needed in case of unexpected changes or change of participants (1996:231).

The potential 21 participant was invited to join the study (unluckily, 6 refused due to lack of time and personal reasons) which successfully resulted in 15 participants. Fortunately, that most of the selected students remained in the study. Participation was purely voluntary, the participants acknowledged how and why their answers will be collected, and for what purposes the data shall be processed. The students were informed that will be a part of focus groups and via group interviewing they were asked to share their opinion and experience with the relevant matters.

Altogether, all of the participants were undergraduate students with various majors and the group purposely featured both male and female between the ages of 20-26. The students had been tested with level B2 and higher on their English proficiency test (Erasmus OLS) which indicated a good command of the language as for only 3 of them it was their mother tongue. However, none of the participants had previous knowledge of Czech. In addition, it was not added to Table 1, but all the participants admitted that this was their first study exchange which ensures another similarity between participants.

The following Table 1 shows certain data about the participants of which some characteristics and peculiarities were meaningful for the study. The dividing lines in the table separate and show how the participants were divided into groups. The first column indicates the nationality of the participants; the second and third indicates the gender and age of the participants respectively. The next column, containing the students' field of study, was included to give an insight into the selected participant profiles. As a part of the data, the language proficiency is indicated in order to demonstrate that the participants have a good command of English ensuring successful communication during the focus group interviews. Finally, other languages that the participants know are indicated to see whether any of them had previous knowledge of the Czech language (otherwise, that could be an advantage and affect results).

Table 1. Profile of Study Participants.

No.	National Origin	Sex	Age	Field of Study	English Proficiency	Other Languages (no.)
1	Finland	M	26	Human Resources	C2	1 (Swedish)
2	Sweden	F	23	Pedagogy	C2	2 (Italian, German)
3	Norway	M	24	Pedagogy	C2	-

4	Poland	M	22	Biology	B2	1 (Russian)
5	Ukraine	F	20	IT, Programming	B2	2 (Russian, French)
6	Russia	F	22	Business	B2	-
7	USA	F	22	Journalism and Literature	Mother Tongue	-
8	Canada	F	24	Journalism	Mother Tongue	1 (French)
9	Germany	M	24	Economics	Mother Tongue	2 (German, French)
10	Spain	F	20	Journalism	B2	-
11	Korea	F	22	Psychology	B2	1 (Chinese)
12	Japan	M	25	Psychology	C1	-
13	Estonia	M	22	Physical Education	B2	2 (Russian, Finnish)
14	Latvia	F	22	Humanities	C1	2 (Russian, German)
15	Lithuania	F	23	Philology	B2	1 (Russian)

The focus group interviews took place mid-May, 2018 – a time when most of the semester had passed and the time before departure. Commonly a focus group interview lasts for about 1.5 to 2 hours can be organized ‘in a variety of sites ranging from homes to offices and by telephone or video call.’ (Stewart, et al 2007:37) The particular focus group interviews lasted for about 80 but no more than 110 minutes as it is recommended by other researchers to be a sufficient but not too tiring time period for the participants. In addition, the number of participants in a focus group interview is important as well. According to Stewart (2007):

‘In most cases they involve about 6 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and ensures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest. Experience has shown that smaller groups may be dominated by one or two members and that larger groups are difficult to manage and inhibit participation by all members of the group. Groups that are relatively homogeneous are even more productive and ‘work better’ (Stewart, 2007:37).

The setting was accommodating and participants could make themselves comfortable. With clear intentions and goal to examine the experiences of international students at Masaryk University in mind the interview process was conducted following most of the guidelines outlined by Connaway (1996):

1. First of all, informing the participants about the use of a voice recorder;
2. Discussing and explaining the purpose of the interview;
3. When asking questions and guiding the discussion to remain open-minded and unbiased;
4. Being selective about statements and questions to probe and explore topics in order to obtain the desired information.
5. Being a good moderator who allows certain freedom to the participants, encourages them to share their ideas, but does not wander off the topic (Connaway, 1996:232).

The focus group interviews were semi-structured and focused on two main topics - the cultural and language shock experienced by the participants (students). A semi-structured interview was chosen to obtain meaningful data in order to gain more than a 'yes or no' type of answers and ensure flexibility, nevertheless, still maintaining a predetermined order to address the matter. (Dunn, 2005:80 quoted in Clifford et al 2016:145) Overall, semi-structured interviews and focus groups are similar in the way of being 'conversational and informal in tone, but supporting an open response in the participants' own words' (Clifford et al 2016:145).

For using focus groups as a data collection tool Morgan (1996) wrote that 'focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do' (1996: 233). The study intended to collect evidence from the participants in their own words. In order to obtain accurate data, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that group interviewing is not entirely about talking, but is as equally important to:

'Listen. It is about paying attention. It is about being open to hearing what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share. It is about being careful and systematic with the things people tell you' (2000: xi).

4.4. Focus Group Interview Questions

The focus group guiding questions were adapted from similar studies done by other researchers and adjust to the specific needs of the study. Some of the questions were adapted from questionnaires by Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) and Baier (2005) who researched the adaption processes of international students.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed and, consecutively, the questions were e-mailed to the participants in order to give them some time to collect their thoughts on the matter prior to their interviews. The focus group interviews generally concentrated about their experience, ways of coping, culture and language shock encounters and so on.

As mentioned before, focus groups typically do not last longer than 2 hours and therefore cannot reasonably address more than ten to twelve questions, whereas in the present study there were 4 main question sets with a couple of additional questions in them. A researcher may be reluctant to spend more than one question on any particular topic. The design of sections were guided by the research by Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) and Baier (2005) who have done research about international students adapting to the U.S. culture. The questions were adapted to the specifics of the research and formed to gradually start with questions about reasons for going on a exchange, then, questions about views on the host culture, culture and language shock moments, and, finalizing with coping and adaption. After the main parts, room for free expression was left for interviewees to add anything that might have been left out.

The sets of questions were guided by four main sections adapted from Baier (2005) and following the 4 typical stages of adjustment from Lysgaard's (1995) U-curve hypothesis. They follow the style of the author's suggested sections and are systematically arranged because 'it is easier for participants when a clear and structured interview plan is presented before starting the process' (Baier, 2005). The focus group interviews plan to start with introductory questions about the participants to collect general data and establish some familiarity between participants (Baier, 2005:43). The second and third section start with the overall experience with the host culture and gradually questions are specific about language shock, as an aspect of culture shock. After asking about language and culture differences, Baier (2005:43-44) suggest to follow with questions about the participants' coping and adaption. Finally, 'open-ended questions at the end of interview are good for collecting information that might have not been disclosed during the questioning. Participants are free to express themselves concerning the matter' Baier (2005:44). All in all, the questions gradually address a different topic primarily concerning language and culture shock:

1. Overall information about the participants – According to Baier (2005), culture shock experience and adapting to a new culture is a multifaceted process, it is important to consider the length of stay, age of arrival, and ethnic-cultural identity but also language proficiency (Baier, 2005:38). For a general characterization of participants for the purposes of the study they were asked questions regarding their age, gender, major or study field, nationality, mother tongue, other languages spoken and whether it includes the Czech language, as well as whether this was their first foreign study exchange and for what reasons had they chosen to come to the Czech Republic. In addition, students were asked to describe their self-confidence level due to the fact that individual characteristics (shyness, introversion or determination) may have an effect on the process and experience of culture/language shock. Self-confidence in this context is referred to as ‘having confidence/trust in one’s own abilities and taking pride in what one does’ (Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998). All of this was important to see whether the initiative and willingness to learn was what characterised the participants.

2. Attitude towards the host country and cultural adaptation – participants were asked about their expectations, beforehand preparations and first impressions of Czech culture. In this section, some stereotypes were revealed and further discussed. Participants revealed their coping abilities concerning the new living conditions, food, currency, the pace at the University, perception and discrimination, as well as aspects of interaction with locals and other students. Participants are asked to share general feelings and comment on whether they experience typical culture shock phases or any noticeable symptoms, etc. (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002)

3. Linguistic difficulties – in this section participants meet questions about Czech language peculiarities and how they experience the sudden immersion in a completely different language. The questions examine how students deal with language barriers and how it helps or complicates the adaptation process.

4. Coping and adaptation – this part contains questions about how participants learned to or did not manage to adapt. Questions were about handling their living situation, studies, adjustment to the host culture and suggestions from students what would have made their experience better, what could have helped and what could have been handled differently. (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002)

The five data collecting focus groups happened with an interval of 2 days each to have enough time to transcribe and process them before the next one. The data of the present study - the students own stories about their experience- were transcribed from the

interviews, as well as their answers. The recordings were carefully transcribed by re-listening several times and from the notes made during the conversations. It was important to record and listen to not only capture the words but also to hear the tone of their voices, the flow of ideas and hesitations; all of which enrich the experience and improve understanding. After reading and listening to the first interviews, it was important writing down the observations in a system guided by themes. Patterns were drawn from the very individual cases not wandering off the topic and aim.

4.5.Ethics and validity

When doing research a certain kind personal and study-related ethic should be considered. To attain an overall quality of the study and gain accurate results reliability and validity were important, as was trustworthiness referring to the honesty maintained in data collection process and the finding analysis. In general, there are four key elements which define reliability and credibility - trustworthiness, transferability, dependability and conformity according to Lincoln & Guba (1985). According to Gregory (2003, 49), confidentiality is a core value and ethical concern in these kind of studies. For accurate material, the focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed, of course, with the verbal consent of the interviewees. To fully ensure these qualities, the participants were assured to not fear of any leakage of their recordings and that the Author shall listen and analyze the data alone solely for the purpose of the study and eliminate the information afterwards to ensure anonymity.

Confidentiality and anonymity were verbally guaranteed to the students for their participation in the study. People that are a subject of research need to be granted autonomy according to the Belmont research and Nuremberg code (Israel & Hay 2006:36). For granting the participants autonomy, the use of numbers to indicate participants in this study was applied to enhance students' privacy. It was agreed that if any quotation is used for highlighting to not mention any names of the number they have been prescribed in the present Paper (seen in Table 1). Afterwards, participants were then given the chance to read the transcription to confirm their ideas and opinions were correctly stated.

Furthermore, as the main data collection tool is focus group interviewing, according to Connaway (1996) it is important to remember that the data generated from that kind of interviews cannot be 'generalized to a larger population, however, it giving detailed information about the groups interviewed' (1996: 231, as quoted in Pelling 2000:18).

Hollander (2004) adds by claiming that large amounts of participants are needed to achieve statistical representativeness of focus group findings and otherwise are difficult to generalize (Hollander 2004:610-611, as quoted in Cyr, 2019). On account of considering validity, it is very difficult to randomly select individuals across enough focus groups to be broadly representative of a population as a whole (Cyr, 2019:33).

When doing research triangulation is also a good method for ensuring validity. According to Denzin (1978), triangulation is a method where the comparison of different sources of data is used when examining materials. The approach uses more than one method to accumulate data on the same topic. Validity of findings is ensured by cross-checking and applying multiple methods and theories or employing multiple investigators. (Denzin, 1978, quoted in Davies 2006:141) However, Flick (2004) argues that the purpose of triangulation is not necessarily to cross-validate data but rather to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon. (Flick 2004:178)

Other aspects that should be considered in the present study are *group dynamics* and *group think* that could potentially bias the data produced (Cyr, 2019). Cyr (2019) adds that group think may suppress individual thought and restrain participants from sharing and explicitly stresses the importance to take these matters into account as it can affect the validity of research:

‘Because of the group dynamic, focus group participants may feel pressured to say something that does not actually reflect their ‘true’ opinion. This can happen because of a dynamic called *group think*. Group think occurs when the pressures of the focus group dynamic cause participants to feel censored or the need to conform to what others say.[...] A participant may be too timid to disagree, or one or two participants may dominate the conversation such that other viewpoints are silenced.’ (Cyr:2019:34)

To conclude, validity shall be ensured to provide reliable data. According to Paltridge (2006), validity is another word for *truth*. In case studies like this subjectivity is to be avoided and it is important to provide validity of the data as the term ‘validity’ refers to ‘the extent to which a piece of research actually investigates what it says to investigate’ (Paltridge, 2006:217). The truth will be provided without affecting or altering the opinions of participants throughout the qualitative content analysis.

4.6. Qualitative Content Analysis

A qualitative research approach was used in this study to attain real and profound experiences from the participants instead of quantitative research that does not promptly access meaningful data. Through analysis and interpretation of their reporting of these

experiences, the researcher was able to try and answer the research questions posed in the introduction. A focus group interview was used to gather this information.

Focus group interview data are naturally interpretive; therefore the Paper embodies qualitative research. The inherently social nature of the focus group is one of its unique strengths. (Cyr, 2019:9) It is also, however, a potential source of problems due to group dynamics as participants may express very different viewpoints depending upon the mindfulness of the group. (Cyr, 2019) This kind of research leaves room for interpretation of findings that may come up during the research process (Dörnyei, 2007:24). This is well explained by Dörnyei (ibid), the approach of qualitative research deals with ‘data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical, data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods’.

Qualitative content analysis is one of various qualitative methods for analyzing data and making sense of it (Schreier, 2012). It is a systematic and objective method for describing and quantifying phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis may be used in either an inductive or a deductive manner. Both content analysis ways have three principal phases: preparation, organization, and reporting of results (Schreier, 2012).

A precondition for better results with content analysis is that the information can be ‘reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon’ (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) by creating categories, concepts, a model or conceptual system (ibid.). The research question specifies what to analyze and what to create (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012) In terms of validity, it is important to present how the data was generated. For reader-friendliness it should be able to clear and easy to follow the research process and resulting conclusions (Schreier, 2012). Along the interview process the main categories established as. 1.) introduction and overall information about participants; 2) perception of host culture; 3) linguistic challenges; 4) adaption process; 5) other worthwhile information or ‘room’ for participants to mention matters that were not discussed as a part of the interview.

The findings and interpretation of the focus group interview are reported in the following chapter.

5. Findings and Data Analysis

Through the use of questions provided by the researcher focus group participants shared their difficulties and attitudes during their period of study in the Czech Republic. With their answers it was possible to see and analyze the greater or lesser impact of their struggles on the exchange. The interview transcripts were analyzed and interpreted to answer the research questions. This chapter aims to demonstrate the results of the research data collection that was conducted with the study groups. The compilation of qualitative content analysis with quotes of participants demonstrating findings is presented in this chapter.

From the qualitative content analysis of transcribed focus group interviews they were thematically arranged by 4 main categories and an additional one for supplementary information. Overall, it has been calculated that approximately 8.05 hours and 57 675 words were transcribed from the five focus group interviews. As seen in appendix 2 the average interview took about 96 minutes with the longest one being 118 minutes long and the quickest being 86.5 minutes long. Within the interview time there was an average of 10 minutes of moderating time per interview. As seen in figure 2.1. below, the approximate word count transcribed per each participant is visualized and it is seen that the most-talkative participant was no.7 with more than 5700 words and the least-talkative being participant no. 12 with about 2100 words. In appendix 3 the groups from most-talkative to least are arranged, respectively, group no.3 generated the most words to analyze (14 740 words) while group no.4 generated almost twice as less - about 7688 words. Finally, in appendix 1, the approximate time of speaking per each participant is shown.

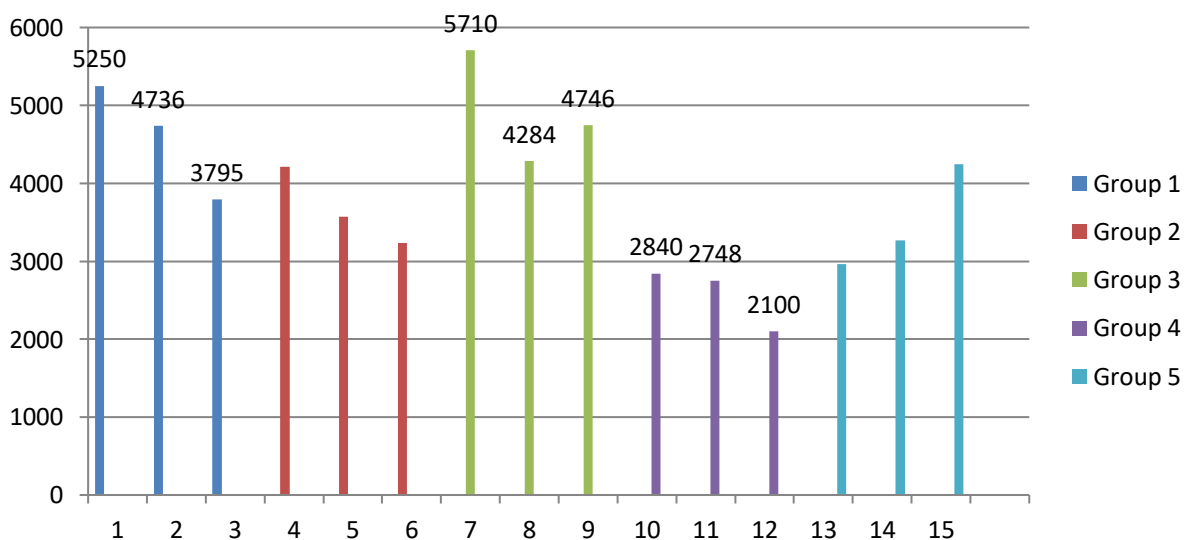


Figure 4.1. Word count per participant.

Before each interview, students were informed about the aim of the study, its purpose, the presumably approximate time of 70 minutes for collecting answers and procedure of how the question categories. There were five sessions with 3 students participating in each session respectively. The group was split into five sessions due to several reasons - less time-consuming and less crowded, higher productivity and more flexibility for the author as well as participants. In order to refer to the research data collection of the focus group interviews relevant quotations from the focus group interviews are presented in the manner of student no.1, no.2, no. 3, etc.

When inviting the students to participate in the study and during the interviews 12 participants appreciated the opportunity to share their experience and struggles. Participants indicated that no one had really engaged on the matter and asked how they felt from different perspectives, except for the common but vague question of ‘how do you like the Czech Republic so far?’ or ‘which Czech beer do you like most?’. They seemed excited to have the opportunity to reveal their own observations as a part of the thesis. For some the participation revealed meaningfulness of interviews and that interviews yield more than data for a study. (Charmaz, 2003:326).

5.1.General information about the participants

All of the focus groups started with small introductions by sharing some general information for study purposes and to see how group dynamic works. The first section explores push and pull factors for going to the Czech Republic and confident are participants when it comes to acquainting.

5.1.1. Going Abroad and Participation in Erasmus+ - Motivation and Demotivation

During the focus group interviews the participants discussed major factors that motivated them to participate in the Erasmus+ program and come to Czech Republic. Participant no. 7 revealed that:

‘Because the U.S. has a huge population and there is a lot of competition for good job positions, it means a lot to study abroad. International experience is a big advantage in the job market, that’s why I even considered staying for the summer and applying for some companies and perhaps do an apprenticeship here or in Prague’.

Others admitted that personal and political frustrations pushed them away from their home countries to come and study here and get better paying jobs. Study- ing abroad meant a lot to many because people from their home countries would appreciate them differently. Other students believed their study methods and culture of learning would improve. Apart

from that they hoped they would experience and learn new cultures, learn different methods of living, and make new friends.

In the study all the interviewed students admitted their motivations to come to study in Czech Republic was because, it was a developed country and they wanted to grow academically and develop professionally. Students from Asia (11) and (12) confirmed that exchange programs highly increase employability and recognition in their home countries. Others admitted to wanting to see and experience something new. 8 participants praised Czech Republic for pleasant and even familiar environment. Some were motivated by the surrounding hills, mountains and density of green forests.

The curiosity of the participants and pleasure to experience new sensations was also a powerful motivation for some. Furthermore, it is peculiar that 2 students of neighbouring countries confessed that one of their concerns for choosing the Czech Republic was proximity to their home and the familiarity to food in this case No. 4: *'It's close enough. The culture seemed similar enough and I had heard that their cuisine is similar to ours in Poland. (laughs) And, yes, food is an important thing for me.'*

Moreover, good recommendations and reviews about Masaryk University were a good pull factor in contrast to their own education in some cases. A good quality University is important for those who think about their future and career, and it works well as both a push and pull factor. In addition, the size and convenience of the city seemed appealing to apply for Brno rather than the capital. As it was explained by students (5) and (6):

(5): *'University is really nice here. A friend of mine had been here and recommended to try it too. In Ukraine we have a different system there. Not much about learning, rather the sympathies of professors will get you far. Here – your actual knowledge is praised.'*

(6): *'I agree because this seemed a nice opportunity to go somewhere else and see how it is. I had heard about the Czech Republic that it is nice and peaceful, plus, Brno seemed less crowded than Prague.'*

Brno was highlighted as a better option than Prague several times (10 participants in total) for being less crowded, slower and easier to get about. To which quotes from student (13) and (14) are in place:

No. 13: *'No, the capital is not for me. Prague is relatively big and I would get lost easily. In Brno, you have an opportunity to mingle and actually see the same people from time to time. Plus, it's reasonably more affordable.'*

No. 14: *'Yes, Brno is a cheaper option than Prague. The transport system for getting is nice. Always on time. Many international busses going everywhere, so no need to be in the capital. I wouldn't want to handle the crowds, regular tourists and pace of Prague.'*

5.1.2. Confidence and incentive towards socialization

Kagan and Cohen (1990) found that cultural adjustment is greatly aided by putting oneself ‘out there’ and it helps if the student speaks the host language. When asked about their self-confidence, some students thought long and hard before answering. Student (1) said:

‘Yeah, well, I guess I am pretty confident when it comes to talking to others and what not. I can easily walk up to people, admit that I’m lost and talk. It’s easy to make some friends, especially among other Erasmus students. A little Czech beer does the charm.’

Czech confidence was questioned by student (3) as well, *‘You would imagine locals shouting out all the answers and being most interactive, but they sit there in quiet with minimum engagement. I put the hand up once in a while, just because I like where the discussion is going, but it’s rare that the locals do it. They sit together in groups, they rarely mingle.’*

From student’s (7) perspective this was seen odd too and even caused a feeling of guilt when speaking up:

‘I remember the first time in class I stood up in class and was first to introduce myself. I told about everyone about myself with confidence, and then when the rest started introducing themselves I felt like an idiot. Everyone just said their names and country where they come from. That’s it. From then on I kinda pushed down the urge to talk much.’

In contrast to what the first focus group discussed, other students, for example, group 3 students (10), (11) and (12) laughed about the matter, but admitted constraining personal and cultural matters.

(10) *‘oohh, that’s a big problem. (laughs) I never talk in class. I have a hard time walking up to strangers and asking for directions or help. I prefer Google maps or being in a group to avoid that. I know, that’s a stupid excuse but I can’t help it’.*

Group 5 with students no. 13, 14, 15 admitted to be more like observers than discussion leaders. They agreed that group work is necessary and there are conversations you cannot avoid. Moreover, they acknowledged the peculiar class leadership where locals do not initiate too much, rather very leader-like foreign individuals. Lastly, their self-confidence stretched far enough to make some small friend groups (culture groups) and stick with them without engaging too much with locals.

From the introductory part of the interviews it is evident from the findings that the participants’ reasons for going to Czech Republic are all sorts of push and pull factors. The main push factors for some students were dislike for their own educational system. With the recommendations of acquaintances many took the opportunity to attend Masaryk University

and explore the beautiful country. Most emphasized the positive outcome of advantages of foreign education for higher employability upon their return home and expressed appreciation for the Erasmus exchange program. The other factor for going abroad were the pull factors. Many admit to have been tempted to go to appreciate the nature, quality of life there and well-developed infrastructure. Besides the beautiful nature and being in the heart of Europe, many wanted better qualifications, as well as learning and experiencing new cultures. Finally, students discussed their own level of confidence and how it might affect their study experience and integration. This part of the discussion ended with students concluding that low self-confidence and other introvert-like personal traits limit their communication with other students or locals. Thus, resulting in a form of segregation and preventing smooth inclusion. Whereas, participants with high self-confidence felt certain disproportion and discomfort during class and other gatherings when locals did not show much initiative and felt themselves 'stand out'.

5.2. Attitude towards host country

The second part of the focus group interviews were questions towards their attitude, expectations from the host country and cultural differences. Some of the observations that were mentioned during the interviews have been explained by Czech professor Zdeněk Janík of University of Masaryk in *Living the Cultural Experience of Studying Abroad* (2017).

5.2.1. Preparing for the Czechs

When selecting the Czech Republic as their destination and before heading out, most students had their views about the country, locals and the whole exchange altogether. According to Janík (2017:1), these kinds of preconceptions about the attitudes and behaviour of members of a cultural group, e.g. Czech culture, are generalizations that most likely are not applicable to all the members of the group. (Janík, 2017:1) However, it is common to assume that typical characteristics and prejudice can be applied to the majority of the culture group. Meaning, people tend to generalize based on group characteristics and overlook them as individuals with unique personal traits. Over time these negative assumptions form as certain stereotypes. As the most common stereotype that surfaces in the interviews is the Czech love for beer. Participant no. 9 and others share the facts they arrived with and which stereotypes were found as false:

Student (15): *'Everyone. I repeat EVERYONE told me you'll see A LOT of beer. When asking for advice while packing for Czech Republic, everyone just gave me a pat on the back and said 'I hope you like beer'. Truth is - I don't. I was afraid I'll see them walking around with beer at all times and maybe get forced into it. But that didn't happen.'*

(8): *'I only got some tips about visiting Prague and to try some local beer. No one actually knew anything about Czech culture. Everyone said they drink lots of beer, they know Russian and drive only Škoda cars. So I just 'googled' it up and read some articles about them.'*

Some admit that stereotypes and facts were circulating without anyone actually ever having to visit Czech Republic. (2) *'When I came here, I could finally see for myself. I had heard all sorts of good and not so good comments about the country, but this is my own now.'* Admittedly, this is a certain way to find out more about a foreign country and see it oneself.

When arriving in Brno, students went through all sorts of emotions and situations. Their first reaction to the new environment seemed very vivid and the first signs of culture shock are observed. Student (14):

'When I went to dorms to check in – that was when reality hit. I was like, whoa, this is my first time out of the country and I'm going to live all by myself. No friends or family to see this. Slightly scary.'

(11): *'I remember day two best. I had woken up in a new reality. And I started feeling hungry. I didn't know anyone, I didn't know where to find food. I wanted my mom's lunch so bad. When I finally found a supermarket, I bought the things I thought I'd recognized, but instead it went so bad that I missed my mom even more.'*

5.2.2. Food concerns

The majority of students pointed out that food was a serious issue and caused a lot of stress and inconvenience. Most dealt with frustration of not being able to read Czech ingredients or labels, small availability of their domestic foods or not recognizing any dish. Two participants strongly missed daily meals and specific meal times with their families.

(10): *'I missed my favourite snacks, my comfort foods... everything was so strange and unknown.'*

(12): *'Almost every day our family would sit down for a meal together. It is so weird that now everyone gets into their room and cooks whatever. No cooking together. I missed the food, the tradition and meals home.'*

While being so far away from home, students expressed missing having meals and traditions that came along with it. Food as an aspect too should be taken seriously, as it is important not to completely deprive oneself of food that is usual in one's home, as food is an important aspect in any culture (Pelling, 2000:39).

5.2.3 Admission and the ESN buddy system

The abundance of formalities and papers was no less stress as participants of the study went through administrating their arrival and new place of stay. In some cases, the process was alleviated by helpful local students. Student (13) was overwhelmed:

'you must do this, do that, sign this, go there, come back and bring that, that and that. That was a lot to take in. I had little idea what was going on. I was pretty desperate at

that point. Luckily, my Erasmus buddy stepped in but literally had to walk me everywhere till we got through the introductory stuff. She even helped me understand the prices. Their currency is weird. She must've been so tired to help me this much...

Participants were very grateful for the European Student Network (ESN) to offer 'buddies' or local students to help getting around. In accordance, student no. 12 said:

'I probably would get lost, robbed or stranded somewhere it weren't for her help. My buddy was around and easy to reach. She was kind enough to do some translating for me and showing me around Brno. Too bad the relationship somehow ended. But I heard that only a few students had super helpful buddies. I got lucky.'

The extra help from the buddy system was very praised for being so useful during the first days of the stay, later many lost contact, became more self-sufficient and managed to get around by themselves.

5.2.4. Czech Stereotypes

As a part of the discussion with the focus group, participants compared the prejudice they had about the host culture before and after seeing them. Interestingly, that most of the stereotypes were common generalizations and were proved wrong in most cases. Some of their observations are included in the present subchapter.

As theory suggests newcomers tend to see the host culture through 'cultural filters' or their own perspective that is based on their previous experience and 'how things were before' kind of attitude. In all likelihood, they tend to notice the cultural differences, everything the natives do in another way and compare it to the practices that they are used to. As participants encountered others, they noticed that the customary way of greeting among the Czech men is a handshake and a straight look into the other's eyes, whereas women do not receive any kind of greeting or '*an awkward kind of hug*' (10). While most recognized this as a standard situation, student no. (10) was shocked not to see more of hugging and kissing on cheeks, calling '*so unfriendly and cold. Where's the friendliness?*'. Student no. (5) admitted to feeling surprised that Czechs do not interact with one another more while waiting for class in the hallways or while having lunch. (5): '*In Ukraine it's more about communication. I would assume they are angry with me if my friends didn't talk to me. Hostile I would call them.*'

As people that do not display expressive emotions, Czechs are received unfriendly.

(7): '*they never ever smile. In American culture, that is very important. You know, when passing by, in stores, course mates – it's just standard etiquette. I always give a smile to people, locals don't smile back.*'

Other participants also admit to have been judging the host culture by their own customs and expressed disapproval for the local behaviour and practice. In contrast, some participants had not noticed these 'oddities' at all claiming that does not matter and are just insignificant nuances.

Besides encountering school culture the way how people act in public spaces seemed peculiar to the participants. As students oftentimes need to go to the centre, travel from one faculty to another public transportation culture is no less of a surprise for some. The quiet and calm on busses, trams and trolleys was a new experience for most.

All over Europe and other countries in the world, manners in public are important and a social standard, and yet comes as surprise to some. Over time this became a norm and students learned to appreciate the relative quietness after the busy streets and other city noises.

(7) *'But you know what keeps bugging me? They may stay silent, but they're always staring. When my friends I talk, we get a dozen eyes our way. First we thought, we must be wearing something that reads 'outsider' or whatever. They were watching and judging. Later we got it. Our language obviously gives us away. We just started keeping our voices down and the angry looks kinda stopped.'*

While a few students were concerned by the locals gawking their way, this behaviour may come with easy explanations, such as loud talking, big groups or foreign languages, but not automatically appearance. Out of pure curiosity people might have been examining the young adults and not necessarily of some disapproval. Again, the participants have found their way to treat these peculiar cases and deal with attention in their own way.

Nothing is certain, especially stereotypes. Participants admit to have gradually left the prejudice behind them and moved on with the new information about the host culture. Most admit to have become more accepting and less sensitive to culture differences. Undoubtedly, the participants' conclusions are good indications for mindfulness and a step towards successful intercultural communication.

5.2.5. Healing certain symptoms

While there were several culture differences that caused inconvenience and took time to understand, students also mentioned several signs of illness that they seem to connect to culture shock and change of environment. Some symptoms incite valid concerns. 5 students expressed feeling homesickness:

(11) *'I call my mom every day. She is very concerned about me being so far away. I felt a kind of depression come on. It felt like a mix of fear, annoyance (for the new environment), I didn't sleep well at all.'*

Student no. 15 admitted to have noticed eating disorders since her arrival:

'oddly enough, I couldn't stop eating. I felt the need to cook, snack, go out for food, etc. I think I have gained about 15 kilos since my arrival. That upsets me a lot, but I can't explain it. Sudden weight gain is depressing'

Whereas student (6) complained about their immune system:

'I don't know if it's the fresh air, environment change or what.. but ever since I came to Brno, I get a cold every other week. I think it comes from the constant inner stress.' A suggestion was made about possible psychological assistance throughout the exchange and appreciation of possible more assistance in coping with the new cultural experience. Student no. 8 urged the need for a professional to help students cope and deal with the new struggles:

'Where I come from, we have Universities just as big, but we have certain amenities available on campus. Now what I miss is a psychologist, you know, someone to talk to about all of this what I'm going through. A professional. Cuz', my friends back home don't understand what is going on and what am I experiencing. Maybe some consoling would be nice – finding an explanation and sense in all of this.'

5.2.6. Cultural differences

Alongside all these serious matters occurring to the participants culture shock was observed and these observations naturally correspond to theoretical culture shock phases, both the U-shaped model and the W-shaped model. From the following two opinions the typical 4 culture shock stages are clearly evident:

(2): *'When I first got here I was like, okay, okay, this is going to be easy and so fun. But then I started realizing, no, this isn't my city. This is all new. I don't know where what is, I don't know how to get there, etc. And their currency... Jesus. I can't calculate anything. I have little idea about the prices here. That stressful feeling was there for quite a while. Then I started getting used to asking for directions or help. I started familiarizing places and remembering routes. Now, when the exchange is almost over I think I've gotten the hang of it.'*

(3): *'I've heard most students here experience something like that. They're all hyped when coming here and going on all this exchange, but then they start University, encounter locals and all this surrounding conditions and they're either shocked, disappointed, lonely. They go through a lot. I mean us. I saw this happening too, you know.'*

Whereas student (13) seemed to have experienced culture shock similar to the W-shaped model feeling that the amount of culture tended to both decrease and increase:

'I felt the shock come in waves. Of course, I was really, really happy to come. There's so much to see. But then I felt kinda lost, kinda deserted. Later everything seemed fine. And recently I got sad again because I'm not going home anytime soon and I still can't understand much. I just know where the shop, faculty, dorms and pharmacy is. I hope it gets better.'

To all which student no. 1 said that occurrences like these were in a sense all predictable. The participant furthermore revealed that the key to coping better was to come with an open mind and take in the new surroundings mindfully. Participant no. 1:

'Well, what did you expect? I hadn't ever been here. When I came here, I was ready for anything and everything. That's why I'm here. I wanted to try living abroad and most of all, I wanted to experience the culture exchange. Cuz' that's what it's all about, isn't it? I like everything about it.'

What may be observed is that students certainly experience some degree of culture shock and try coping whichever way they can. However, the idea that this can be an easy

process and better experience is to remain open-minded, tolerant and observant of the host culture and new surroundings to which the author completely agrees.

5.2.7. Pace at the University

The final question of the second interview part was about the participants' experience in the classes, contact with the professors and host culture encounters. From the participants it became clear that communication in class is not solely reliant on culture, highlighting culture differences or connected to deliberate discrimination. This experience depends on the individual characteristics of the professors like in any other school or University and the same applies to local students – every class, student group and setting is different.

Many students mention their professors and advisors by highlighting certain encounters. For example, student no. (5):

‘Czech professors are very different from the ones in Ukraine. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. Here they are very result-oriented. They expect a lot, and it actually motivates me to learn and achieve. Back home it was all about passing and it didn’t matter if it was an A or D. I appreciate the professors’ concerns. It’s a nice change. Whereas the students seem very individualistic. They don’t collaborate much and are very concerned about their own performance. We don’t do that.’

4 other students as well pointed out that the ‘new’ professors were interesting, different and a pleasant change. Students appreciated the interest about them – their origin, what they have studied at their home universities and the processes back at their countries of origin.

(14) *‘I remember our Law professor. She was eager to guess where we’re from just by looking at the name list. Surprisingly, she was very good at this game. When talking about the subject, she often asked: ‘What’s it like in your country?’ or ‘This is how it happens here, is it the same where you come from?’ I thought that was very considerate.’*

More students mention the tendency of distinctive attitude towards ‘them’ as in the locals (Czechs) and ‘us’ as in the international students. Student no. 6 had observed this too :

‘Sure, it’s ‘we’ and ‘them’. You can feel it in class, you can see it in the dorms and pretty much everywhere. That’s why Erasmus students stick together. We have our own parties, we go out together, and we study together too. Professors talk differently with us. I think that could be because Czech students stay but we change every 6 months.’

5.2.8. More contact with locals

The overall opinion remains that there is a very distinctive group division between foreign students and Czech students and that it is quite difficult to change that. Participants express the want and need for more common activities between the two groups to have opportunities to learn about the host culture. However, the great attention and interest from the professors is evident but appreciated. The new teaching methods are welcomed and often compared to the ones at home. The want for more connection was first mentioned by student

no. 13 who admitted to be saddened by not having more opportunities to mingle with Czech students. Later on this issue is discussed in more detail:

‘It feels sad that I won’t have any Czech friends after this. I didn’t get the chance to that. They were always in their groups. They all speak Czech and understand English. We speak English, but don’t understand them. I wish we’d had more common events. But after all, we just remained in our Erasmus ‘bubble’ and gave up early.’

(15): *‘Oh well, it’s almost over. What’s the point of trying to make new friends now? It’s nice to have the Erasmus friend group. I wish it wasn’t so separate. They always talk Czech between themselves and stay away from us.’*

To sum up, the second group of questions revealed many cultural differences and how they affected everyday activities. Unfortunately, many participants went through and are still dealing with the negative consequences of culture shock. The majority expressed the need for consoling and shock mitigation, since family and friends could not understand them, thus feeling alone. Most participants revealed to have gone through typical culture shock with stages correlating with the theory. An urgency for professional help surfaced, such as, a psychologist or counsellor in hopes to unburden the feelings piling up inside. The only relief available was the support of other Erasmus students and the usefulness of the ESN buddy system. Other than that, participants discussed the positive attitude from the host culture professors and praised them for having different teaching methods than others. They appreciated the Czech interest in the international students; however, this resulted in evident attitude that differed between Erasmus students and local. All in all students got accustomed to the inconveniences that they struggled with, although not entirely overcoming them.

5.3. Linguistic difficulties

As part of the third part of the focus group interviews, participants considered their struggles and results when coping with language barriers and Czech language. Throughout this part participants debated about the usefulness of knowing the local language, its role in their daily activities and Czech language specifics.

As a part of the introductory week the ESN offered basic Czech language courses to arriving Erasmus students. Not all of the newcomers participated in the course but 9 participants appreciated the opportunity:

(9) *‘When I arrived I didn’t understand anything. Nothing at all. I panicked because I was used to signs in my language. But now... zero. I appreciated their concerns and their organization of the few introductory lessons of Czech. We learned the very basics, of course. Basics for survival as they called it. But I have to admit, learning basic greetings, food names and how to ask for directions was very useful indeed. It’s not an easy language though.’*

The complexity and noticeable peculiarities of the Czech language were noted by 6 participants. A quote from participant no. 3:

(3) *'Yeah, I took the Czech language course all semester long but I still can't get over the weird letters they have. Like, saying three in Czech is tři. That 'Ř' gets me every time.'*

Participants from Asia found the peculiar pronunciation extremely difficult possibly due to the noticeable differences between their mother tongue and Czech (grammar, alphabet, pronunciation):

(11 & 12) *(trying to pronounce some Czech letters) 'It's impossible! There's 'ň' and 'ř', and 'ř', and oh my god... too many.... Our languages are so different from Czech. We were shocked that it didn't have any similarities. Not grammar, not letters, nothing. That is why we've been taking the free courses offered by the ESN for beginners, but it is so different from our languages. Ok, now we know how to say promiňte which means excuse me in Czech and of course 'Nemluvím česky. Můžete mi pomoci?' We do not understand Czech. Can you help us? Which is very useful, of course (laughs).'*

Some felt obliged to learn the host culture's language in order to naturalize to some extent: (1)

'I wanted to learn Czech for many reasons. First of all, I didn't want to look like a complete tourist that doesn't understand anything. Second, I did it because, well, since I'm staying here for a while I might as well learn it. I'll be able to show off when I get back home. Third, it makes perfect sense to have a basic understand of the language for getting around easily, to simply understand what you're buying at the store, oh, and locals actually appreciate it when I try to squeeze out the five words I know in Czech just ask some directions. But compared to Finnish, it's very different.'

One student tried to draw similarities between her mother tongue and Czech: (4) *'Well, Polish is actually somewhat close to Czech. I didn't take any extra courses, but tried guessing words that looked familiar to Polish. I've survived up until now as you see (laughs).'*

However, while some tried learning the language or figured it out by themselves, two participants confirmed the reliability of the Google translation app and said it was more than enough to get around:

(14) *'Naah, I just used the Google translator. I could understand signs and labels. That was good enough for me. Oh, and Google maps are the best. I didn't have to ask for any directions. I just typed any place I needed and it calculated the route for me. So easy.'*

(10) *'For sure, Google apps helped me avoid problems to ask others for help. I could drive around and translate myself.'*

As the main language of communication for international students is English, participants were very critical about the host culture's knowledge of it. Most came to a sad conclusion that outside the faculty grounds or dorms, the host culture had relatively poor English language skills. Some had even heard beforehand that Czechs reluctantly speak English. Participants said that this became partly evident when arriving. When further investigating these negative judgements, participants admitted to experiencing this while

going about their everyday activities. In most cases situations like conversations with bus drivers or sellers had resulted in more misunderstandings than success. The confusion experienced is commented by participant no. 7:

‘They just stare at me and keep blinking their eyes. Rarely anyone outside the campus knows English. They end up saying something in Czech, I reply in English, of course and we get nowhere. It’s frustrating.’

In addition, participants assumed the host country is uninterested and distant due to situations where locals avoid English-speaking whenever encountering them. As 3 students concluded, it is a safer option to address locals of their age in hopes of them understand English. Participant no. 8 comments:

(8) ‘Otherwise they literally walk around me or speed up whenever I try to approach someone to ask for directions in English. They’re like ‘no, no. No English. Pardon.’ and speed away. The best case scenarios were the ones millions of gestures and a small word exchange. Better than nothing, obviously.’

As professor Janík (2017) put it, ‘Czechs generally do not trust strangers and tend to avoid talking with speakers of other languages because they are not confident enough of their English language skills.’ (2017:3)

(5) ‘I even learned to say dobrý den (hello), děkuji (thank you) and prosím (you are welcome), but whenever I mentioned a word or two in Czech, they’d just go full speed Czech at me. I just always apologize and continue with what I want in English.’

The ‘escape’ of Czech individuals should not be treated as hostile behaviour or avoidance of newcomers, rather as avoidance of uncertainty and shame of their lack of other language skills. The stereotypes of Czechs may be further explained by going under the surface of cultural practices, observing the host culture closely and taking it in without preconceived notions. The common prejudice that Czechs do not know any English was partially eradicated as students admitted that after starting the conversations with at least a few words in Czech would bring a more positive outcome than just plain English. Moreover, the level of English for the Czech students of Masaryk University was concluded to be at a high level and, to their surprise, they knew many more languages when contact would be established and if asked about it.

5.4. Coping and adaption

The final part of the interviews was more about summarizing the participants’ experience and opinion about the culture exchange and whether or not they had learn to handle linguistic and cultural differences and cope with the consequences of language and culture shock in their

own words. In addition, some suggested improvements that should be applied and offered their own explanations for culture and language shock.

Fortunately, the majority of students finished the focus group interviews by sharing that they had more or less successfully dealt with the adaption process. With time participants learned to handle their accommodation, studies and other duties by adjusting in certain ways to the host culture. As the end of the study semester and exchange approaches, students hurry to finish their liabilities with the University and other responsibilities for the exchange. A student comments the finishing days of the exchange:

(7): *'You know, now, when it's almost over I'm already starting to get sad about the thought of leaving. In spite of the complications in between, personally, I had a lot of fun. I met a bunch of cool people from all over the world, I even learned a thing or two at the Uni (University) and I'll have a head full of memories when I get back. In the end – it's all worth it.'*

The parting process has been a whole new 'problem' as many students are leaving early and need to say goodbye to friends and roommates:

When the exchange will be over, participants admitted considering another Erasmus exchange to possibly a different country due to the overall positive experience of the program:

(15) *'I'll definitely go again Maybe somewhere else this time. After all I've been through, I'll remember this a serious experience and I'll know more what to do next time. The next time should be better. I hope.'*

As a part of the discussion participants offered their opinion about possible improvements. For example, students no. (6) and (7) suggested that there could have been more mingling possibilities between Czech students and Erasmus:

(7): *'I don't know about y'all but there could have been game nights or, heck, even Bingo nights where the locals would actually show up. A sports game event would have been nice too. I don't know how, but this seemed forgotten. Yeah, I know we went to class together with the Czechs, but still only a few would actually talk to me. I just wish we could have learned more about 'em.'*

(3) *'Also, I could have appreciated more clarification on why they do this and why they do that. The International Dinner that happened weekly was great. Everyone presenting their country and cuisine. Amazing.'*

While introductory events, especially the survival Czech courses, were praised by most, 4 students pointed out that it could have been a wider range of activities during the initial week. Student no. 8, for example, would have appreciated a guide to exploring the country in perhaps a form of discussion evening where the must-see destinations of the Czech Republic could be discussed. Student no. (1):

'If I remember correctly, in the first week of introduction we had Czech courses, tours around the city, faculties and even the dorms, then there was movie night, student activities fair, the best beer & food or coffee & cake tours, school system training and the official welcoming party. So much was going on. That was nice and all, but what felt like missing were some introductory events about, for example, graduate study opportunities in Masaryk University or Czech Republic because I would have gladly appreciated those.'

Then student no.(3) interrupted by adding:

'But remember the night with the dean!? That was amazing. The thing was that the new Erasmus students attending the faculty of Education were invited to 'a beer with the dean'. Literally. The few people that we were met at a local pub and had drinks with the dean and the management. How cool is that? Sorry for interrupting...'

While some reminisced about the opportunities missed most participants confirmed the whole exchange being *'all in all, fun'* (3) and participant no. 13 described the program as 'a life changing experience' and would recommend his to try it for themselves. Since the exchange program is primarily and fundamentally about getting a different perspective of studying it simultaneously is an exchange and learning of cultures. As student no. (5) put it:

'I think in the end we meet to goal of the program. This will be our experience. I've learned and seen a lot. I'd do it again. We come here to learn and we meet so many foreign students. They're very friendly and willing to learn too. I like being part of the Erasmus community. I'd recommend going to anyone. Czech Republic is a nice destination.'

(10) *'When you learn to handle your new life and environment, it gets better. At least that's what I had. I overcome difficulties, I learn some Czech even though first it seemed mission impossible, and now I don't even mind the culture differences. I like it here. I am happy I decided to go. I am grateful to the University for accepting me. And not to forget the nice people I met here. I love my Erasmus family. Most of all, I'll miss my funny roommate.'*

Students generally summarise the exchange positively leaving the hard times in the beginning of the semester.

5.4.1. Defining terms

While the centrepiece of the focus group interviews was research on language and culture shock students were keen on learning more about the topic themselves. However, before ending the long questionings, students were keen on sharing their comprehension of the subject and offering their own definitions of the two terms – language shock and culture shock. The following definitions were offered by the students (not arranged in a specific order):

- *'They both are about when new culture or language seems too much and that starts having negative consequences.'*

- *‘Language shock is when the other language seems too crazy and unusual to understand because you’re used to your own. Culture shock is basically the same. You find others’ culture too weird and you are not able to process it very well.’*
- *‘Culture and language shock are literally shock from seeing other people do stuff and talk differently. A lot of confusion from the differences.’*
- *‘Negative feelings about other’s beliefs, values and practices. Not everyone is the same and that might be hard to accept.’*
- *‘It’s a whole lot of trouble. It’s a bundle of bad feelings and thoughts you get when judging others. For the things they do and how they talk.’*
- *‘The inability to adjust to a new, culturally and in a language way different environment.’*
- *‘Those are the feelings – stress, depression and discomfort- that we get when we get surrounded by an unfamiliar language.’*
- *‘A phenomena that knows no cure. For now. Those are the insecurities you get about yourself when thrown out of your language comfort zone. A huge challenge and a task to adjust or suffer.’*
- *‘It’s not all bad. Sure, it’s very much about stress, worry and some anxiety, but then again it is a feeling of difference. But not everything new is bad. It’s good when you overcome it. You become a little more culturally aware, experienced and wiser.’*

From the definitions provided by the participants, the author was able to draw out the essence of what was meant. In short, culture shock is ‘inability to adjust to a new or unfamiliar environment that may result in negative attitudes, sickness and psychological issues’. Whereas, language shock is about ‘a state where one does not assimilate an unfamiliar language while being surrounded by it’. These descriptions of the two terms correspond unquestionably with the definitions by researchers referred to in the review of the literature, found in chapter one of this study.

5.5. Other aspects that cause confusion

Even though academic environment, language and other practices may be the most common culture or language shock initiators, other, less mentioned fields are just as surprising or upsetting. While the moderator tried to focus the discussions on the leading questions, once in a while participants managed to wander off the topic and express other observations about the

host culture's peculiarities. After discussing the 4 main categories, participants were given the opportunity to mention anything related to the topic.

5.5.1. Dating culture

This culture is undoubtedly important to young adults and the participants were no exception. While having enough free time on their hands some participants were curious about the local boys and girls, and managed to go on a couple of dates from which the observations were drawn.

Most of the 'dates' were found through the world's most popular app for meeting new people 'Tinder'. With a couple of finger taps, participants had access to a dozen of individuals who were ready to meet up. Participants no. 5 and no. 6 went on quite a revealing dialogue about the matter:

'When I opened the app for the first time here, I got a dozen matches within the first 24 hours. From there on the show could begin. Czech boys weren't as clever as Ukrainian boys with opening pick-up lines, but, boy, were they tireless. They don't take 'no' for an answer and all insist on at least one meeting. I was shocked but pleasantly surprised about their gentle manners. I always felt like a lady.'

Student no. (6): *'They're real gentlemen. They always brought a flower and paid for the coffee. I never had that at home, to be honest. Maybe they tried a bit harder because I'm not from here'*

No. 5: *'Oddly enough every man on Tinder is either Jiří or Honza...' 'and every girl's name is Eliška or Anna. (both laugh about their observations)'*

The participant group compliment the host culture's good manners when it comes to dating. In addition, the two made peculiar observations about the most common names of people that were on Tinder. Other than that, the focus group finished by joking that they would not mind getting Czech husbands or a wife.

5.5.2. Czech jokes

Humour in general is a very individual thing as it can be easily misunderstood, offensive or just plain silly. Besides internationally known knock-knock jokes or funny stories about kids, every country, culture group and nationality have their own peculiar jokes. Usually they are specific and meaningful for the group and when they need to be conveyed into another language or a different culture representative it becomes complicated.

Misunderstandings with joke translations were no exception for the participants. Some had trouble translating, some conveying the 'punch line' and most could not understand the distinctive local humour. (7):

'I often tell jokes. I have really good ones and even some course mates here admitted it. But when they tried telling me a joke that was translated from their own language... well, everyone else burst into laughter, but I just sat there all confused.'

To which student no. (8) added: *'But they quickly notice that you are not laughing with them and they start the long process of explaining where the funny part was. It turns out as a not so good joke if you have to explain the part where you're supposed to laugh.'*

As troublesome as that may already seem, participants observed the specific topics the locals tend to joke about. (1):

'I love jokes, but Czech jokes felt very clumsy. They joke about weird things, like, there are many jokes about drinking and their local spirits, popular Czech people, weddings and funerals even, then there are common jokes about their politicians and president that no one understands and a bunch of Czech inside jokes.'

(2): *'Some of the jokes were pretty dark, even too dark. But some were funny even after a long back-story about the laughing matter. But then again, they didn't understand my jokes either, so I had to go into story-telling myself.'*

Even if the jokes seemed exclusive to Czech people, participants were patient and willing to understand. Joking abroad is a delicate thing and should be carefully played out while thinking of others' reception.

5.5.3. Choice of words and expressions

'Think before you speak' people often say to one another and caution to choose their words appropriately when talking to others. Mispronunciation, misinterpretation and miscommunication can cause entertaining situations or turn into complete disasters. Accents, expressions and idioms are often the causes of misunderstandings and require certain attention, especially when having intercultural conversations. Both the previous section of culture specific jokes and the linguistic manner of each culture may cause confusion through language about culture.

Participants dealt with quite a lot of confusion due to some dissimilarity of cultural standards, language differences and choice of words. Student no. 7 got into an argument due to a great deal of interest about history:

'I asked a Czech guy about Czechoslovakia. We were discussing the regime, the two nations united and the aftermath. He must've misunderstood me because he became apparently tense when speaking about it. I apologized and said I didn't need to know more, but he said it's fine, but Czechs don't like to talk about that part of the history much. Especially communism.'

Nowadays, people from any country may find politics, history, religion and other topics as sensitive. If possible it is best to avoid controversial or delicate topics at all times, and when that is done, Czechs are open and willing to talk about anything. Student no. (13) said:

‘My Erasmus buddy was ready to discuss anything. Family traditions, celebrations, everyday life... But often we took a lot of time to understand each other. It was because I often directly translated expressions or sayings from our language, but it made no sense in Czech. And vice versa. Some things just can’t be explained and some just better left not translated.’

While some conversations turn into comedy, some participants were on the verge of arguments because of the way they talked or the topics they chose to talk about. Whereas student no. 7 got into an amusing situation with the local police and blamed it on not knowing the host language well enough:

‘oohh.. I remember an awfully funny misunderstanding with the local police. I still laugh about it when I remember. So I was walking back to the dorms late at night when a patrol drove over and asked if I’m alright. I answered affirmatively and said I’m going to my dorms at Vinařská, they said they’ll give a lift. I agreed, but I must’ve said or pronounced it completely wrong, because they took me in the opposite direction, when I realized, I was too embarrassed to say anything and walked home extra miles. That is so embarrassing, but it’s my own fault.’

To sum the focus group interviews up, the present chapter was about the interviewing, methods, process and questions that were used to determine their feelings and attitudes of international Erasmus+ students during their period of study in Czech Republic. The data was examined to see whether culture and language shock might impact on their overall experience while abroad. The discussion part was carefully investigated and interpreted in order to answer the research questions/hypothesis. The chapter identified participants’ thoughts on action and attitudes that lead to culture or language shock, and how they deal with it. Also, the successful cases of coping and handling the exchange are demonstrated with other findings from the focus group interviews. All in all, it is interesting to hear the many ways how the participants handled language barriers and avoided inconveniences with the use of apps. Some relied on themselves and managed to learn basic Czech for getting around and later to ‘show it off’ upon returning home.

Prejudice influences the perception of unfamiliar culture and will complicate communication with other students of other culture groups, for example, Czechs. Moving past stereotypes and keeping an open mind prior to the experience with host culture will improve communication opportunities and overall results, as the participants’ experience clearly show.

Conclusions

The present study set out to determine how international students at Masaryk University deal with linguistic and cultural adaptation during a study semester in Czech Republic. The following questions were addressed by the study: What factors motivate international students to study in Czech Republic? How do students perceive cultural differences of the host culture? How do students develop culture shock? What are the coping and adaptation strategies of international students? What are other notable language and culture shock aspects?

The most valuable theories include, first of all, Nida (2003) with research on language shock; Kohls (1984), the research by Oberg (1986 and Pelling (2000) were fundamental for exploring culture and defining culture shock; the importance of focus groups were explained by Stewart, et al. (2007) and Cyr (2019); and the design for the focus group interview adapted from Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) and Baier (2005).

To explore the research problems, a variety of theories have been considered and five focus group interviews were conducted for study purposes. 15 students were part of 5 focus groups and generated more than 57 000 words within 8 hours of interview time.

From the data gathered during the focus group interviews, as described in chapter 5, it was possible to answer the previously mentioned guiding questions. Some major factors that may be linked to causing linguistic and cultural confusion are summarised, as well as the ways how students admit to coping with these matters.

While analyzing the interviews similar leading reasons for linguistic confusion are observed, and language as a barrier was repeatedly reported to influence cultural adjustment. Mainly, as the leading cause for language shock students admit to having to struggle with the different language and the resulting misunderstandings due to locals avoiding conversation in English. Also, the sudden and total immersion in the new environment and being completely surrounded by a different language lead to certain language shock as well. Finally, the peculiarities and specifics of Czech language were noticed by most. Even after taking language courses, some struggled with pronunciation and the abundance of new knowledge.

In addition, three main factors that contribute to culture shock were common among the students. According with the interviews, causes that lead to culture shock are firstly, unusual cultural differences and misunderstandings; secondly, apparent discrepancy between social norms; thirdly, language barriers and miscommunication with the host culture. In addition, from what the participants revealed it may be interpreted that linguistic matters can have influence on culture shock, as well as through conversing cultural differences can be

observed. Therefore it is possible to say that culture shock can come through linguistic confusion, in the same way so can language shock be an aspect of culture shock.

For students to cope with the phenomena of language and culture shock, the participants admit to using several strategies: first of all, communicating with trustworthy people and expressing one's actual feelings may help to cope with the new circumstances. Also, keeping in touch with home (family and old friends) can alleviate stress and alarm. Second, even though not supported by theory, but observed in the recordings – one should not forget to enjoy dishes that resemble the ones at home. The few familiar cues ease adaption, which also leads to the next observation that – maintaining a kind of daily routine similar to the previous one could help avoiding negative consequences during the exchange process. Finally, participants admit to being surrounded in a cultural 'bubble' of either their own culture representatives or other international students, thus, limiting contact with the host culture to a certain level. However, while participants admit to having discovered their own strategies for adaption, they admit that more help from the staff, locals or even involvement of specialists could further help with acclimating.

While the findings are indeed interesting, there are certain aspects that are limiting and could be improved if similar research were to be done. First of all, the participants had very different backgrounds, for example, each of them came from a different country, which most certainly could influence results and trends. In this case, (see appendix 4) the overall proportions of speaking time/word count per question set are the following. Participants expressed concerns mostly about culture differences and the second most discussed topic was confusion by language – these trends might differ if focus any changes had been made in respect to participants. These trends or problems could vary by culture group and could be probed by having more homogenous focus groups, e.g. all of the same nationality, language proficiency, etc. Next, group dynamic may have influenced the proportion of speaking time per participant. Also, the sensitive matter of gender differences were not addressed by the study and perhaps influence the findings about the adjustment of international students. Finally, when addressing comprehensive topics and problems, a mixed-method approach might offer different and more inclusive data. Due to the certain limitations, the results should be viewed as exploratory until validated by more specific and deeper research.

All in all, participants view the adjustment experience as adaption and personal development complementary to the culture exchange. After all, most regard the exchange, the program and overall experience very positively. Some participants agree that the knowledge gained will be taken into account and serve as a guide for next foreign encounters, also they set future goals regarding exchange programmes and being more open about the process next time.

Thesis

1. Language shock is a less recognized aspect of the more general term culture shock, however, causes as much inconvenience and frustration.
2. Language and culture shock are closely interrelated processes and one can be part of the other and vice versa.
3. Inability to cope with a new foreign environment may lead to negative psychological emotional and physiological consequences.
4. From the focus group interviews the most discussed topics were the cultural experiences and linguistic misunderstandings.
5. A sudden immersion into a new environment and being surrounded by a different language oftentimes leads to disorientation and misinterpretation.
6. Language and culture shock are almost inevitable as the change of one's everyday cues may cause frustration to a certain level.
7. The main triggers for culture shock may be cultural differences and misunderstandings, difference of social norms and certain linguistic barriers.
8. Students and subjects of environment change become discouraged to approach the host culture due to reasons, for example, language barriers and fear of being misunderstood and tend to stay within a comfort zone, such as a cultural 'bubble'.
9. An approach that may ease the foreign exchange is to remain open and mindful about differences as behind every act there is an explanation that may only be clear for the respective culture representative.
10. Having people to listen one's struggles an experience, up-keeping habits and cues similar to the ones at home and even enjoying food that one may be used to helps the adaption process.

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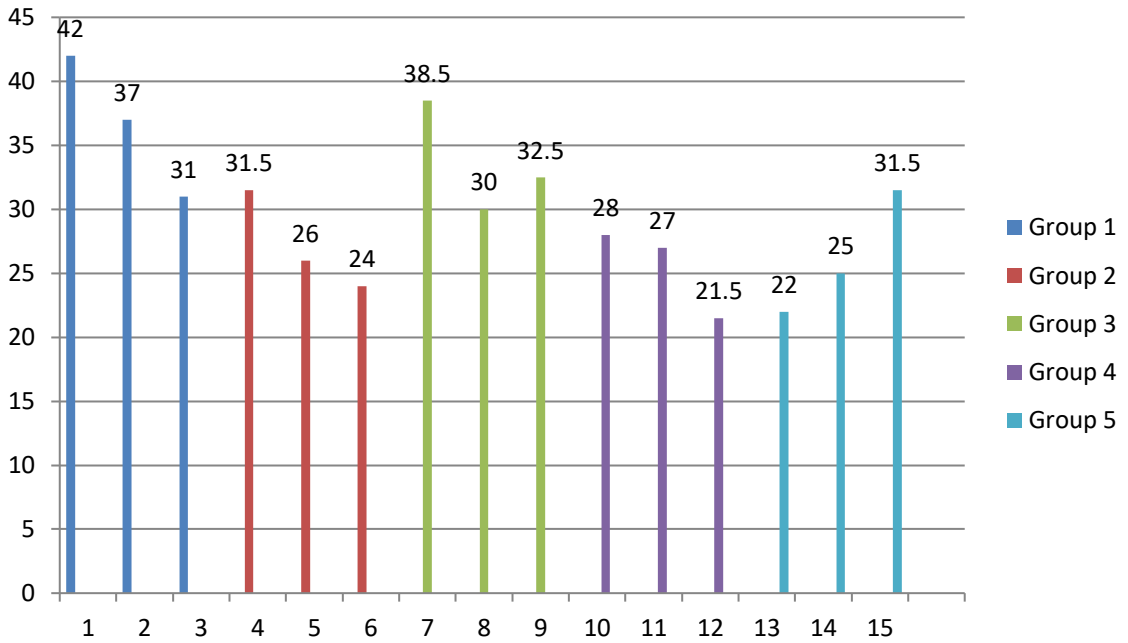
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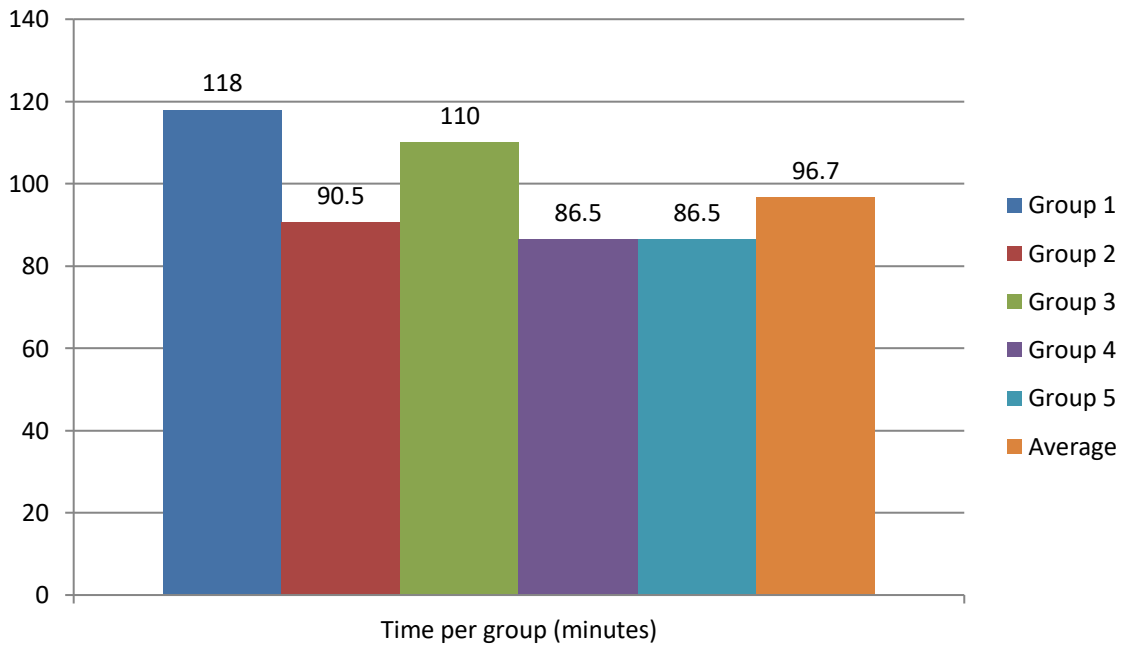
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Appendices

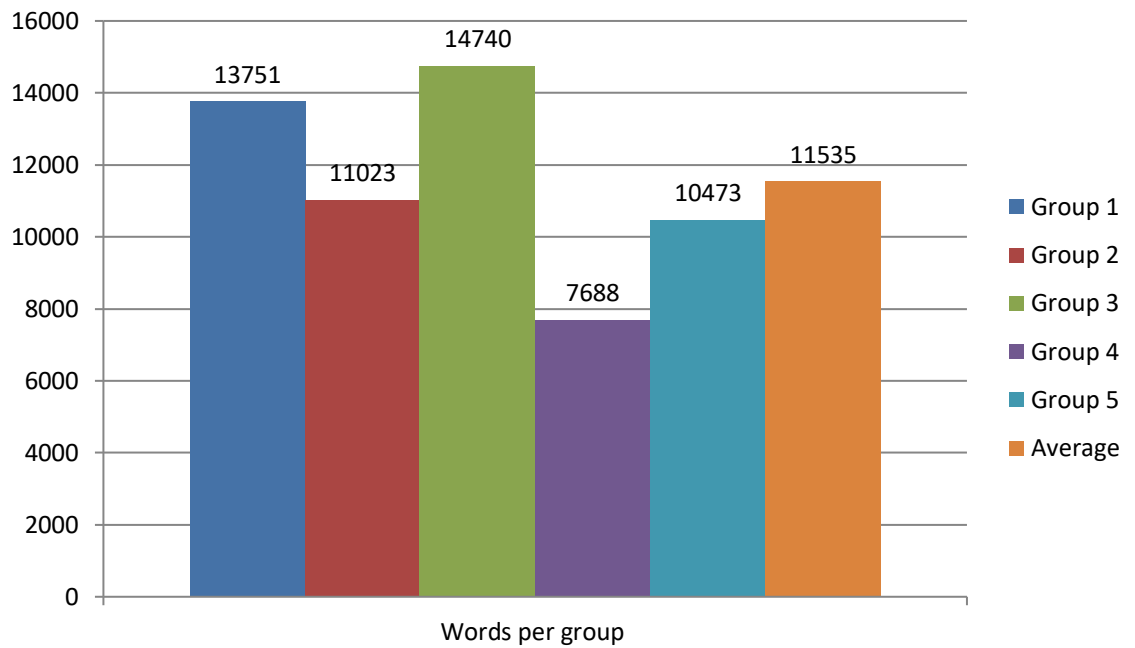
Appendix 1. Figure 1. Time per participant (minutes)



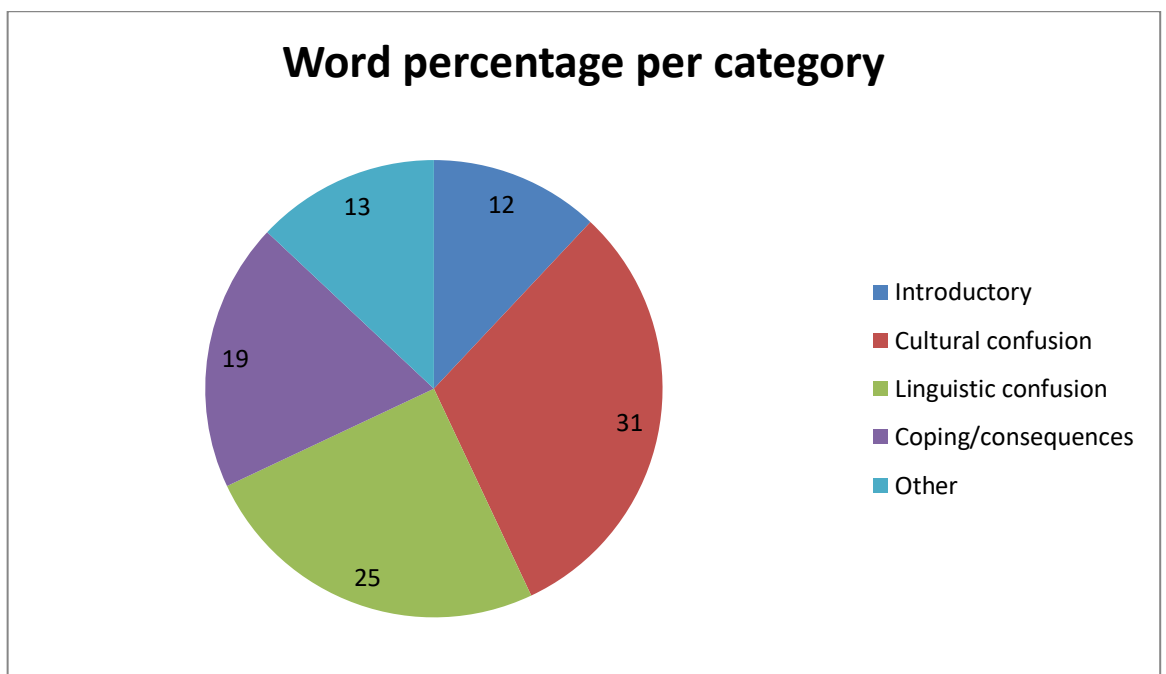
Appendix 2. Figure 2. Time per group (minutes)



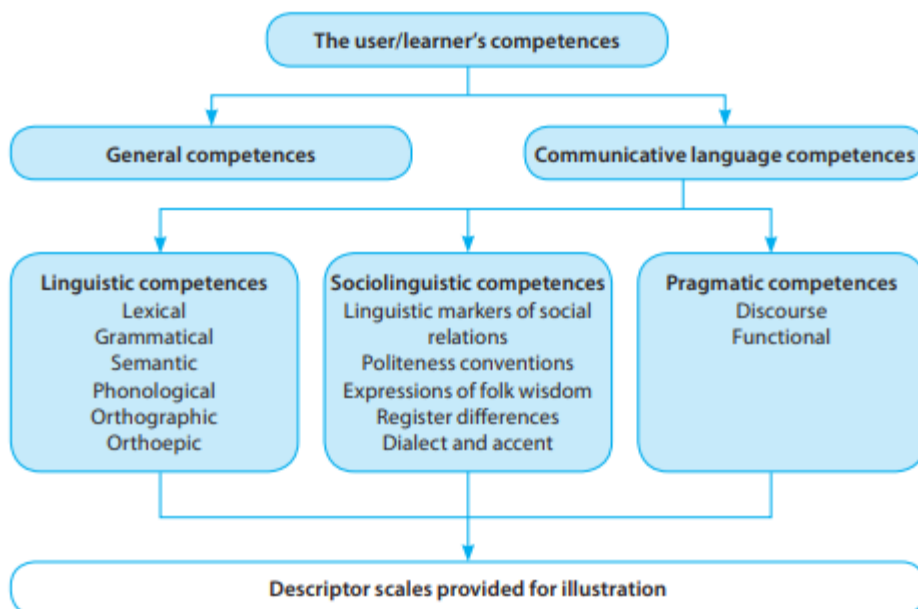
Appendix 3. Figure 3. Words transcribed per group



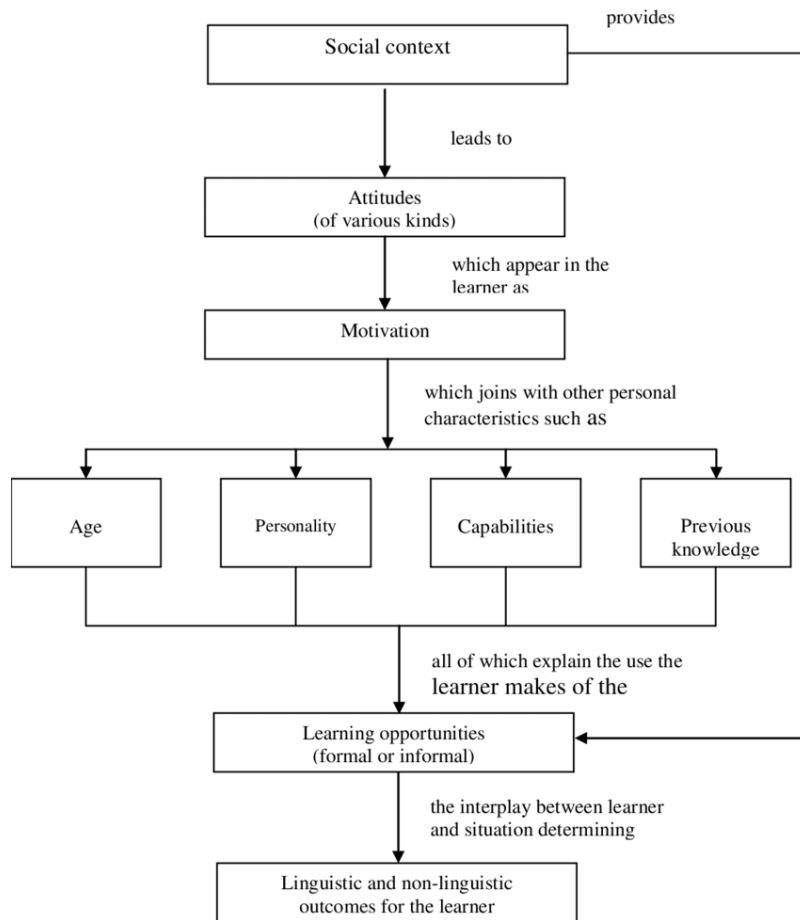
Appendix 4. Figure 4. Word percentage per interview category



Appendix 5. *Figure 5* Language user's competences from the Manual for Language Test Development and Examining (2011)



Appendix 6. *Figure 6. Spolsky's bilingual education evaluating model*



Dokumentārā lapa

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30.05. 2019.

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30. 05. 2019.

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Darbs iesniegts Anglistikas nodaļā:

30 .05. 2019.

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Darbs aizstāvēts bakalaura gala pārbaudījuma komisijas sēdē

2019. gada..... jūnijā, prot. Nr., vērtējums

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