

Report from the research part of the Erasmus+ project “English through entrepreneurship”

Anita Normann,
Associate professor in English didactics,
Department of Teacher Education,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology,
Norway

Introduction

This text reports on a study carried out in relation to the Erasmus KA2 project “English through entrepreneurship”. My role in the project has been limited to being what is known as a “silent partner”, which means that I have not benefited from the economic EU-funding given to the project. To be able to take part in some of the project meetings, I received economic support from my own institution; The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The economic funding was given to cover travel expenses and accommodation related to data collection. In agreement with the Norwegian delegation of the Erasmus project and given the limitation in time and economy from my side, we decided that the focus area of the study would be related to students’ reflections around own language-learning experiences, when engaging in face-to-face interactions in lingua-franca contexts.

It seems to be generally accepted that stays abroad benefit language development. However, most of the research carried out within this area explores longer stays abroad and in particular the benefits related to immersion in native-speaking contexts. The latter was not the case for the current study, where communication took place between non-native speakers in a lingua franca context, linked to the mobilities the students took part in. The term *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) has become central to describe the role of English as a means of communication between speakers who do not share the same mother-tongue (Krulatz, Dahl, & Flognfeldt, 2018). This indicates that English serves the purpose as a contact language. The communication between the non-native speaking Erasmus project participants took place primarily within two domains: 1) The professional, academic domain, related to students’ work with their entrepreneurial project tasks. 2) The social domain, related to students’ non-academic activities during mobilities. In relation to the overall focus area of the study, as presented above, the following research questions were developed:

- Which aspects related to taking part in an Erasmus project may influence students’ motivation and their language development, as experienced by a group of the respondents?
- Which language learning experiences do the respondents report about from their participation in partnership meetings?
- Which strategies are employed when English is used as a lingua franca in an authentic context, as reported by the respondents and / or observed?

The full analysis is not yet completed. As a consequence, this report does not present detailed results related to all three questions above. The complete analysis will be submitted for publication in a relevant journal article at a later stage.

Methods and material

The project was designed as a qualitative case-study, which implies that it was limited both in time and space. The respondents consisted of a group of upper secondary students from the Norwegian delegation. The decision of not including students from the other project countries, relate to the role and time limitation from the researcher's part, but also to the fact that participation required informed consent from parents, where they would have had to assent to formal observations and recording of interviews. Different countries have different rules and regulations in this matter, something which would have demanded a lot more work than time allowed.

The empirical material consists of interview transcripts, observation notes and written documents from the respondents. *Individual interviews* as well as *focus group interviews* were carried out with the respondents prior to, during and after mobility meetings in Antwerp, Varaždin and Trondheim. *Observation notes* were taken during students' group work in transnational groups in the professional, academic domain. *Written documents* from respondents were collected at various intervals during the data collection period. These consist of reflection logs prior to partnership meetings, focussing on their expectations and their perception of own communicative competence in English. Included in the written material are also short reflection logs written by students during the partnership meetings, where they were asked to write about use of communication strategies during the professional group work. Finally, the written material also comprises reflection summaries written after the three project meetings in Antwerp, Varaždin and Trondheim.

The time frame of my engagement in the project, presented below, covers both the active participation and my own individual work with the project in general as well as with the material more specifically:

Spring 2016:

- Data collection from mobility meetings in Antwerp and Varaždin (two-days-participation in both meetings)
- Transcription of interview material

Autumn 2016:

- Data analysis and preliminary structuring of generated material

Spring 2017:

- Data collection from mobility meeting in Trondheim (two-days-participation)
- Facilitation of literature work shop at NTNU campus, for all students and teachers attending the Trondheim mobility meeting
- Transcription of interview material

Autumn 2017:

- Continued work with data analysis and structuring of material

Spring and summer 2018:

- Writing of text to final Erasmus project report
- Writing of academic article aimed for publication in relevant journal

What does the material tell us?

Some of the main findings from the study will be presented and reflected upon below. The respondents' voices are central in the analysis, and the overall focus is on what they have pointed to as important aspects when using English as a lingua franca in the Erasmus project.

The significance of the extended learning arena

Not surprisingly, the material shows that participation in the project has increased the respondents' motivation not only for using English as a means of communication, but also for working within the professional, academic domain itself. Offering students opportunities for language immersion through transnational projects like in this current project, seems to be a motivation booster, despite the hard work the students need to put into the project, both before, during, after and between project meetings. The group of Norwegian students report about being obliged to follow up the ordinary classroom work also when they are busy with the project work, but this extra amount of work does not seem to have negative consequences for the motivation and eagerness they put into the Erasmus project.

Being forced to use English all the time during the mobilities has apparently been an eye-opener to many of the respondents, as this student signalled: "In Antwerp, I realized that my English was actually much better than I had thought". Increased self-confidence often leads to self-efficacy; believing in your own ability to achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). This becomes a positive spiral where experienced success in own language use reinforces the willingness and inclination to use the language even more. Some of the Norwegian students commented on their own use of English also in communication between themselves, as Norwegians. This was done, they said, out of respect for the others present, but also because they found it fun to be practicing whenever possible. Also "because it seemed natural, since we used English so much already", as one of them mentioned.

Students additionally pointed to having learned new vocabulary as a consequence of working in an extended learning arena, here offered through mobility participation and opportunities for language immersion. During a focus group interview some weeks after the mobility in Antwerp, the students were still able to point explicitly to the specific low-frequency vocabulary they had acquired as part of the professional group work during the mobility. This may indicate that the new lexis learned had been stored in their long-term memory, where it is more readily available for active use (Nation, 2001/2013). The cognitive challenges that helped students store the new lexis, related, according to themselves, to the transnational group discussions taking place within the professional domain of the mobility meetings.

Another finding in relation to the importance of the extended learning arena has to do with students' meta-reflection. "I tend to speak too fast when I speak English and realized that this became a challenge for the others", one of the respondents commented in her reflection log, and continued by saying that she apologized and started speaking slower and hopefully more understandable". Other comments of the same kind signalled a development towards a higher level of meta-reflection around own language use. Being forced to use English for communication purposes in a professional domain related to agreeing on decisions and getting things done in their group tasks, embraces various aspects of communication, not only speaking. For all kinds of oral interaction, such as discussing and trying to reach an agreement, listening is also a central element of the communication. It was therefore interesting to observe to what extent the group members were aware of and took into account how their own oral output, impacted the language intake of peer students.

The significance of social setting and agency in the work

After the second mobility, where the same group of Norwegian students attended as in the first mobility, they reflected around how much easier it was to use the target language once they had learned to know each other better, across borders and first languages. There was, however, no consensus as to which setting or domain that influenced their perceived language development most positively. The majority of the respondents in the study pointed nonetheless to the social domain's events and activities during mobilities as important aspects in this respect. Activities within this domain helped all students to connect better at a social level. This, in turn, seemed to impact their cooperation also within the professional domain positively. Students found that they were more relaxed during events taking place in the social domain of the mobilities. These events often allowed them to decide the seating and to mingle, more than what was the case when they were working in the professional domain.

Another aspect related to the choice of conversational topics. "During social events we could talk about anything, and the conversation was hence not restricted to the group work", one of the students commented during an interview. This aspect obviously helped the conversation flow more easily. Lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1987, in Harmer, 2007/2015) plays a central role in all language learning. Situations where students' psychological filter, generally referred to as the affective filter, is lowered, are known to facilitate language use. This is what the majority of the respondents in the current study experienced. They reported about increased willingness to take risks in own language production, since no formal, professional agenda framed the conversations taking place in the social domain. It seems as if this situation facilitated language output and input as well as enhancing the process of converting input to comprehensible intake. It is the latter aspect of second language acquisition, where input is processed, that helps students develop their linguistic systems.

A smaller number of the students pointed to the more formal settings, experienced primarily in the professional, academic domain during the mobilities, as the context contributing most to their own perceived language development. Arguments used here relate to these settings as being more challenging, language-wise, but at the same time also more rewarding, as long as linguistic success, for the respondents understood as effective communication, was achieved. "These settings were more challenging in terms of having to use specific terminology and correct vocabulary, but at the same time I found it more informative when I succeeded", one of the students commented. An interesting added dimension relating to the conversation flow within the professional domain during mobilities, is tied to the following citation from one of the respondents: "We talk more, and also more freely while working with the formal group tasks, when the teachers leave the groups". This aspect can be linked to Krashen's theory of the affective filter, as commented above. In the latter case, it seems as if the cognitive effort experienced through having conversations related to professional topics, in combination with lowering the affective filter, here experienced as a feeling of agency when teachers left students discussing alone, facilitated and encouraged the respondents' language use.

The importance of scaffolding

One finding from the study shows that both as speakers and as listeners, students often communicated and interpreted meaning through use of context. The context could be linguistic, as in situations where they would lean on what was said immediately before and / or right after the word or sentence in order to interpret what was said. The context could additionally be situational, as in situations where they were familiar with the topic being discussed. Using context was hence seen as one type of scaffolding (Bruner, 1986) for

students' language development. They would also ask peers in the transnational groups, use their dictionary mobile apps or use Google translate if they need immediate help with a specific word. Only as a last resource did the group of Norwegian students ask their Norwegian peers, in their mother tongue, for language help. Even if the level of mastery of English differed quite a lot between participating Erasmus students from different countries, the data material shows that the respondents acknowledged their peers' competence, as this quote shows: "Not everyone is at the same level of English, but everyone has something to teach others".

Conclusion

The material in the current study, related to students' own perceptions of language development in a lingua franca context offered through participation in an Erasmus K2 project, clearly indicates that the project participation has contributed to various competencies in students' second language development. First, the project participation seems to have influenced the respondents' linguistic competence. This relates to increased awareness around abilities related to grammatical and lexical aspects of the language. Second, the respondents' socio-linguistic competence seems to have been developed. This is e.g. reflected in their ability to adapt own language use to various situations and contexts in which the language is used. It also relates to appropriateness and various norms for accepted formal and informal language use. Finally, the project participation seems to have influenced the respondents' metalinguistic competence and the development of metalinguistic awareness, i.e. to think and talk about language and language use. When language learners are conscious of how they use the language and how they learn, they are also able to identify effective ways of learning. The latter is a typical characteristic of an autonomous language learner. This study has shown several examples of language users on the path of becoming highly autonomous language learners.

References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Harmer, J. (2007/2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson: Longman Harlow.
- Krulut, A., Dahl, A., & Flognfeldt, M. (2018). *Enacting Multilingualism. From research to teaching practice in the English classroom*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001/2013). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.