

Living in Poland in narrative accounts of international students

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Introduction

The world is undoubtedly shrinking in a cognitive sense. Yet this does not mean at all that the world is becoming uninteresting or that we already know everything about it. On the contrary, thanks to easier access to information as well as increased communication and means of transport, what once seemed different or strange has now become a bit tame. We are no longer bewildered by different cultures, behaviours, or attire. The internet and TV serve us this diversity on a silver platter in the privacy of our homes. However, not all of us accept and appreciate it. This is reflected by such things as the growing popularity of groups that do not recognise otherness and are not tolerant of the diversity that characterises the contemporary world. The best example of this are the nationalist and xenophobic movements that have become more active in Europe and the United States in recent years.

Despite the campaigns to respect cultural and linguistic differences led by the Council of Europe and other institutions of the European Union, many of us still find it difficult to understand other cultures more completely and fail to act in a way conducive to intercultural reconciliation. Linguistic, cultural and sociological studies often refer to the theory of cultural relativism proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (Słaboń, 2001). Adopting a moderate version of their hypothesis, Walery Pisarek (2008) assumed that the cognitive processes of individual people depend on the language they speak – especially their first language – and the culture in which they live. For example, it is difficult to understand a culture without a good command of the language spoken by the people who shape it. On the other hand, both scientists and politicians argue that acquiring intercultural awareness is possible (Baker, 2012), just like developing intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

The strategy of multilingualism adopted in the European Union emphasises increasing language proficiency among citizens of the uniting Europe and gives priority to research on improving the effectiveness of foreign language teaching. Based on the assumption that no language exists in a vacuum, learning languages is expected to make it possible to get to know other cultures as well as the mentality of people who speak a different first language. The very process of learning a foreign language is supposed to lead to a kind of acculturation, understood here as going beyond the solipsistic vision of one's cultural programming, acquired unconsciously while growing up in a given culture and acquiring the first language. Therefore, the process of learning and teaching a foreign language should feature values that go far beyond the mere development of communication skills.

A special role is given to speaking and learning English, which is currently used worldwide. Some even claim that it is not a foreign language anymore, as it has become a second language in many countries and settings due to its widespread presence in school curricula. While critics of the neoliberal approach go as far as to claim that no foreign language, including English, is an esteemed resource anymore, but rather a necessary attribute on the labour market (Holborow, 2015), others appreciate the contribution of English to the increase in the number of people equipped with intercultural communication skills. The more users of English, the bigger the population of those who have the ability to effectively handle communication situations involving representatives of different cultures (e.g. Cavalheiro, 2015).

Undoubtedly, English is considered a modern *lingua franca* – just like Latin and French in the past – and is widely used to communicate with people who speak different first languages. The global nature of English makes it difficult to talk about learning its specific (national) version. Few teachers openly claim that they teach, for example, its American variety, not only due to problems with defining the full catalogue of its features but also because of the difficulty to determine which of its functioning subvariants is the most representative of the people living in the United States. However, the departure from the so-called monolingual approach (keeping to a specific variant) in teaching foreign languages results in the fact that non-native English speakers use some sort of a hybrid language – an amalgamation of many elements of national and local varieties. For example, they may apply pronunciation similar to that used in the United States while also using certain elements of British vocabulary. This is due to their exposure to different language variants in the mass media as well as personal contact with teachers and users applying equally diverse variants. For this reason, the terms “English as a *lingua franca*” (Jenkins, 2007) or “Lingua Franca English” (Canagarajah, 2007) are now commonly used to refer to variants of the English language used in international communication by non-native English speakers. The latter term highlights the equal treatment of a given variety (as indicated by the use of capital letters) with other national versions. In addition, the term *Lingua Franca* serves a defining function, as does the adjective “American” or “British” in compounds “American English” or “British English”. For this reason, we opt for the term *Lingua Franca English* and preserve its specific spelling.

This book is embedded in the trend of perceiving language competences, used in every language, as tools for functioning in everyday life. We also recognise that contrary to popular belief, communication skills enabling conversation only in English do not guarantee satisfactory social interactions during longer stays

abroad. The knowledge of the local language is essential for an extended sojourn in a foreign country, which undoubtedly contradicts the widespread belief that *Lingua Franca English* suffices to lead a successful life abroad. While we do not deny the status of English as a global language, we argue that developing skills in other languages increases the pool of professional, educational and social opportunities. Additionally, mastering the local language ensures high quality of communication, especially understanding issues important to a foreigner. Besides, the local language enables understanding and sharing of humour, building rapport and offering a deeper insight into the culture of the host country.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first one discusses the reasons why young people decide to go abroad. As shown by recent studies, this is due to a variety of motives other than improving one's language skills. Studying abroad is a life experience that can be viewed from different angles: cognitive, metacognitive, emotional and behavioural. In all these dimensions, identity, communication competence and intercultural communication are crucial. Nevertheless, language (languages) is a layer through which all experiences are filtered. The only problem is that speaking a *lingua franca* does not guarantee in-depth knowledge of a foreign culture. This is because the process of getting to know a given culture and the mentality of a local community requires participation in the process of creating meanings – and these are never given once and for all. To illustrate, grasping the meaning of a joke often requires passive or active participation in the process of its sharing. This book provides instances of situations in which ignorance of the local language limits participation in the meaning-making processes, and to some extent, isolates people who have a command of only the international variant of the language.

In Chapter 2, we elaborate on the definition of the language itself and the understanding of the notion of language policy. The policy of the European Union, including Poland as a member state, is presented in relation to learning mobility, which is the subject of the research presented in the final chapter of the book. The legal documents of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and other bodies of the European Union as well as reports presenting the results of activities carried out so far show that mobility and multilingualism are treated as a priority in the European Union, in line with the adopted motto “united in diversity”. The rights of EU citizens, the status of national languages and the protection of national minority languages are guaranteed by many documents, including the founding document, i.e. the Treaty on European Union. Poland also applies this approach to educational recommendations and central regulations. This part concludes with the characteristics of learning mobility

in Europe. Poland also offers a wide range of educational exchange programmes, mainly under Erasmus+, and offers its own mobility programmes that encourage people to study at Polish universities.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical foundations for the research, especially the main assumptions of the narrative approach along with its application in intercultural research. The chapter ends with a discussion of the methodological aspects of a narrative interview.

The results of narrative sessions conducted among students staying in Poland for an extended time are the subject of Chapter 4. These results entitle us to claim that for the majority of our respondents the stay abroad only partly led to increased linguistic awareness and intercultural reflection. Most of the respondents did not prepare for their stay, awaiting whatever the future would bring. The choice of Poland as the country of residence was most often random and rarely came from the desire to learn about a new reality, in this case, the Polish culture. In this sense, it would be untrue to state that the desire to get to know a foreign culture was an important factor in the decision-making process regarding going abroad. Nevertheless, the intercultural experience our respondents gathered became an added value that capped their stay. The widespread belief that the command of the English language guarantees unlimited possibilities for communicating and learning about a foreign culture turned out to be yet another myth.

Even though many academics agree with the assumption that intercultural communicative competence is and should be a part of teaching English language learning and teaching (Byram, 1997; Porto, Houghton and Byram, 2018; Sharifian, 2014), the latest research indicates that the level of language proficiency does not correlate positively with intercultural communicative competence (Mighani, Moghaddam and Mohseni, 2020). The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis offers one reason why this is true. Assuming the local character of culture and language, as well as humans' active participation in co-creating meanings, one may conclude that intercultural experience without knowledge of the local language will always be doomed to superficiality. This conclusion is reflected in stories offered by our respondents, especially when they complain about the inability to enter into deeper relations with Polish peers and when they mention the feeling of isolation from the broader community. However, this does not undermine the value of participating in life and gathering knowledge about the local community. Even if such holistic experience only marginally contributes to expanding the awareness and knowledge of foreigners, it is still a breakthrough event in their general development, and most of them consider it as something highly positive and valuable. Intensified contacts with local people during a longer stay abroad require from both parties a more or less conscious verification of the beliefs and values

underlying their behaviour when interacting with people with different cultural resources and speaking a different first language (Hofstede, 1980). In general, experiencing culture first-hand in the course of real interactions abounds in various positive results – more on that in Chapter 4.

At this point, we would like to thank the foreign students who shared with us their reflections on their stay in Poland and the students of the Institute of Applied Linguistics at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań¹ who reached out to Erasmus+ students staying in Poland and agreed to conduct and transcribe interviews under our supervision.

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¹ The participants in the research project included third-year students of applied linguistics in the 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 academic years. Each person taking part in the study received an individual written confirmation and acknowledgment.

1



The role of language during a stay abroad

Stays abroad for professional or educational purposes, whether short or long, are becoming a part of the life experience of an increasing number of working and studying people across the world. From a personal perspective, a long stay abroad is usually a turning point in life. Recent research on such sojourns broadened our knowledge concerning factors that motivate such decisions. Apart from improving language skills, these motives include the desire to make friends, establish relationships or build rapport (Coleman, 2013), get to know oneself in a broad sense, as well as develop the traveller's identity in terms of religion, work or sex (Isabelli-García, Bown, Plews and Dewey, 2018). From this perspective, a stay abroad is seen as a potentially critical life experience (Isabelli-García et al., 2018) that may lead to opening new opportunities, including these to learn or use language.

1.1. Factors motivating people to travel abroad

Several positive factors may motivate a person to go abroad. Of these, the acquisition of language skills (British Council, 2015) comes to the fore, along with the possibility of an increased employability and opening new career prospects (cf King, Findlay and Ahrens, 2010; Deakin, 2014). Mark Teng divided the motives of people leaving their countries into two groups. Some invest time and money to go abroad to acquire “symbolic resources (e.g. language, education, friendship) and material resources (e.g. capital goods, real estate, money)” (Teng, 2019, p. 44). Others make a decision to relocate for such reasons as expanding knowledge (King, Ruiz-Gelices, Findlay and Stam, 2004), general interest in a new culture (Van Mol and Timmerman, 2013), or gaining intercultural experiences and developing intercultural competences (Beerkens, Souto-Otero, Wit and Huisman, 2016; Gómez, Imhoff, Martín-Consuegra, Molina and Santos-Vijande, 2018; Sison and Brennan, 2012).

Some researchers propose that the reasons for the participation of young adults in exchanges should be treated as a separate category because it is most often this group of people that opt for a longer stay abroad and the factors that motivate them to do so can be significantly diverse. Young adults treat the foreign placement as some kind of rite of passage from childhood to adulthood – to experience something that can shape or expand their personal and linguistic understanding (cf. Xamaní, 2015). In contrast, Hannah Deakin (2014) pointed

to “personal drivers” which, though seemingly distant from purely educational or professional goals, include factors related to personal development. It may be the desire to enjoy oneself, the need to change the place of residence, or the search for new goals and experiences. These are all driven by the desire to explore, often combined with a socio-cultural development of the traveller (Gómez et al., 2018). Sometimes, the leitmotif of such a journey is an idealised image of the destination which makes some countries more preferable to others because of their greater attractiveness resulting from stereotypes or images perpetuated by the media.

Other researchers examining the factors underlying the decision to go abroad, especially to improve the knowledge of a foreign language, refer to the so-called consumer values (Gómez et al., 2018; Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991). There are five types of consumption values: functional, emotional, social, epistemic and conditional. While together they can influence the final choice of destination or intention to travel, these values usually compete with each other in the decision-making process until one becomes predominant.

In most cases, people who decide to leave their country are guided by functional (utilitarian) values, e.g. geographical proximity, natural beauty of the destination, its diversity and quality of culinary art, historical legacy, infrastructure, and if applicable, also prestige. Emotional values often play a secondary role. When driven by a positive attitude towards the destination, prospective sojourners choose destinations that they consider worth visiting or those that provide fun and relaxation. In comparison, people who are guided by social values travel to make friends or simply meet others with similar interests. Those who travel to discover new places and learn new things, often to escape routine, are guided by epistemic values. Conditional values – the last item on the list – are usually attributed to objects, here destinations, and play a key role in this study. They are based on “perceived utility from a set of conditions that enhances functional alternatives; perceived utility from a set of conditions that enhances the functional or social value” (Gómez et al., 2018, p. 127). These values are therefore external – they are linked to the purpose of the travel and not to the traveller – and result from a better understanding of the object or destination in the process of individual reinterpretation of values. For example, some people may decide to visit a particular place because it seems geographically close. The longer they stay there, the more obvious it is for them that their place of stay is safe, its economy is stable, and it is easy to find employment there, which translates into high quality of life. In other words, they re-evaluate their motivation to stay in a given country due to specific conditional values.

1.2. Studying abroad as life experience: research review

Currently, higher education institutions around the world aim to prepare students to function in a globalised world, in an international community, and the experience of studying abroad has become one of the basic elements of academic education programmes. The objectives of study abroad go far beyond expanding language skills and include, e.g. raising intercultural awareness or global communication competences (Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Szczepaniak-Kozak and Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2013). Following in the footsteps of Allan Findlay's team, this book assumes that internationalisation of studies and learning mobility are inextricably linked and lead to the personal development of students, particularly by shaping their identity and contributing to the acquisition of new skills as well as linguistic and intercultural awareness (Findlay, King, Stam and Ruiz-Gelices, 2006).

The provisions of *The Bologna Declaration* signed in June 1999 assumed that at least 20% of students studying in the countries comprising the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) would have taken part in learning mobility by 2020. Due to the outbreak of the pandemic in the early 2020, these assumptions have not been achieved (FRSE, 2021), as health concerns have become yet another factor discouraging students from going abroad. Before the pandemic, the main obstacles mentioned were financial problems, fear of loosening ties with the loved ones, insufficient language competences, personal reasons (e.g. lack of self-confidence), or concerns regarding academic performance abroad (Fowlie and Forder, 2018; Powell and Finger, 2013). A potential departure may also be prevented by administrative problems, including those related to obtaining a visa (British Council, 2015), issues linked to the socio-economic environment (Findlay et al., 2006; Netz, Orr, Gwośc and Huß, 2012), or a simple lack of interest in such an endeavour (Beerckens et al., 2016).

Upon arrival, individuals who decide to leave their country and manage to overcome the initial organisational obstacles typically face a language barrier, confront their own and local stereotypes as well as difficulties in understanding the new value system or worldview resulting from a different way of thinking. Next on the list, there are issues related to the daily functioning of a foreigner in the host country, e.g. organising and legalising the stay, everyday work and handling issues in public institutions. The prospects of having to resolve these problems may be paralysing, and as such, adversely affect the willingness to take initiative and establish contacts, or, in some cases, they may discourage students from continuing their stay abroad.

To understand the role of personality factors in intercultural encounters, Karen Van der Zee and Jan Pieter Van Oudenhoven (2001) conducted a study on successful stays abroad. The *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* that they developed makes it possible to measure the intensity of these factors using scales for the following categories: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative and flexibility. According to these scientists, cultural empathy, defined as the ability to clearly show interest in others, as well as to obtain and reflect a relatively accurate sense of other people's thoughts, feelings or experiences, constitutes a fundamental aspect of a satisfactory and effective sojourn abroad (Van der Zee and Oudenhoven, 2001). Other available studies do not categorise factors but, instead, focus on an individual's overall ability to operate effectively in a multicultural environment and refer to it as a "cultural intelligence predisposition". According to Martine Gertsen and Anne-Marie S oderberg (2010) and David Thomas (2006), cultural intelligence is a dynamic ability based on three dimensions operating in synergy:

1. (Meta)cognitive dimension – includes knowledge about cultural differences and the impact of cultural diversity on interactions and activities carried out by partners from different cultures. This dimension also includes the meta-level, which refers to the ability to reflect on how cultural diversity influences cognition and understanding of oneself and others;
2. Emotional dimension – concerns the ability to be empathetic, to be aware of and open to other points of view, to engage and learn from day-to-day culturally diverse experiences;
3. Behavioural dimension – signifies the ability to communicate effectively in the verbal and non-verbal form in intercultural relations, in real-time. It includes, for example, the capacity to recognise, explain or deal with misunderstandings and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence (cf. Byram, 1997; Byram, Nichols and Stevens, 2001) as well as respect for the interlocutor and other aspects related to linguistic politeness.

The course of cultural adaptation in a foreign culture largely depends on one's profile of cultural identity. Such a profile is made up of various elements, among which common habits, distinctive interpretations and entrenched ideas can be clear indicators of common features (cf. Jameson, 2007). However, the profile of identity is essentially determined by the concept of difference, i.e. identity is always defined in juxtaposition with another group. Contacts with foreigners promote the strengthening of our own sense of cultural identity as they make us aware of its components. In other words, we become most aware of the characteristics of our culture when we meet a person who does not have such

characteristics. Sometimes, however, a confrontation with a new feature or its lack may lead to a cultural identity conflict.

In the latest research, a stay abroad is treated as an experience in which “cross-cultural success” largely depends on the identity of a given individual, defined as “the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 586). Initially, it was considered that this construct is shaped during local interactions in the first language. Over time, it has been noticed that learning a foreign language and living abroad can also impact identity: “when individuals move across geographical and psychological borders, immersing themselves in new socio-cultural environments, they find that their sense of identity is destabilised and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance” (Block, 2007, p. 864). Staying away from the place of origin may lead to the questioning of some components of one’s identity. New and varied experiences lead to a rephrasing of the points of reference that have so far been used to assess reality and to position oneself in it, thus changing the identity of a given individual. A stay abroad is a period of an intense confrontation of practices, customs and behaviours acquired in the place of origin with those prevalent in the place of stay. According to Celeste Kinginger (2013; 2015), the realities of the known and of the unknown clash intensely during such a period, which results in the emergence of a need for the negotiation of difference. For most people, this creates a feeling of ambivalence, internal conflict, and even destabilisation. The best way for a foreigner to work out an internal compromise is to function in the local social network.

1.3. Role of a local and global language when staying abroad

The desire to learn a language greatly influences one’s willingness to go abroad. UNESCO report data (2014; 2019) confirm that the destination in which a person chooses to study is usually one of the three, as indicated by Christina Isabelli-García, Jennifer Bown, John Plews and Dan Dewey (2018). The first is studying in countries where the student’s first language (L1) is one of the local official languages, which minimises or even excludes the need to learn a foreign language (FL). The second is the choice of an English-speaking country, which is the result of the undeniable status of *Lingua Franca English* in the academia and related efforts by universities around the world to open up to students, participate in the globalisation of education and face the challenges of the modern world. The third may include a country where the spoken language is neither their first language (L1) nor English. Some students may want to learn the first language

of their ancestors in their parents' or grandparents' country of origin (Gómez et al., 2018). Others wish to learn more about their religious, national or ethnic identity, which frequently is related to a specific country or region (Shively, 2016). Most often, however, globalisation contributes to the promotion of English language learning and benefits students who remain in global networks where the language has not only become a *lingua franca* but also a “form of cultural capital” (Short, Bonniche, Kim and Li, 2001, p. 4).

Mark Teng (2019) is of a similar opinion and claims that when choosing a destination country, students take into account the capital resources that are required to learn a given language. Referring to the logic of neoliberal discourse, one might say that English has been objectified (here, construed as a product) and has been assigned a real market value. It is widely recognised that English paves the way to socio-economic success by enabling contact with global communities (cf. Kubota, 2011; Pavlenko, 2001) and privileging those who master it. It can therefore be concluded that globalisation affects educational policy, individual decisions and the massive achievement of language proficiency of English, which affects the popularity and motivation to learn other languages.

The assumption about the superiority of the communicative and instrumental function of more popular languages (e.g. English or Spanish), which is widely shared by scientists, is strongly rooted in the dichotomous tendency to treat widespread languages as communication tools and minority languages as identity markers (cf. Riera-Gil, 2019). In this perspective, majority languages are seen as the keys to integration and socio-economic development, as opposed to minority languages, which satisfy individual autonomy. At the same time, it is a commonly shared view that minority languages act as socio-economic inhibitors. This means that people who speak only a minority language are less likely to establish relations with representatives of other linguistic circles, including the linguistically dominant group in a given region. This polarised picture runs counter to the aspirations of international organisations, such as the European Union or institutions operating in non-English speaking countries, to promote multilingualism and the equal status of all languages, and to use individual and social multilingualism as an asset and a tool to promote social justice and democratic values (e.g. May, 2014; 2015; Mehmedbegovic and Bak, 2017).

Most theories of communication assume that reaching an agreement in a specific situation, or using language as such, depends to a large extent on the existence of common ground between interlocutors, e.g. shared conventions regarding the principles of communication, standards and norms (Kecskes, 2018). In the case of intercultural communication, the common ground is usually limited, and its presence cannot be taken for granted. Rather, a shared conceptual sphere

must be worked out each time. For this to be possible, the interlocutors must have a common means of communication at their disposal. Most people who stay abroad for longer periods assume that English will be the resource that will ensure satisfactory functioning and communication at the place of destination (cf. Szczepaniak-Kozak 2012; 2014; Szczepaniak-Kozak and Kłodnicka 2015). However, they usually do not realise that intercultural communication consists in co-creating meaning and content. When foreigners do not know the local language, they participate in such co-creation to a limited or less effective extent, or not at all. A good example of failing to participate in the co-creation of meaning is the difficulty in understanding a style of speech or intertextual speech. For example, they cannot interpret a joke or recognise the irony of it in a given context, because they do not have access to the conceptual basis of the local language or socio-cultural background. Additionally, in everyday communication, meanings are often created spontaneously and words are played with (Kecskes, 2018), which makes it even more difficult for foreigners to participate in a conversation on par with others. Therefore, to be able to communicate in full pragmatic dimension and use it spontaneously, knowing a language is simply not enough. It is necessary to know its conceptual sphere and the socio-cultural background of its native speakers as well as to have the skills of the so-called operational control, a prerequisite for processing linguistic meanings.

Operational control is the ability of the brain to simultaneously perform many operations that a given activity requires. When using a language, not only should you focus on what you want to say (concept), but also control the words and structures you want to use to suit the context. In the first language, these operations are performed unconsciously – one's attention is most often focused on the content of the message. Repeating all these activities in a foreign language becomes a daunting task. Since you typically know what you want to say, the focus is on finding the right words at the expense of grammar and pronunciation. The longer a foreign language is used, the better the operational control and the ability to limit the attention paid to particular elements of communication. However, this requires the spontaneous use of a given language, not just a passive knowledge of it.

Let us now come back to functioning in a group in which only a foreigner does not know the local language (e.g. a work group at university). Initially and typically, other group members use a commonly known foreign language in conversations with such a person. According to Istvan Kecskes (2018), if a foreigner speaks the local language to a limited extent, local people will unconsciously, yet automatically, develop conversation strategies that make their messages more intelligible (if they notice that the foreigner has not mastered this language very well).

They intuitively predict that communication difficulties may arise, which they try to avoid by using supporting gestures, repetitions, explaining the context of the information, or ignoring possible misunderstandings. Such behaviour, despite its advantages, is not natural and cannot last forever.

If a foreigner does not improve her or his local language skills and the locals are not proficient in English or another universal language, their intercultural contacts will not develop. Over time, native speakers of the local language will begin to convey less content, and sometimes even avoid talking to a foreigner to evade the communication burden. Since the use of the foreign language requires an increased level of attention during a conversation, local people, after an initial trial to use a foreign language, most often switch to their first language, ignoring the foreigner's communication needs and indirectly excluding her or him from the conversation. As a consequence, people who are not native speakers of the local language in such circumstances lose the chance to enter interactions and take advantage of the opportunities that they bring (e.g. access to informal information, establishing new contacts). In this context, the assumption put forth by Kecskes (2018) is justified: for communication to be sustainable and satisfactory, each interlocutor must share the same communication tool (relevant language) as well as the conceptual level and the socio-cultural background of a given group. In the long run, the use of a tool that does not require enhanced attention or a high level of operational control facilitates the deepening of communication and the consolidation of relationships. In general, the knowledge of the local language increases the effectiveness of communication interactions and translates into their quantity and quality (Riera-Gil, 2019).

Knowing the local language is also beneficial for other reasons. First, moving away from promoting just one language as a global communication tool in a shift towards promoting local language skills and this, in turn, can broaden both life and socio-economic opportunities available to foreigners. Second, individual multilingualism is usually accompanied by readiness to become involved in social life while staying abroad, which increases one's pool of experiences (Hampton, 2016). Additionally, from the ethnocultural perspective and socio-economic justice perspective, speaking local languages constitutes an undeniable advantage. In light of modern economic theories, especially those calling for a shared or knowledge-based economy, speaking a local language contributes to the development of equal chances and builds a broad platform of trust (Hampton, 2016; Mehmedbegovic and Bak, 2017). According to Mar Gómez et al., very often "the ability to speak other languages increases the competitiveness of workers in the global economy" (Gómez et al., 2018, p. 125). Some of the respondents who participated in the research presented in Chapter 4 provided arguments supporting this thesis,

since they came to Poland either to learn Polish or improve their proficiency in it during their stay. In this sense, they can be considered language tourists (see section 1.1). According to Gómez's team, such individuals travel "to foreign countries to improve communicative skills", and at the same time, "for business or training purposes" (Gómez et al., 2018, p. 125).

Currently, more and more researchers point to the synergy effect that multilingualism can cause (cf. Mehmedbegovic and Bak, 2017). For example, Elvira Riera-Gil (2019) emphasises the interconnectedness and complementarity of both global and local spheres of human life. On the one hand, locally, people are emotionally attached to a given place and need interaction with the community living there. On the other hand, inhabitants of the modern world are not tied to only one place or community, which greatly expands the range of their interactions. This means that the more languages one knows, the wider the range of people one can communicate with. This approach does not assume the superiority of either a global or a local language, but points to the fact that the ability to use different languages makes it possible to establish social relationships and offers individuals the opportunity to make their own choices regarding the kind of life they want to lead.

What served as the inspiration for writing this book was the belief that a command of languages that do not hold a global status should be treated as a tool which makes it possible to influence social interactions, including daily conversations and functioning. Communication is inherently strategic and goal-oriented. To quote Malcolm Parks (1994, p. 592): "We communicate because meeting our needs often depends on others. Meeting our needs is possible by influencing other people or by controlling how others react to us". An effective influence over others requires considerable experience, general knowledge and the ability to use a language skilfully.

Selected approaches discussed in this section will be taken into account when analysing the narrative data presented in Chapter 4. Before that, however, we will briefly present legislature pertaining to multilingualism in Poland and the European Union.

2



Language policy and learning mobility in Poland and the European Union

The European Union brings together 27 countries whose citizens belong to different cultural circles. Some of them are relatively homogeneous, while others are an amalgamation of many ethnic groups and cultures, speaking different official languages or a whole range of dialects and vernaculars of the country's official language. Some of them have the status of ethnic (regional) languages or official auxiliary languages spoken by a local national minority. At the communicative level, the efficient functioning of such a community requires the implementation of language policy and its appropriate promotion in the member states. These, in turn, may have their own ambitions in this regard and not always fully implement the general assumptions. Considering the context of the present study, this chapter also focuses on Poland's policy as a member state of the European Union. We present the problems of all linguistic divisions, and given the context of these considerations, we refer to learning mobility, which serves to implement the assumptions of language policy on the one hand and contributes to the cultural and linguistic integration of the residents of the European Union on the other.

2.1. Language as an ideological construct

As already mentioned, language is a vital element of the identity of social, ethnic or national groups, also in historical terms. It is therefore unsurprising that nations fighting for autonomy or rebuilding their statehood often find the revitalisation and strengthening of the role of their language to be of great importance. Within these nations, there are also strong tendencies towards language standardisation. This is the case with the Ukrainian language in Ukraine and the language of the Basques living in the territory of Spain, both considered guarantors of a distinct national identity. The language policy of both Ukraine and the Basque Country is aimed at complete codification of the language, defining its legal status, dissemination and validation. Similar claims are made for the "Kashubian language", which used to be a local dialect, but after long discussions, supported by linguistic research and promotional campaigns of the Kashubian community, achieved the status of a regional language, i.e. an ethnolect (*Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages*, 2005). In fact, in all these cases one can speak of a melting pot of various dialects – from the sociolinguistic point of view – or a set of linguistic practices on a given territory, i.e. languaging – from the point of view of ecolinguistics (Lankiewicz, 2014) – which, due to political and social reasons, was unified and standardised into a distinct language to maintain a distinct ethnic or national identity.

One of the regions of Europe where linguistic divides are a direct outcome of political activity is the Balkans. The “Serbo-Croatian language”, a linguistic term used to collectively define the language practices of the former Yugoslavia, has been broken down into four separate standards used to define the ethnic (or national) identity: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. In fact, all these mutually understandable varieties are one language (its written form uses the Latin alphabet, Cyrillic or both). Linguists point out that they stem from the same dialectal group and the differences between them are smaller than those between the varieties of European languages still used in postcolonial countries or overseas territories (e.g. English, Spanish, Portuguese; Kordić, 2010).

Apart from linguistic disputes about the distinctiveness of individual languages, one may be tempted to say that today’s separation or coordination of languages is a result of language policies of specific countries, and more precisely, the result of the political activity of a given ethnic, social or political group. History offers many examples in which language policy played a significant role, with varying degrees of success, in efforts aimed at territorial unification and building national identity.

A strong tendency toward linguistic standardisation and unification is demonstrated by nationalist movements, which deem language to be not only a tool for building a sense of cultural and national distinctiveness, but also a propaganda instrument. For leaders such as Benito Mussolini or Francisco Franco, imposing a language standard was supposed to evoke a sense of community in a specific group and temper separatist movements or tendencies. On the other hand, the consistent use of the top-down propagated “newspeak” served indoctrination purposes. In his theory of cultural hegemony, Antonio Gramsci (1971[1991]) emphasised that the most subtle way to control, one that does not require the use of direct means of coercion, is the ideologisation of language.

It can also be concluded that many languages were granted the status of a language quite arbitrarily, and such decisions were often due to political reasons and resulted from divisions and aspirations that were not strictly related to the distinctiveness of the communication code. This is why contemporary linguistics often substitute the word “language” with “linguaging”, which has at least two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that in spontaneous communication language users, in principle, do not limit themselves to one linguistic repertoire but use all the linguistic resources available to them. On the other hand, individual languages are seen as a continuum: the more distant the linguistic centres (in the sense of the standard usage of a given language), the greater the lexical, syntactic or phonological differences between them. Examining language issues from a sociolinguistic perspective, some researchers point

to the so-called language myths (e.g. Bauer and Trudgill, 1998). They argue that certain normative grammar recommendations in English are the result of language policy rather than the evolution of the language variant used by native speakers. For example, the ban on dividing the infinitive results from the adoption of the grammatical norms of the Latin language, regarded as an ideal one, into the English language by the eighteenth-century linguists. The same applies to excluding the use of verbs expressing movement in the “be going to” structure, which has first appeared in grammar textbooks in the early 20th century and has been present in them ever since, even though native English speakers do not abide by it, as shown by corpus linguistic research (Burton, 2021).

Other researchers went a step further. They do not consider many myths as examples of language policy, but point to the existence of a language myth as such. Roy Harris (1981) emphasises two of its communication aspects. Firstly, he questions the existence of a language as a code non-fixity, and secondly, questions the so-called telementation, i.e. the ability to convey thoughts with the help of words. In such an approach, communication is never effective because both interlocutors use different forms and meanings, which does not guarantee the exact transfer of thoughts, i.e. a full mutual understanding between the conversation participants. This assumption became the basis for Harris to redefine the concept of both language and its attributes.

Contemporary linguists are most often far from a positivist vision of knowledge conveyed through a structured, objective language. In the postmodern world, both knowledge and the language that is used to expand it are under constant pressure. No longer is knowledge objective (critical theory), nor is language an objective instrument of its transmission (an interactive group of linguistic theories, including the critical theory). In other words, both of these elements are politically influenced and exposed to ideology.

Bearing in mind that language and language policy are at the centre of our considerations, in what follows we will first try to define what we mean by language policy and then move on to the issue of language ideologies stemming from it. However, we hope that this initial reflection on the language itself will help the readers better understand these key issues.

2.2. Concept of language policy

The term “language policy” is not as unambiguous as it might seem. The second element of the term is the most troublesome because of its fuzziness. It refers to “both the broad institutional, ideological, and legal-organisational sphere, which

is related to gaining, maintaining and exercising power, as well as the conscious and purposeful «activity» of individuals and organisations” (Pawłowski, 2006, p. 7). Additionally, as emphasised by Pawłowski, the understanding of this concept in Poland is conditioned by the historical context, i.e. the struggle to defend the national identity. It is thus unsurprising that Walery Pisarek describes the task of the Polish language policy as follows:

[Poland’s language policy] consists in watching over the development of the Polish language, popularising the beautiful Polish language, issuing language laws, and standardising and codifying the Polish language. In addition, [...] institutions try to awaken the linguistic awareness of Poles and spread among them care for the culture of the language. An important aspect of language policy is also to promote the Polish language abroad and support learning Polish as a foreign language [transl.].

(Pisarek, 2001)

This attitude towards the language policy was reflected in the Act on the Polish language (1999) and was criticised by some Polish language authorities (cf. Bień, 2003; Piotrowski, 2011). The problematic nature of this concept in the context of practising science was also emphasised by Grzegorz Lisek:

Language policy is a difficult topic, not only because of the danger of extreme politicisation of the processes related to it. It is so because of its position at the interface of many sciences, such as linguistics, cultural studies and political science. It is important that whenever language is concerned, the topic should be considered not only strictly philologically but taking into account its many aspects. The language is inseparably connected with its users who, depending on the state or religious community, may constitute a majority or a minority in a given human group [transl.].

(Lisek, 2011, pp. 79–80)

Language policy may be direct and include detailed regulations contained in specific documents or explicit (putative), resulting from the behaviour and actions of persons or institutions. According to the latter approach, it is expressed “in daily decisions of individual persons and groups, thus taking on a more intimate

dimension: private, family or social (Linda-Grycza, 2016, pp. 105–106, transl.). Moreover, the term may refer to many spheres of human activity and take various forms. In some publications, it is used interchangeably with the term “language planning” (Pawłowski, 2006).

Similar observations can be found in English-language literature, where older publications equate language policy with language planning (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997). On the other hand, for years there have been at least two journals dealing with language policy issues: “Current Issues in Language Planning” (Taylor&Francis Publishing House) and “Language Policy” (Springer Publishing House). The titles of these journals indicate the complete interchangeability of these terms as their scope is largely the same. However, planning is only a part of language policy: “it can be seen narrowly, as language planning itself, but also broadly – as both positioning the status of a language and a purist approach to loanwords” (Lisek, 2011, p. 80, transl.).

Walery Pisarek, the first president of the Polish Language Council, construed language policy as “all conscious activities aimed at shaping the desired individual and team linguistic behaviour” (Pisarek, 2007, transl.). On the other hand, Tomasz Wicherkiewicz, referring to Robert Kaplan and Richard Baldauf (1997), defined language policy as “a set of all directives concerning the shaping of society’s attitude to the language or languages present (even symbolically) and used in this society” (Wicherkiewicz, 2016, p. 113, transl.). Thus, he identified language policy with activities relating to the official and regional language or languages, whether of minorities or immigrants, or foreign languages taught and used, or dead or classical languages used in certain contexts, e.g. in medicine or liturgy. In terms of education, considering the assumptions of the language policy of the European Union, especially of the Council of Europe, Hanna Komorowska defined language policy as “a set of assumptions and priorities in the education system” (Komorowska, 2004, p. 38, transl.). The same author outlined the scope of the impact of language policy in relation to such issues as the “selection of languages, their type and number available in schools; the status of foreign languages and the languages of national minorities; teaching policies and procedures, including objectives, language curricula and methods; exams and certification; education and training of teachers” (Komorowska, 2004, p. 38, transl.).

The very issue of language policy appeared in international discussion in the 1960s and 1970s and was related to the processes of decolonisation and language problems faced by the newly established states (Kutyłowska, 2013). Today, the problems of language policy are still very much alive but there has been a shift in interest:

The narrow perspective focusing mainly on building a national identity based on a language in postcolonial countries was abandoned in favour of including such topics as: national minority rights, globalisation and the extensive use of the English language as an international means of communication or bilingual education [transl.].

(Ferguson, 2006, p. 3, after: Kutyłowska, 2013, p. 11)

Language policy has become a subject of interest among various social and scientific circles as part of three areas: status planning, corpus planning, and assimilation planning (Philipson, 2003). The first area covers legal regulations relating to the functions of individual languages and their place in the institutional system of a given country or region. The second pertains to cultural and normative issues – it is used to define correct grammatical and spelling rules for a language. The third area most often refers to the provisions of the education law, determining, for example, the range of languages taught in schools.

2.3. Language policy of the European Union and the Council of Europe

Language policy has always been an important element in the activities of the European Community and the organisations preceding its founding. Pursuant to Art. 342 of the *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (2012, p. 193): “The rules governing the languages of the institutions of the Union shall, without prejudice to the provisions contained in the Statute of the Court of Justice of the European Union, be determined by the Council, acting unanimously by means of regulations.” The Council of the European Union issued relevant regulations amending previous legal acts concerning the Community’s language policy, which laid the foundations for its functioning. Such acts include regulations of the Council of the European Economic Community (*Regulation No. 1...*, 1958) and the Council of the European Atomic Energy Community (*Regulation No. 1...*, 1958), both of 15 April 1958 and with the same content, drawn up in the official and working languages of each community. The Council amended them many times due to the accession of new countries to the European Union. The latest regulation on this subject was issued on 13 May 2013 (*Council Regulation No. 517...*, 2013), following the admission of Croatia. This document recognised 24 languages as official tongues of European Union.

Some countries of the Community have several official languages, which makes the EU language policy even more complicated. As stated by Agnieszka Doczekalska (2013, p. 237):

Until the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, it was generally accepted that if one of the official languages of a multilingual candidate country already was or was supposed to become an official language of the Union, the status of an official language of the Union was not granted to the other languages of that country [transl.].

Malta was the first country to set a precedent by requesting the recognition of Maltese since English, one of Malta's official languages, was already an official language of the European Union at the time of accession. Malta was followed by Ireland and eventually, both languages (Maltese and Irish) became official languages of the Community. Some countries did not apply for such status. Cyprus withdrew from the recognition of Turkish and Luxembourg did not apply for the recognition of Luxembourgish which had been one of its official languages since 1984 (Doczekalska, 2013). These examples indicate that the recognition of a language as official can sometimes be problematic, and it is up to the member states to apply for this status. Some dilemmas also exist with regard to the languages of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the countries of the Union, as well as the mutual relations between their languages in the era of globalisation, unification, economisation and marketisation of many areas of social life.

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union by 10 new member states, mostly located in Central and Eastern Europe, resulted in the need to revise the language policy partly due to the increased diversity of the EU's official languages caused by the newly added group of Slavic languages. To that end, 22 November 2004 saw the establishment of a dedicated EU post to manage issues of multilingualism, i.e. the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, with Jan Figel² from Slovakia appointed to serve in this capacity.

In 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria were admitted to the Union, the language policy position was given a separate ministerial office, with Leonard Orban from Romania appointed as the Commissioner for Multilingualism. During his term of office, he promoted language learning through European Lifelong Learning

² Also worth mentioning is the fact that the name of this position has changed, and its translations into Polish are inconsistent (its last part is often translated as "and of European languages", cf. Pisarek, 2007).

Programmes. In the 2010–2014 period, the issues of multilingualism were handled by Androulla Vassiliou, a Cypriot, who served as the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth. In the following years, the phrase “for multilingualism” disappeared from job titles. Vassiliou’s successor was Tibor Navracsics from Hungary, who was appointed the European Commissioner for Education, Youth Culture and Sport; and currently, Marija Gabriel from Bulgaria serves as the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. This results from the merger of the two posts and the earlier revision of the phrase “citizenship” which briefly replaced the previously used “multilingualism”. Despite the declarations published on the official websites of the European Union or implied by the names of positions held by senior EU officials, there has been a noticeable change in the significance of multilingualism in European politics, which may have resulted either from lowering the status of this issue or taking it for granted.

An important moment in the evolution of the European Union’s language policy was the release of *A new framework strategy for multilingualism* (2005). It clearly states, for the first time, that the issues of multilingualism are included in the commissioner’s responsibilities, reaffirms the European Commission’s commitment to promoting it, and sets out a vision of concrete actions targeting not only the official languages but also the 60 local and non-local languages that the migrant communities use in the European Union. The document’s introduction makes it clear that:

*It is this diversity that makes the European Union what it is:
not a “melting pot” in which differences are rendered down,
but a common home in which diversity is celebrated,
and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth
and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding.*

(source: bit.ly/31LEmuu)

After wide consultations, the European Committee of the Regions expressed its position on the framework strategy for multilingualism during its plenary session on 14 June 2006 (*Opinion of the Committee of the Regions...*, 2006). In addition to encouraging language learning as a factor enhancing mobility and economic potential, this strategic document expressed concern about linguistic diversity. It also stressed the need to protect local EU languages and raised concerns about the dominant role of English in the education systems of some non-English speaking countries. Moreover, it underlined the need to take into account multilingualism in the process of communication between the Commission and

the citizens of the European Union through the use of local languages which do not hold the status of official or working languages of the Union but are legally recognised in a given member state.

The primary shortcomings of these documents pertain to the fact that they are of a very general nature. They encourage local and regional authorities to take care of their languages and cultures while preserving the cultural and linguistic diversity of migrants as well as promote the learning of foreign languages which enables the EU citizens from different cultural backgrounds to communicate. The declared equal status of official and working languages of the Union, without properly defining them (Doczekalska, 2013), means that *de iure* they can be used interchangeably, but *de facto* some languages are used more frequently than others. In practice, the main working language of the European Union is English, which retained this status even after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom thanks to the fact that it remains an official language in Ireland and Malta. French and German are used to a lesser extent. On the other hand, while all documents and legal acts of the European Union must be published in 24 languages, the English version is often the reference document in cases of inaccuracies. However, high-aspiring, the idea of leading conversation in many languages of the Union has turned out to be a utopian undertaking. The creation of a European identity via communication commonwealth clashes with practical factors related to the greater popularity of a particular language, costs of maintaining language equality policy (e.g. translation costs) or socio-cultural problems (e.g. issues of national identity).

2.4. European education policy and linguistic diversity

Language policy in education is a crucial factor in maintaining linguistic diversity. In order to promote multilingualism, the European Commission listed the following challenges on its official website:

Poor language skills can cause companies to lose international contracts, as well hindering the mobility of skills and talent. Yet, too many Europeans still leave school without a working knowledge of a second language. For this reason, the EU has set the improvement of language teaching and learning as a priority. [transl.]

(source: bit.ly/365jnTV)

It must be admitted that the Council of Europe and other EU bodies put a lot of effort into promoting knowledge of foreign languages and increasing the effectiveness of their learning. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was developed within the initiative of the Council of Europe, which is responsible for the area of human rights (including language policy). The CEFR provides a common scale of language proficiency description, including levels and assigned skills. The system constitutes the basis for all activities undertaken in the field of teaching and learning foreign languages, e.g. preparation of textbooks and curricula or the process of certification, and makes it possible to classify students into appropriate groups based on their language proficiency. Apart from introducing the said system along with linguistic competence descriptors, as well as a description of goals, preferred approaches and assessment methods, this extensive document is the essence of the European Union's language policy.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has undoubtedly proven a spectacular success. However, the socio-cultural changes taking place in the Old Continent and new trends in the field of foreign language learning forced the Council of Europe to update it by means of three groups of experts. Hanna Komorowska (2017a) summarised the pros and cons of the original version in the context of foreign language learning. One of the CEFR's serious shortcomings was the monolingual approach to language teaching as if the new language had a designated, separate space in the learner's mind and did not interact, for example, with the first language. Monolingualism is characteristic of a communicative approach that promoted the learning of a new language as a distinct and idealised entity with no impact on other linguistic competences. As Komorowska pointed out: "there are no references to plurilingualism in the CEFR (2001), no approaches to assess the language in which school education is provided, i.e. the student's second or third language, nor are there any references to regional or ethnic languages" (Komorowska, 2017a, p. 172, transl.). This resulted from the communicative approach, which was dominant at the time of the CEFR's preparation. The first edition of the document did not take into account newer reflections on foreign language acquisition, e.g. the concept of multicompetence (Cook, 1991), translanguaging processes (Canagarajah, 2013; García and Li, 2014; Lankiewicz, 2020), new socio-cultural realities in Europe related to mass migration and resulting in the spread of multilingualism, the coexistence of many languages on a given territory and plurilingualism, the use of multiple languages by one person, not necessarily at an advanced level. When evaluating the CEFR's initial version, it is worth mentioning

that the Council of Europe issued two other documents: *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Beacco et al., 2010) and *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures – FREPA/CARAP* (Candelier et al., 2007/2012). Both publications are the outcome of the work of teams established by the Council of Europe.

Referring to the earlier reflection on the arbitrariness of official linguistic classifications, it is worth mentioning the phenomenon of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959/1972), also known as bidialectism or bilingualism. It refers to a situation where a given language community uses two variants of a language with different statuses, which influence the acquisition and mixing of other language codes. The results of such processes can be seen in an anecdotal situation that happened to one of the authors of this study during his teaching practice. One of the students wrote: “and he jumped without the fence” (Polish vernacular: *i skoczył bez plot*). While wondering about the reason for using the wrong preposition – “without” instead of “over” – the teacher, after a short discussion, realised that the problem emerged due to the influence of the local vernacular or dialect, in which the standard version of “jumped over the fence” [*skoczył przez plot*] took the form of “jumped without the fence” [*skoczył bez plot*] and was obviously translated into English literally by the student.

The updated version of the CEFR, published in 2018 under the name *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors* (CEFR/CV, 2018), seems to take into account the shortcomings and flaws of the previous edition as well as expectations that resulted from socio-cultural changes (cf. Komorowska, 2017b). The Council of Europe, the European Parliament and other bodies of the European Union have further defined the Union's language policy in relevant documents. One of them is the *European Parliament resolution of 24 March 2009 on multilingualism* (2010), which highlights such issues as the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe resulting from mobility and migration, the need to confirm the CEFR's assessment of multilingualism, tolerance and respect for language diversity and the protection of multilingualism. An important factor influencing language education and the re-issuing of the CEFR was probably the provisions of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2012), particularly Art. 21, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of language, and Art. 22, which ensures respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. Also significant in this respect were the conclusions of the Council of the European Union on multilingualism and the development of language competences (*Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences*, 2014). By emphasising the advantages of Europe's linguistic diversity, the Conclusions

also underscore the need to increase the effectiveness of language learning and properly assess language skills using the CEFR.

Although a full assessment of the CEFR's new version is beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be stated that it formulates the concept of multilingualism and embeds it in the context of language learning and the assessment of linguistic competences. The processes resulting from the mixing of languages and competences were taken into account in the new version of CEFR (cf. Lankiewicz, 2020). For example, the importance of mediation, which is a part of both language learning and linguistic communication, has been given a due attention. The addition of mediation to the CEFR resulted in the recommendation to overthrow the monolingual approach. The newest version of the framework mentions such things as the use of the plurilingual repertoire, which refers to switching between languages, takes into account dialectal use of language, considers the fact that commonly known words may have different meanings and even seeks alternative ways of expressing oneself, including with the help of facial expressions and gestures (cf. CEFR/CV, 2018). Mediation also refers to translation processes – an integral part of language learning – which have regained their proper place in language learning and teaching (Lankiewicz and Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2019). Importantly, the CEFR takes into account the fact that language learning is often local in nature and takes place in a specific socio-cultural reality, which has been reflected in the CEFR's relevant language competence descriptors.

2.5. Language policy of Poland

As a rule, the authorities of a given country conduct their own language policy. Its direction is reflected not only in the legal acts but also in the conduct and actions of the government. The rights (including linguistic ones) of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of Poland are protected by both European and Polish legislation, and the latter must comply with the former. Such rights are established at various levels of the hierarchy of legal acts, both those directly related to linguistic and cultural issues as well as other specific regulations, e.g. educational, in the *Electoral Code*, or in the *Broadcasting Act*. First, such rights are guaranteed by the *Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997)* whose Art. 27 states that “Polish shall be the official language in the Republic of Poland. This provision shall not infringe upon national minority rights resulting from ratified international agreements” (*Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997*). Poland's constitution refers to language issues three more times. Article 35 Section 1 states that “The Republic of Poland shall ensure Polish citizens belonging

to national or ethnic minorities the freedom to maintain and develop their own language, to maintain customs and traditions, and to develop their own culture”, while Section 2 says that “National and ethnic minorities shall have the right to establish educational and cultural institutions, institutions designed to protect religious identity, as well as to participate in the resolution of matters connected with their cultural identity” (*Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, 1997). Finally, Art. 233 Section 2 states that “Limitation of the freedoms and rights of persons and citizens only by reason of race, gender, language, faith or lack of it, social origin, ancestry or property shall be prohibited.”

The issues of broadly understood protection and use of the Polish language are regulated in greater detail by the *Act on the Polish language* adopted on 7 October 1999 and frequently amended afterwards. It is worth mentioning that the Act was adopted despite much criticism. The document was drafted by a group of Polish philologists who were concerned about the future of Polish in the face of globalisation and the prospect of Poland joining the European Union. The Act treats about the correct use of Polish, aims to counteract its vulgarisation, to popularise it in foreign countries, to support Polish language teaching, and even “honour to regional expressions and dialects, and their preservation” (*Act on the Polish language*, 1999, Chapter 1, Article 3). The Act also defines the rules of using the first language in relation to foreign languages in education, advertising, legal transactions and culture. Failure to comply with these provisions is punishable with a fine (*Act on the Polish language*, 1999, Chapter 4, Article 15). The Act also established the Council of the Polish Language, which serves a consultative and advisory role and reports to the Sejm (the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament) and the Senat every two years (the upper chamber of the Polish Parliament) on the state of the protection of the Polish language (*Act on the Polish language*, 1999, Chapter 3, Article 12). In addition, due to subsequent amendments, the Act also defines the principles and criteria for the functioning of the system of certifying proficiency in Polish as a foreign language with reference to the CEFR (2003) as well as the rules of conducting certification exams and the requirements which examiners must meet (*Act on the Polish language*, 1999, Chapter 2a).

The *Act on the Polish language* was criticised by many legal circles (Mostowik and Żukowski, 2001) that pointed to inconsistencies in its provisions, mistakes and even harmfulness it can cause. Some linguistic circles (Piotrowski, 2011) also opposed the Act, claiming that it creates a fictitious threat to the Polish language and imposes a prescriptive approach to language regulation.

Even though Poland, in comparison with other European countries, is quite homogeneous in both linguistic and cultural terms, it still has many ethnic

groups living on its territory. Their list is published by Statistics Poland based on the census (e.g. GUS, 2011) and the *Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages* (2005). However, it should be noted that there exists a difference between a declared and a statutory minority. In the statutory sense, only a group of people who have Polish citizenship and meet certain criteria can be recognised as a national minority. The Act recognises the following communities living in Poland as national minorities: Belarussians, Czechs, Lithuanians, Germans, Armenians, Russians, Slovaks, Ukrainians and Jews (*Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities...*, 2005, Chapter 1, Article 2). On the other hand, the Karaim, Lemko, Roma and Tatar communities are classified as ethnic minorities. The criterion that distinguishes national minorities from ethnic minorities is that the other group does not identify “with a nation organised in its own state” (*Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities...*, 2005, Chapter 1, Article 2, Section 1(6) and Section 3(6)). The Act also recognises the distinctiveness of Kashubians, citing the *European charter for regional or minority languages*, and defines their language as regional.

Pursuant to this Act, the language of a national or ethnic minority may be used by municipal authorities (apart from the Polish language) if the minority constitutes at least 20% of the municipality’s inhabitants. Additionally, such a municipality must be entered into the Official Register of Municipalities in which an auxiliary language is used (*Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities...*, 2005, Art. 9). Attempts were made to extend this right to the *powiat*³ level, but President Andrzej Duda vetoed the necessary amendment in 2015 (Prezydent.pl, 2015).

Language policy has always been associated with actions of states, communities and individuals who have an impact on the fate of people. In the scientific sense, i.e. as a subject of linguistic research, it only emerged in the second half of the 20th century and derives from critical theories that present social and linguistic issues from the point of view of a more vulnerable individual.

Walery Pisarek (2007) states that until 1989, in Poland the problems of language policy focused on the issues of the correctness of language use. This was because the government of the People’s Republic of Poland deemed the country nationally homogeneous and censorship blocked the freedom of expression. However, even then, there were disputes pertaining language policy. The policy toward the languages of national minorities began to be raised more often following

3 Local administration unit in Poland, often compared to a county.

Poland's adoption of the *Framework convention for the protection of national minorities* (1995) in 2001. It was then that the “national framework” of the Polish language policy “shifted towards the civic framework” from the purely scientific or purist one observed earlier (Pisarek, 2007, transl.). The change in optics could also be seen in the 2004 amendment to the *Act on the Polish language*. However, the practical dimension of the *Convention* was limited to a statement, the content of which was agreed upon by the member states of the Council of Europe, and which left the decision to recognise a given minority group at the discretion of individual signatories:

Taking into account the fact that the Framework convention for the protection of national minorities does not contain a definition of a national minority, the Republic of Poland declares that the notion means national minorities residing on the territory of the Republic of Poland, whose members are Polish citizens [transl.].

(Oświadczenie Rządowe z dnia 15 października..., 2001)

Poland's accession to the European Union contributed to greater care for the proper status of the Polish language and its intensive promotion in the new community. Many of these activities are undertaken in cooperation with the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL). Founded in Stockholm in 2003, this organisation functions as a network of institutions dealing with language issues of the member states. The Polish Language Council has been a full member of the EFNIL since 2006.

Representatives of the Polish authorities try to influence the language policy of the European Union, and if necessary, notify directly the commissioners responsible for multilingualism. Noteworthy in this context is the expert opinion written for the Chancellery of the Senate of the Republic of Poland by Adam Pawłowski (2009). Referring to the discourse on communication balance and the symmetry of influences of various languages as well as Poland's new position on the international stage, Pawłowski expressed the need to support the Polish language. He noted that the transnational communication system remains asymmetrical, contrary to the declarations of equal treatment of languages. Simultaneously, Pawłowski proposed the restoration of balance in the European Union by basing communication on languages representing three main groups: Romance, Germanic, and Slavic plus a world language supporting them. In the group of Slavic languages, “[due to] the status and position of Poland in the Central European region, Polish is a natural candidate” (Pawłowski, 2009, p. 6, transl.). The author called for the involvement of Polish nationals in European bodies dealing

with multilingualism and multiculturalism to pursue an increased presence of Polish in international communication and international media, including the websites of the European Commission. He also pointed to the troublesome, and even discriminatory, practices of simplifying spelling by omitting Polish diacritics and failing to distinguish male and female inflectional endings in last names.

The ministry responsible for education (since 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science) is involved in promoting the Polish language in Europe and across the world. A vital document defining the objectives of activities in this regard is *Nauczanie i promocja języka polskiego w świecie* (English: *Teaching and promoting of the Polish language in the world*; Miodunka et al., 2018), developed by a team of scientists at the request of the then Minister of Science and Higher Education. Yet another important element of the worldwide promotion of the Polish language is Polish language education for foreigners (e.g. Achtelek and Tambor, 2015; Janowska, 2019; Kajak, 2021; Miodunka, 2016b; 2020; Seretny, 2011; Zarzycka, 2016, 2017; 2018). Noteworthy in this regard is issue No. 26 (2019) of the journal “Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Kształcenie Polonistyczne Cudzoziemców” (English: “Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Polish Studies for Foreigners”), containing more than 500 pages and dedicated language learning and teaching in Poland, published under the editorship of Grażyna Zarzycka, Beata Grochala and Iwona Dembowska-Wosik, as well as the publication *Dydaktyka języka polskiego obcego jako nierodzimego. Konteksty – dylematy – trendy* (English: *Teaching Polish as a foreign language. Contexts – dilemmas – trends*) edited by Anna Seretny and Ewa Lipińska (2021). The researchers did not remain indifferent to the increased migration mobility of Poles and its linguistic consequences, which is confirmed by numerous studies in the field of Polish-foreign bilingualism and heritage Polish (e.g. Lipińska and Seretny, 2012; Pułaczewska, 2017; Wróblewska-Pawlak, 2014; Skudrzyk, 2015; Żurek, 2018).

The language policy of Poland stands not only for taking care of the national language or protecting the languages of national and ethnic minorities. The educational policy related to language learning and teaching is also its integral. The promotion of foreign language learning in Poland intensified after the political transformation, with the breakthrough moment being the establishment of foreign teacher training colleges in 1990. Their objective was to educate a team of professional foreign language teachers, i.e. this was something that the country was lacking as few candidates graduated from university philology departments then, and their curricula were often strictly academic and did not include preparation for the teaching profession. The colleges fulfilled their function and made it possible to popularise learning of foreign languages from an early age.

At the turn of the 21st century, because of the baby boom of the 1980s and the surging interest in continuing education at the tertiary level, the number of universities (including private ones) increased significantly, with faculties educating foreign language teachers and philologists breaking records of popularity. Furthermore, the community of scientists dealing with language learning and teaching has grown, as has the number of conferences and publications on foreign language teaching (cf. Komorowska, 2017b).

An important element of the language education process in Poland is the adherence to European documents, e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference, already described in this chapter as well as lowering the age at which foreign language provision begins. While in the 1990s Polish students would start learning their first foreign language in the fifth grade of primary school, between 2008 and 2017 foreign language education began as early as the first grade. Due to the popularity and wide use of English, it was commonly expected that it should be a compulsory foreign language at all levels of education. However, 2008 saw the introduction of compulsory teaching of a “modern language” into the core curriculum. Noteworthy in this regard are comments by Katarzyna Hall, the Minister of Education at the time, who justified her decision by claiming that there was a “new trend in the European Union whose point is to promote regional languages, not just one – English” (after: Czubkowska and Klinger, 2008, transl.). The decision was criticised by previous ministers: Roman Giertych, Krystyna Lybacka and others, who insisted on the priority of teaching English (Czubkowska and Klinger, 2008). Nevertheless, English became the most frequently taught foreign language of the first choice, which in turn outraged teachers of other languages, who voiced their dissatisfaction, for example, at scientific conferences on language learning and teaching.

Pursuant to the national core curriculum for schools, in force since 2017, learning a foreign language begins in kindergarten and continues through primary school, while learning a second foreign language starts in the seventh grade. The overall objective of language education is efficient communication both in the first language and modern foreign languages (*Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły podstawowej...*, 2017). With respect to modern languages, the core curriculum emphasises the “need to gradually expand the resources and correctness of linguistic means within a given topic” for both the spoken and written language variety while also shaping “attitudes of curiosity, tolerance and openness towards other cultures” and other soft skills at the same time (*Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły podstawowej...*, 2017, pp. 80–81, 250–251, both transl.). Additionally, it places a great emphasis on showing students how

a given foreign language is applied to communicate in systems involving various interlocutors, including native speakers, in different social life and occupation contexts, and using various modalities (*Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla szkoły podstawowej...*, 2017).

Despite many attempts to improve the quality of teaching modern languages in Polish schools, many experts still claim that its effectiveness is unsatisfactory (Śpiewak and Zaród, 2015). Additionally, although most Poles declare that they can speak at least one foreign language, this is not always owed to formal school education. Many people attend private classes or acquire language skills while working abroad. However, such a self-declaration does not necessarily mean that one is highly proficient in speaking a foreign language. In a 2015 survey, more than half of the respondents (56%) declared knowledge of at least one foreign language but without indicating their proficiency level. This means that almost half of the respondents (44%) did not speak foreign languages at all and used only Polish (TNS Global, 2015). Similar results were obtained in the survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center, in which 53% of respondents declared having foreign language proficiency at a conversational level (CBOS, 2016). The most popular language was invariably English, with 32% of respondents capable of speaking it. English was followed by Russian (20%) and German (14%). According to CBOS, the command of other foreign languages in Poland was low; few respondents could communicate in French (2%), Spanish (1%) or Italian (0.8%; CBOS, 2016). Further, the results of the study clearly show that Poles' linguistic skills are socially conditioned, i.e. they are influenced by such variables as age, education, place of residence as well as professional and material status. Young, educated people living in big cities and enjoying a higher professional and financial status are more proficient in foreign languages. Also worth emphasising is the significant correlation between travelling abroad and the command of foreign languages (CBOS, 2016).

Compared to the pre-1989 situation, the number of Poles who can communicate in a language other than their first language has increased, with Russian supplanted with English as the most popular second language (CBOS, 2016). After Poland's accession to the European Union, there has been significant progress in learning foreign languages; however, various statistical sources show that, compared to other EU countries, Poland still demonstrates low educational effectiveness, low diversification of foreign language skills (English is the dominant language) and problems with ensuring learning continuity that the subsequent revisions of the school core curriculum tried to remedy. Finally, Poland still ranks low in European statistics on the early start of foreign language learning (cf. Eurydice, 2017; Komorowska, 2017b; Kutylowska, 2013).

2.6. Learning mobility

The European Union policy is conducive to promoting social, professional and learning mobility. After opening its borders, the European Union stands open to its citizens. This does not mean, however, that all of them have decided to move to other regions of Europe or to go for a longer stay abroad.

The globalisation processes related to the development of transport and communication have certainly blurred some differences between countries. The unification covered many areas of life to such an extent that some are even willing to talk about the creation of the so-called international culture, especially with regard to corporations (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009; Morden, 1995) and more (Bradbury, 1982; Xintian, 2002), or about the emergence of linguistic convergence – languages becoming similar under the influence of contact in a given sphere, e.g. making European law (Genew-Puhalewa, 2011; Sosoni and Biel, 2018). Although the establishment of a new position for a person responsible for the protection of the “European way of life”, announced in September 2019 by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, was criticised and questioned (e.g. Euronews, 2019), we can all agree that the lifestyle in highly urbanised centres of Europe has recently become very unified. Moreover, the common market – the main driving force behind the unification of Europe – has made us consume the same products, often differing only by their name.

Despite these unification tendencies, mobility within the European Union member states is not something that destabilises the economic and social situation. This was something feared by such countries as Germany, which initially reserved for itself a transition period for the gradual opening of its labour market to citizens of the newly admitted EU members. There are still many barriers that limit the movement of people – related to the logistical, economic or family circumstances. Language is undoubtedly another important barrier.

The language policy of the European Union and its member states aims to break communication barriers resulting from the lack of knowledge of foreign languages and related cultures. The promotion of multilingualism also aims to protect local languages and dialects, ensuring that each region’s rights to its own language and culture are respected, and prohibiting discrimination in this regard. Therefore, at the Union level, the importance of learning mobility is emphasised as a factor that increases the linguistic and cultural awareness of its citizens through learning of foreign languages, discovering different lifestyles and mentalities, and above all, exchanging experiences and acquiring knowledge.

In an effort to increase mobility, numerous programmes were launched to promote the exchange of learners and teaching staff, including cooperation programmes between educational institutions and universities of the EU member

states, as well as mobility initiatives related to vocational training and internships abroad. This chapter does not aim to provide a historical overview of all such programmes. We will limit ourselves to mentioning the already completed Socrates programme which included Erasmus, Comenius, Lingua, Minerva, Grundtvig, Arion, Eurydice and Naric. Since 2014, some of its components have been implemented under the consolidated Erasmus+ programme.

The statistical data provided by the European Commission shows that in 2018, 435,291 outbound exchanges of students and staff and a similar number of inbound exchanges were implemented; the students and staff originated from Erasmus+ programme countries, partner countries neighbouring the European Union and others. In 2019, Polish participants took advantage of a record number of 24,882 foreign exchanges. The years 2020 and 2021 were less successful due to the pandemic, with slightly more than 10,000 exchanges (13,603 and 10,537 respectively). In the Higher Education sector of Erasmus+, Spain was the most frequently chosen exchange country, with as many as 60,476 host beneficiaries (European Commission, 2020). It is difficult to generalise the reasons why individuals decide to spend some time abroad. Mobility choices are dictated by various factors, such as the status of the university centre, location, amount of funding allocated, academic cooperation, and availability of flights. The scale of mobility also depends on the amount of funding granted to the country and the number of students.

Learning mobility contributes to the growth of internationalisation. According to Sjur Bergan (2011), this is not a new phenomenon in the field of higher education. First universities, established in the 11th and 12th centuries, considered it an integral part of a university's performance. In today's Europe, the direct impulse for the internationalisation of higher education was provided by the Lisbon strategy adopted by the European Council in March 2000. According to its assumptions, by 2020 the European Union was to become the fastest-growing part of the world thanks to innovation and scientific progress. An integral part of that strategy was the improvement of the training and education system as well as active academic cooperation. Cooperation between university centres also intensified thanks to the so-called Bologna process, initiated by the *Bologna Declaration* signed by the ministers responsible for higher education in 1999. Its main goal was to increase the transparency of university education systems in different countries, ensuring the comparability of diplomas and competences and the creation of the European Higher Education Area which currently comprises 49 countries (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, n.d.).

In addition to mobility programmes operating under the auspices of the European Commission, the member states establish national institutions

supporting learning through mobility programmes (e.g. “Campus France” in France, NUFFIC in the Netherlands, DAAD in Germany and the National Agency for Academic Exchange in Poland; cf. Bergan, 2011). Furthermore, individual Polish universities actively work to increase the inflow of students from the European Union countries and beyond by encouraging them to study in Poland.

Tomasz Domański lists many reasons for increasing the degree of internationalisation of universities, ranging from political and economic to purely academic ones. He divided them into internal, i.e. initiatives undertaken by the university itself, and external, resulting from government regulations and international agreements (Domański, 2017). One of the reasons for the intensification of measures to increase student mobility is the demographic decline observed in recent years. It necessitates the search for potential candidates for studies abroad. The same author emphasised that the effectiveness of the policy of Polish universities depends on a broader socio-political context, e.g. migration and visa policy, post-graduate employment opportunities or tuition fees, which are usually relatively higher for international students (Domański, 2017). An equally important role in the internationalisation and scope of academic mobility is played by university rankings.

Under various governments, the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (since 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science) supported the programme of internationalisation of Polish universities, allocating appropriate funds for student mobility (including admitting students from neighbouring countries) and the exchange of academic staff. A crucial step in this area was the *Higher education internationalisation programme* (Polish: *Program umiędzynarodowienia szkolnictwa wyższego*), announced in 2015 by the then Minister of Science and Higher Education Lena Kolarska-Bobińska. It declared support for universities with funding amounting to EUR 75 million, provided through the “Universities of the future” initiative (MNiSW, 2015). The document also contains estimates of the international education market’s value:

[g]lobally, 4 million people study abroad. By 2020, as many as 7 million people will want to acquire education outside their country of birth. The market is estimated at \$ 100 billion. The most active players are the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. However, there are new significant players, including France and Germany. Poland has a chance to join this group due to its dynamically developing economy, as its role as a European leader in economic growth attracts the world’s attention [transl.].

(MNiSW, 2015, p. 2)

The subsequent government continued the policy of internationalisation of the higher education system. Internationalisation became the key aspect of the reform initiated by the Minister of Science and Higher Education Jarosław Gowin. Although no stand-alone national programme focused on this issue was developed, internationalisation became part of the *Strategy for sustainable development for the period up to 2020* (Polish: *Strategia na rzecz odpowiedzialnego rozwoju do 2020 r.*), which provided for the creation of favourable conditions for internationalisation and innovation in the field of higher education. Currently, as a part of the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, the “Ready, Study, GO!” campaign is being carried out to provide information about the opportunities of studying in Poland.

In recent years, Poland has also introduced organisational changes that contribute to increased mobility and internationalisation (*Mobility and internationalisation, 2020*). In 2016, 56,000 foreign students from 198 countries studied in Poland, which means a 10% increase compared to the previous year. They were mostly students from Ukraine (30,589), followed by citizens of Belarus (4,615), Norway (1,581), Spain (1,407) and Sweden (1,291; Domański, 2017). Between 2016 and 2019, the number of students and university staff coming to Poland within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme was also constantly growing: from 17,674 in 2016 up to 21,857 in 2019 (FRSE, 2021).

Unfortunately, today’s internationalisation index of Polish universities, measured as the ratio of foreign students to domestic students, is one of the lowest among the European Union member states. In 2018, it was only 4%, giving Poland the fourth to the last place in the ranking (Eurostat, 2018). In contrast, Luxembourg’s score was 48%, Cyprus’ 24% and Austria’s 18%. Regardless of the criticism of the index itself, its average Community value of 8% should soon become the target of the Polish national strategy for the internationalisation of higher education.

3



Narrative approach to intercultural research

A narrative, sometimes also referred to as a life story or a narrative interview⁴, is a useful method of documenting not only the facts and events that may be relevant to the phenomena being studied but also their meaning and significance. Overall, this approach analyses “a spoken or written text giving an account of a series of events occurring over time and integrated into a plot” (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2010, p. 249), with the length of the story being less important. Most of the narratives fit in the continuum between a story told by a respondent without any interruptions on the part of an interviewer and an exchange of short questions and answers, making it possible to obtain reports on the events that took place.

According to Arthur Bochner (1994), analysing narratives has a lot to offer to researchers. It is a “viable option to theorising” which allows “analyzing processes of reality construction” (cited in Lindlof, 1995, p. 172). Perhaps due to the in-depth insight into the data offered by this method, it has recently become very popular in the humanities and social sciences. Some researchers refer to this increased interest as the “narrative turn” (Errante, 2000; Riessman, 1993).

3.1. Definition of a narrative

The very term “narrative” is derived from the Latin *narratio* and means “a story”. Torill Moen defined it as a “story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her or his audience” (Moen, 2006, p. 60). Storytelling plays an essential role in human life as it helps to systematise experiences and provide them with meaning. Donald Polkinghorne (1988) even stated that people cannot exist without stories and that everyone has something to tell. Meanwhile, Moen saw life itself as a “narrative inside which we find a number of other stories” (2006, p. 56).

On an individual level, narratives can play the role of powerful motivators to guide and inspire change or action: “Stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (Noddings, 1991, p. 157). Storytelling also has a social dimension, since narratives typically occur in contact with other people and they are stories that happened with their involvement (Zellermayer, 1997). According to Catherine Riessman (2008), creating and sharing narratives is a universal phenomenon that goes beyond the limits of space, time, society and age. Narratives are also potentially interactive, as they engage both narrators and listeners, and

⁴ These terms are used interchangeably in this book.

reflect the specific socio-cultural and historical context in which they are set (Elliot, 2005). Consequently, from the perspective of the socio-cultural theory, the contextual setting of individual stories must be taken into account when interpreting them.

The perception of narrative as an expression of self, identity, and culture has been posited by many scientists, especially sociolinguists (e.g. Cameron, 2003; Coates, 1996; Holmes and Marra, 2005). For example, Deborah Schiffrin (1996) considers narratives to be “self-portraits” that can be interpreted simultaneously through the prism of global and local socio-cultural norms and individual experiences. Lynne Cameron (2003, p. 459) emphasised the importance of transforming the life experience of an individual “into a coherent, lasting autobiographical narrative”, enabling the acquisition of a sense of identity, which is essential in late postmodernity (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2014).

In this context, it is also worth referring to linguistic biography as one of the available research methods (Miodunka, 2016a). In Poland, this method has been widely used in research on Polish-foreign bilingualism in various countries of the world, e.g. in Brazil (Miodunka, 2003), Australia (Dębski, 2009), Germany (Pułaczewska, 2017), France (Wróblewska-Pawlak, 2004), United Kingdom (Błasiak, 2011) and Argentina (Guillermo-Sajdak, 2015).

There are also a few narrative studies presenting conclusions on learning a foreign language while abroad. For example, Phil Benson, Gary Barkhuizen, Peter Bodycott and Jill Brown (2012) collected stories from nine pedagogy students who travelled to Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom to take part in internships lasting several weeks. The stories allowed the researchers to draw conclusions on selected aspects of identity that were influenced by learning a foreign language, e.g. self-awareness of the degree of knowledge of a foreign language, including pragmatic competence; the level of willingness to learn a foreign language and involvement in this activity; the level of self-confidence as a learner; and – most interestingly – the level of personal autonomy and independence that resulted directly from actions taken in a foreign language. The latter issue means that an individual’s sense of self-worth, independence and overall well-being increases thanks to activities performed successfully in a foreign language. The publication of Benson’s team (2012) shows that students attributed a significant increase in foreign language proficiency not so much to the completion of the foreign internship but rather to interactions with the host country’s inhabitants. These interactions served as encouragement and provided them with a more positive image of themselves as foreign-language speakers, especially in terms of their ability to express their cultural distinctness and encourage others to socialise (e.g. make friends).

Hang Du (2015), who studied the experiences of 29 American students learning Chinese (Mandarin) during their stay in China, reached similar conclusions. Almost all of them tried to use Chinese when interacting with the Chinese, which provided them with a sense of satisfaction and motivation to take on new language challenges. Du stated that the American students:

were able to actively use and even create opportunities to use the language and thus make critical discoveries about their identity, develop a more sophisticated perception of their nation and the world, and validate their own self.

(Du, 2015, p. 262)

Although most of the surveyed students started to look at China from a different perspective thanks to that stay, seven participants began to appreciate their homeland more, with their narratives showing a strengthening of their American identity.

Similar conclusions can also be found in other studies. For example, Asunción Martínez-Arbelaiz and Isabel Pereira (2018) recorded a more positive perception of students' homeland and native culture. Their narrative study involved foreigners studying at universities in Madrid for whom Spanish (Castilian) was not the first language. Further, a 2015 publication by these authors confirmed the conclusions that Benson and his team had drawn three years earlier. This time, based on a study including an analysis of two topics of essays written by 27 foreign students staying in Madrid, Martínez-Arbelaiz and Pereira concluded that interactions in Spanish not only changed the identity of the respondents as Spanish speakers but, after a period of initial destabilisation of identity as the learner, the students felt that their identity had a trans-linguistic and transcultural dimension (Martínez-Arbelaiz and Pereira, 2015).

In 2020, the same researchers examined the relationship between the level of satisfaction with a stay abroad and the level of proficiency in the local language, which seems important for understanding the results of the research presented in this book. They analysed essays of four foreign students who stayed in Madrid for a longer period and studied Spanish at an intermediate or advanced level. The subject of the study was the experiences that significantly affected the process of their learning Spanish. The study focused on breakthroughs in this process as well as linguistic aspects, e.g. the degree of complexity, correctness and fluency of the respondents' essays (Martínez-Arbelaiz and Pereira, 2020). In other words, the researchers analysed not only the stories shared by the respondents but also the language used to convey them. The authors concluded that

the level of involvement in learning a foreign language is greater when the image of the country of stay before and during the sojourn is constantly confronted and appropriately modified, similarly to the perception of oneself as a language learner. As a rule, foreigners profit not so much from the gradual acceptance of local customs but rather from the willingness to get to know the new environment through contact with the local community, leaving the comfort zone and certain personal transformation, which does not, however, lead to the negation of one's true self from before staying abroad. It also helps the foreigners to be more motivated to participate in local life, even though they may sometimes consider themselves intruders or tourists in their new surroundings. The data obtained by the Spanish researchers also confirmed that no learning progress could be achieved without an interaction in a foreign language. For example, in one of the essays they analysed, a Japanese research participant emphasised the impact of speaking the local language on the feeling of comfort and well-being during a stay abroad. In her case, her lower knowledge of Spanish translated into a sense of personal instability abroad and even into health problems: "In my opinion, nothing makes a person feel more like an outsider than being unable to communicate. [...] With all the unfamiliar sounds, my head was aching within the hour" (Martínez-Arbelaiz and Pereira, 2020, p. 119). Based on all analysed data, the researchers concluded that "language proficiency can impact identity development and identity changes, in turn, can affect language proficiency" (Martínez-Arbelaiz and Pereira, 2020, p. 123).

By analogy, in Chapter 4 we try to determine the extent to which speaking Polish can help foreigners adapt to living in Poland.

3.2. Methodological aspects of the narrative approach to research

In theoretical terms, the narrative approach is derived from ethnomethodology, the developmental concepts by Lev Vygotsky (1978), the notions of dialogism and heteroglossia by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), and the socio-cultural theory. Its origins are rooted in the ethnographic life stories researched in the early years of the last century. The classic work of Polish and American sociology by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, entitled *The Polish peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), is based precisely on the narrative approach. In later years, Harold Garfinkel (1967), an American sociologist and the originator of the ethnomethodological approach to studying societies, used this approach to explore the methods of human communication and particularly to explain how people assign meaning to experiences and organise their social world using the documentary method.

Ethnomethodological research avoids idealising and generalising. Garfinkel did not trust quantitative research methods and attached great importance to the analysis of human relationships. He dealt with the subjective nature of human experience, including communication through language perceived as a tool for interpreting and explaining social interactions, and noted that people distinguish selected facts that form a certain pattern or conform to some rule when they interact in social situations. Afterwards, they use the pattern to make sense of the facts themselves. Garfinkel claimed that people constantly isolate such patterns or rules and use them to understand new events or facts. He called this behaviour the “documentary method”. Garfinkel’s followers, such as Don Zimmerman and Melvin Poller (1970), sought to explain how members of certain groups perceive, describe and explain social behaviour. Overall, ethnomethodological research has made a significant contribution to the understanding of how humans make sense of the world around them and their social interactions. It was ethnomethodology that made it possible to understand the fact that the knowledge shared by interlocutors is not isolated or decontextualised but related to action.

Another researcher who inspired our research approach was Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), a Russian literary scholar and philosopher who opposed the universalisation of rules and definitions as well as the tendency to build systems or patterns. Instead, he advocated focusing on the context and interpreting events and the meaning of language from the other person’s perspective: understanding the interlocutor as well as the situation, events, and even the landscape, by being close to, yet not connecting with, her or him. In this interpretation, agreements reached by two different people or agreements reached by the same person but confirmed in different time-spaces will never be identical, but convergent at best. Bakhtin also stated that words are never neutral but bear traces of their history, reflecting the speech with echoes of other voices from other times and places (Bakhtin, 1986). Therefore, Bakhtin called for accepting the wealth of experimental and interpretative possibilities that life provides us with. He also emphasised the significance of the place (that he called the *locus*) from which something is perceived or observed, thus expressing his strong support for the explanation of the physical world with reference to Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity. For Bakhtin, the world of cultural, artistic and linguistic meanings was also relative (Folch-Serra, 1990).

A narrative is also a valuable research method because it enables individual differences in cognition and interpretation to be captured. It helps the respondent to observe the events that create the so-called internal focalisation (Potter, 1996). Although members of a given community may use accepted conventions to express their social identity, each person uses these resources differently, depending on the way they want to present themselves (Yates, 2005). According

to the Bakhtinist approach, to operate in a specific socio-cultural context, we do not “don a range of masks or impersonate a repertoire of roles”, but “declare oneself(s) situated among the existing languages of heteroglossia” (Klancher, 1998, p. 29). This interpretation requires clarification, as one is not always capable of making such declarations literally, nor is one always aware of one’s positioning. In the context of research, heteroglossia, i.e. defining meanings in a given context, reveals itself in socially and culturally conditioned situations that are readable to the other person – in this case, to the researcher who interprets or tries to understand the reported behaviour. This is an attitude that we strongly advocate in this book.

Differences in how respondents use conventions may result from personal psychological conditions, style of expression, relationships with particular groups or the immediate context of interactions. According to Elinor Ochs (1993), identity is shaped both by the individual playing a given social role in a specific context (e.g. parent, student, teacher) and by individuals for whom the role is played. This means that although interlocutors have a similar, socially developed pool of conventions, they use them in different ways, depending on personal circumstances or expectations.

Due to the methodological benefits of the narrative approach, the late 20th century saw its successful adaptation to research in history, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, and business sciences. It is applied to gain insight into the individual experience of an interlocutor. A positive side effect of such research is often processing “negative stories of [...] troubles into stories pointing to alternative possibilities of interpretation and action” (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2010, p. 249).

Over time, narratives also began to be used in communication research and applied linguistics in general. Their contemporary revival can be attributed to the creative interviewing concepts developed by Jack Douglas (1985) and active interviewing proposed by James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (1995). Linguistic narrative research is primarily aimed at exploring human experiences as revealed in the stories told (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). This approach makes it possible to analyse individual accounts of personal experiences and reflections expressed in narratives, as well as to organise fragmentary accounts into a meaningful whole, reflecting the complexity of life (Elliot, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Despite its relatively short tradition in qualitative and interpretive research, the narrative approach has received a lot of attention in recent years, as reflected by the growing body of literature on the subject (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2014).

It should be noted, however, that the very understanding of the narrative approach differs among researchers. John Creswell argues that in a qualitative approach, “case study, biography, phenomenological or ethnographic research can

take a narrative form of representation” (Creswell, 1998, after: Moen, 2006, p. 57). Some researchers consider the narrative approach to be a research method (e.g. Connelly and Clandini, 1990; Gudmundsdottir, 2001). This view has been criticised by other scholars who consider it more as framing and assume that narratives can both reflect and create reality (e.g. Heikkinen, 2002; Moen, 2006).

The perspective adopted in this book is in line with Moen’s view that integrated all three approaches, defining the narrative approach as “a frame of reference in a research process, wherein narratives are seen as producers and transmitters of reality” (Heikkinen, 2002, after: Moen, 2006, p. 57). It encourages narrative research rather than narrative analysis as it does not focus on the form of narration but on the potential of narration to “explain [help us to] understand a phenomenon better” (Swain, Kinnear and Steinman, 2011, p. xiii). Moreover, storytelling not only documents socio-cultural stories but also strengthens them by evoking emotions and reflections in interlocutors (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004).

3.3. Narratives in intercultural research

The narrative approach has been successfully applied in intercultural research. It makes it possible to observe the processes of communication and intercultural cooperation, especially in international organisations (e.g. Czarniawska and Gagliardi, 2003; Gertsen and Söderberg, 2010; 2011; Söderberg, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). Narratives perform cognitive, semantic and explanatory functions (Wilczewski and Söderberg, 2017) because they enable communication participants to understand, give meaning, and interpret the reality they experience in intercultural contexts. On the other hand, they help researchers to identify both differences and similarities in the intercultural experience, which may form the basis for developing effective communication and mutual trust as well as lead to the development of cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence (Söderberg and Worm, 2011).

Based on the analysis of interviews with Chinese and Western managers working in branches of Chinese companies with a global reach, Anne-Marie Söderberg and Verner Worm (2011) illustrated the potential of the narrative approach in the study of intercultural communication. It makes it possible to reduce the impact of constraints that clearly defined cultural patterns (e.g. dichotomous categorisation of low and high cultures or individualistic and collectivist cultures) may have on the interpretation of cultural phenomena. These authors argue that clear boundaries between cultural patterns do not apply to migrants in a given place. Migrants often share many multicultural experiences gained in various

educational and professional environments. In addition, due to the knowledge of at least two languages, they also tend to be aware of the differences between the cultures of their home country and the host country.

Apart from providing valuable research data, narrative interviews also have a lot to offer to the narrators themselves. Participation in a narrative interview stimulates reflection on one's own intercultural experiences by activating complex processes of thinking and metacognition (Søderberg and Worm, 2011), which is recognised as a key component of intercultural learning (Gertsen and Søderberg, 2010). For this reason, a narrative can have a practical application in the development of cultural intelligence. As a form of storytelling, it enables migrants to express themselves, articulate needs and share intercultural experiences, and as a result, reflect on them, understand them and ascribe to them a new meaning (Gertsen and Søderberg, 2010).

It is worth emphasising that social identity emerging in a narrative is not always consistent in a given time or context. The same speakers may portray themselves in various ways on different occasions, in different situations or within particular spheres of life. Social identities are dynamic, and an individual often belongs to many groups. Therefore, each individual may have many subjectivities and reveal them depending on the situation, time or social roles played (Weedon, 1987). People create diverse but coherent social identities that may consist of many elements or even blurriness. The same applies to intercultural contacts, because “there are no simple social or linguistic formulae that spit out how to compose suitable identities for the occasion” (Ochs, 1993, p. 298). This means that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can be successfully applied in contact with people of different socio-cultural profiles. A communication strategy or behaviour that once proved effective may lead to communication failure in a different situation involving other interlocutors.

3.4. Methodological aspects of the narrative interview

One of the most characteristic features of qualitative research is the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the subject. In the context of narrative research, Torill Moen (2006, p. 60) favours the use of the term “subject”, or alternatively “collaborator” or “participant”, rather than “informant”, and advises that cooperation should be based on a dialogue. Building such a relationship between the researcher and the narrator requires devoting adequate time and space to make both parties feel comfortable (cf. Connelly and Clandini, 1990;

Heikkinen, 2002) as well as creating an atmosphere of non-judgment and equality (Fetterman, 1998). Additionally, the researcher should remember that meaning is revealed on an ongoing basis during a successful narrative interview. We believe that narratives show not only the fully realised meanings, but also those constructed as a part of a reflection on one's own experience.

While narrative research can be supported by various data collection techniques, such as notes, diary entries, observations, letter-writing and autobiographical writing (Connelly and Clandini, 1990), we chose narrative interview for the study presented in the next chapter. Compared to other interview types, it is the least structured one and is primarily aimed at collecting stories that give an insight into the lives and experiences of the interviewees. John Lofland et al. state this type of interviewing provides “rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis” and its purpose “is to find out what kind of things are happening rather than to determine the frequency of predetermined kinds of things that the researcher already believes can happen” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland, 2006, p. 76).

In an unstructured narrative interview, the researcher is expected to create conditions for storytelling rather than collect answers to listed questions (Kartch, 2017). Such questions are asked less frequently, the scenario is not closed, and the role of the researcher is to listen and ask clarifying or opinion-forming open-ended questions, unlike in partially structured interviews. By asking questions, the researcher can encourage the interlocutor to develop the story and share her or his emotions and opinions, thus ensuring a “rich and well-developed narrative” (Kartch, 2017, p. 1073). Anne-Marie Söderberg (2006) also advises refraining from commenting on and judging the responses received during an interview.

As a qualitative research technique, the narrative interview is based on the above-mentioned criteria, and as an alternative research approach, it is distinguished by the following features (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, pp. 17; 28–34):

- Individualism: encourages respondents to develop topics in a way that is appropriate to their own experiences, and at the same time, it takes into account not only basic socio-cultural categories, such as social status, family role, gender or profession, but also those that make it possible to capture a personal perception of reality;
- Interpretability: enables the expression of alternative or hitherto unconscious reflections. This is especially true of content that is revealed in the dynamic interaction between the storyteller and the researcher;
- Language and meaning: the storyteller's goal is not to “read from a fixed text” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 28), but to improvise using the available

resources “far from merely reporting a chronicle of what is already present [...], the respondent actively composes meaning by way of situated, assisted inquiry” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 34);

- Thematic categories: parameters for analysis of first-person relationships are determined in cooperation with the storyteller;
- Holism: a given narrative cannot be repeated – its course depends on conditions that can be created as well as on individual characteristics of conversation.

Therefore, a narrative not only serves to obtain a story but also to discover its meaning in a complex, interactive context. This means that the role of the narrative interviewer is different from that observed in other types of interviews since it includes asking questions and writing down answers as well as creating conditions conducive to the free expression of thoughts and interpretations by a respondent. Where incomprehension occurs, the researcher should provide instructions leading to the full exploration of the theme undertaken. Before starting an interview, it is recommended to express genuine interest in it, and during its course, to maintain a focused and neutral attitude to the received content, whether transmitted verbally or non-verbally (Kartch, 2017). In fact, in this type of interview, the researcher takes the role of a listener, of the “narrator’s empathic «fellow traveller»” (Gabriel, 2000, after: Söderberg, 2006, p. 402).

With regard to the scope of moderation, the researcher may allow an interlocutor “free rein to tell his or her story” or enter into a dialogue with her or him, if necessary (Lindlof, 1995, p. 174). The researcher can also allow the narrator to interpret the meaning of the stories told by sharing one’s knowledge or experiences, which can serve as stimuli initiating a constructive dialogue and involvement of both parties.

Researchers who interview people from other cultures face additional challenges. Rafał Beszterda (2016) pointed to several cultural pitfalls that await them. He paid particular attention to excessive self-confidence, manifested by the assumption of the uniformity of European cultures or the universality of human experiences. Another threat to a successful narrative is the transculturality of interviewees and the resulting difficulty in recognising the cultural hybridisation of an individual by a interviewer.

Among the methodological pitfalls, Beszterda mentioned time constraints, which may be prevented by meticulous preparation for an interview (e.g. gaining solid knowledge on the topics discussed in advance, obtaining as much information about a respondent as possible). Secondly, the language of the conversation must be adapted to the communication skills of the interlocutor. This is also related

to the formulation of the questions themselves – those that suggest the answer or are ambiguous should be avoided⁵. In addition, researchers tend to simplify linguistic forms, which may result in excessive familiarity and affect the neutrality of the researcher–narrator relationship (Beszterda, 2016). It is also important to pay attention to the accuracy of the interview transcript and the researcher being properly concentrated.

In the early stage of the data analysis process, an interview may appear less “scientific”. The narrative session does not have a rigorous structure and provides both factual and interpretative data. Therefore, researchers most often focus on isolating and categorising thematic threads, e.g. consistent with the adopted theoretical approach or the purpose of the research. The analysis may, however, focus on discovering the reasoning presented by a respondent in her or his story (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The qualitative approach is not the only one that can be applied to analysis of the collected data. In recent years, narratives are also analysed using corpus linguistics and other methods, and are based on such tools as finding keywords, collocations or sentiment of language resources used.

⁵ Details on how to formulate questions are provided in the research methodology literature (e.g. Dörnyei, 2007; Patton, 2002).



4



Living in Poland in narrative accounts of international students

In this part, we present our research aimed at gaining an in-depth insight into the reality and experiences of foreigners learning and working in Poland, especially Erasmus+ students. We were interested in the reasons for choosing our country, the preparations they made for the mobility – also in terms of language – as well as the benefits and difficulties experienced by the respondents during their stay in Poland. We focused primarily on the respondents' opinions or reflections on the role of language proficiency in creating conditions for day-to-day functioning abroad at a satisfactory level. To collect relevant data, we conducted narrative interviews with students. The chapter starts with a discussion of the methodological aspects of the research and then proceeds with the presentation of the findings of our analyses and the conclusions drawn.

4.1. Methodology of the conducted research

4.1.1. Research goals and questions

The conducted narrative sessions were aimed at getting acquainted with the experiences of foreigners staying in Poland for a long time. The questions asked concerned the foreigners' preparation for their stay in Poland, challenges related to everyday functioning that they had to face in a foreign environment as well as factors influencing their final positive or negative assessment of their stay. We were particularly interested in the role of *Lingua Franca English* and the local (Polish) language during individual intercultural interactions as well as during the entire stay abroad. The following research questions served as the basis for formulating the questions asked during the interviews (Appendix 1a; cf. Szczepaniak-Kozak, 2012; 2014):

Research question 1: How well were the respondents prepared for the stay abroad?

- 1a) What were the respondents' expectations of staying abroad?
- 1b) What was their level of proficiency in Polish or/and English?
- 1c) What was their knowledge of Poland?
- 1d) What was the length and the type of their previous stays abroad?
- 1e) What was the profile of their cultural identity?

Research question 2: Did the respondents encounter challenges related to everyday functioning in their environment abroad, particularly those pertaining to language proficiency?

- 2a) If so, in what areas did the problems emerge (e.g. accommodation, transport and navigation, shopping, medical care, communication channels, activities outside the university, contacts with nationals of the host country)?
- 2b) If so, what kinds of challenges were they?

2c) Were the challenges related to their language proficiency in Polish or English?

Research question 3: What factors had the greatest impact on their final positive or negative assessment of their stay in Poland?

4.1.2. Research procedure

Analytical data was collected by means of 53 narrative interviews conducted in Poland in May and June 2018 ($n = 28$) and in May and June 2019 ($n = 25$). The audio recordings of the interviews total 892.36 minutes. An average session lasted 17.6 minutes ($Min = 4.19$ minutes; $Max = 48.42$ minutes; $Me = 16.83$ minutes).

To increase the comfort level of the study participants and ensure the authenticity of the sessions recorded, the interviewers assured the respondents that their identities would remain anonymous and that the material would be used only for research purposes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, following the simplified transcription conventions developed by David Boje (1991), as presented in Appendix 1b. In each transcript⁶, the researcher was marked as “I” (as in interviewer) and the respondent as “R” (as in respondent). The next step was to analyse the collected narratives. Pseudonyms were used when describing the research results.

The data was collected and initially analysed on an ongoing basis until the research sample was saturated, that is, until the collected data ceased to introduce new issues or points of view (cf. Charmaz, 2009). In a qualitative approach, the average sample size ranges from 20 to 30 interviews, depending on the type of research. For example, the sample size is 20–30 interviews in research based on the grounded theory, 5–25 in phenomenological research, and 30–60 in ethnographic research (Pasikowski, 2015). Due to the difficulties with defining the representative sample size, the decision to achieve saturation was based on the theoretical sufficiency principle (Dey, 1999, after: Charmaz, 2009).

The proper data analysis consisted of four main stages:

1. Stage one involved coding the interview transcripts and interview reports and a preliminary categorisation of threads and their quantitative summary in a spreadsheet along with the demographic data of respondents (Tables A1–A8 in Appendix 2);
2. Stage two focused on research questions and its goal was to search for repetitive patterns and keywords. Events that were presented by the respondents as turning points, challenges or crises were important in the analysis process;

⁶ Sample transcripts of several interviews are available at: <https://doi.org/10.47050/65591425.app>

3. Stage three was qualitative. Once the patterns had been identified, an in-depth re-reading was carried out and each topic was explored to gain an insight into the process of building social meaning related to the respondents' experience of staying abroad;
4. Stage four consisted in drawing conclusions from the analysis and formulating recommendations.

To avoid the pitfall of distorting the respondents' narratives that were shared in response to the questions asked, the interviewers tried to build good relations with the research participants (e.g. meeting before an interview; meeting in a pleasant place, sometimes at the interviewer's place; interviewing respondents in a friendly, semi-formal way).

The purposive sampling and homogenous sampling techniques were used. This way the specific group of respondents who share common features was reached and a coherent respondent profile was obtained (cf. Dörnyei, 2007). It should be noted that this is a non-statistical sampling technique that rejects formal procedures of random sampling, which means that the generalisation of the results onto the entire population is not justified. Individuals qualified for the study were young adults (18–30), citizens of other countries, whose common experience was a stay in Poland under an international education programme.

An important element of the project was its intercultural and international context, which had a significant impact on the research process. Another decisive factor was the language of the interview itself. The interviews were conducted in English by trained interviewers (third-year students of applied linguistics) who, however, were not native speakers of the language. There were four exceptions where English was not the first language of the interlocutors either. Despite the interlocutors' declared command of English on at least a communicative level, an interview in a foreign language definitely influenced the quality of the questions asked and the answers obtained. For example, the respondents had noticeable problems with the precise formulation of their thoughts and expressing themselves. Possible limitations in this respect were eliminated by the formula of the qualitative approach itself, which made it possible to ask questions repeatedly, as well as to clarify and paraphrase utterances. Language mistakes made by both the interviewers and the respondents, which sometimes made it difficult to understand the meaning of the narratives, were also a major barrier. It should be noted that, in accordance with accepted transcription rules, the original form of expression has been preserved, as is evident, for example, in the quoted excerpts. Sharing Monika Popow's (2015, p. 88, transl.) opinion,

we believe that the risk of “cultural overinterpretation and misunderstanding”, an inherent element of research embedded in an international environment, is a significant limitation of this type of research. Difficulties in conducting narrative interviews, both of a linguistic and methodological nature, were discussed in more detail by Emilia Wąsikiewicz-Firlej (2020).

4.1.3. Profile of participants

Among the respondents, there were 27 men and 26 women studying in Poland. They came from 24 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. The sample comprised 8 individuals from Spain; 6 from Ukraine; 4 from Italy, Greece and Turkey each; 3 from Germany; 2 from the United States, South Korea, Russia, Colombia, Canada and Belarus each, as well as one individual from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Congo, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, India, Kosovo, Romania and Lithuania each. At the time of the study, the average age of the respondents was: 22 (*Min* = 19; *Max* = 30; *Me* = 22). Although most respondents stayed in Poznań (48 people), five of them stayed in Warsaw. The demographic data of the respondents is presented in Table A1 in Appendix 2.

4.1.3.1. Level of proficiency in Polish and English

The command of Polish among our respondents was not formally verified, and its assessment is based on their declarations. Only one respondent considered himself a native speaker of Polish; four respondents claimed that they were fluent in Polish, seven assessed their level of proficiency in Polish as B1 or B2, three as communicative and another three as basic. At the time of the data collection, 35 respondents did not speak Polish at all or knew only a few basic words.

In contrast, all respondents declared the command of English on at least a communicative level. Although their proficiency was not formally checked, it was partially verified during the interview. Four respondents considered English their first language whereas fourteen regarded themselves fluent (C1/C2), fifteen intermediate (B1+/B2), and twenty communicative (A2+/B1) English speakers.

4.1.3.2. Reasons for arrival and previous stays abroad

There were several reasons why the foreigners came to Poland. The vast majority came to study (48), four of them planned also to start a professional career, two wanted to continue working in Poland, and one came to Poznań as a volunteer within the framework of a larger international initiative. These numbers do not add up to 53 as some respondents declared more than one reason.

The student respondents varied in terms of the types of universities and fields of study they represented. They included philologists (English, Russian) and students of the sciences, e.g. engineering, medical or social sciences (e.g. economics). The length of their stay in Poland ranged from 2 to 72 months ($Me = 6$ months). A typical stay lasted 5 months (the most common value).

Less than half of the respondents had previously made longer sojourns abroad. The remaining ones had no such experience or declared only short holiday stays abroad before coming to Poland. Only three respondents had previously stayed in Poland for a longer period of time: Meghan (Turkey), who had spent five months in Łódź, Jack (Canada) who was fluent in Polish and visited Poland many times, and Hans (Germany) who had Polish parents and was fluent in Polish as well.

4.2. Results

The analysis of the collected data presented in the subsequent sections follows the sequence of the research questions included in Section 4.1.1. Accordingly, the discussion begins with the presentation of information on the respondents' mindset and preparation for their stay in Poland.

4.2.1. Preparation for departure

The respondents' preparation for the stay abroad was usually limited to the absolute minimum: it mainly included collecting and filling in necessary documents ($n = 41$; cf. Table A2 in Appendix 2). Although several participants declared that they had spent some time learning the language of the host country ($n = 19$) as well as the culture ($n = 26$) and history of Poland ($n = 40$), the analysis of individual narratives showed that these preparations were rather brief and superficial. The foreigners often openly admitted that they were not at all prepared for their stay abroad (e.g. as reported by María, Oksana, Hans, Sandra, Luika, Cora). They took a very spontaneous approach to their sojourn and their preparations were usually limited to searching the internet for basic information about the host country and filling in the necessary documents, including the Erasmus+ learning agreement. In this context, the respondents often complained about the bureaucracy involved in participating in the programme.

The participants in our study were motivated to come to Poland primarily by personal motives (cf. Deakin, 2014). They did not seem too interested in the culture or language of the host country (with some exceptions). Most often

they were fascinated by the mere possibility of going abroad, which can be illustrated with Lucy's words (Spain)⁷:

EXTRACT 1

- 26 R: Yes and... I decided to come here because
I always wanted to do Erasmus. I didn't much care
27 where, but I also wanted to do with my friends
from university, and for some point places like
28 UK or France or Italy, where three places were,
like, for whole university just one or two, and
29 me and my friends are a group of three,
so we couldn't go over there together, and we realised
30 that [we can be together] in Poland. At the beginning
we didn't want to come to Poland, I have to admit it. [laughter]

In most cases, the search for information on Poland or the city of residence during the exchange was limited to using internet search engines or Wikipedia. Phone applications also turned out to be useful (Jaroslav, lines 14–18 in interview transcript). Some respondents consulted friends or family members who had previously visited Poland. For example, Sabine from Germany admitted that:

EXTRACT 2

- 69 R: I had a little bit knowledge because of the girl I talk to.
Also, I searched something up. I
70 also took Polish history lessons. One of my professor
from the university she is from
71 Poland and she is really, really nice. She said also
some stuff to us, also funny stuff.
72 That the man kisses your hand and stuff like this.

Preparations for the stay in Poland were not troublesome for more experienced students, especially those who had previously been abroad. This was the case with Erva, a student from Turkey who had previously spent six months in the Netherlands within the Erasmus+ programme:

7 The transcripts retain the original wording and expression of the respondents' utterances. The numbers given next to the responses correspond to the line numbers marked in the transcript of each respondent's narrative.

EXTRACT 3

- 11 R: I think I was well prepared because
I've been abroad couple of times previously.
12 So... and I knew that I wanted to do this...
moving abroad and living there /for/ some
13 time. So, I think.... I was ready and prepared
for this different experience.

Ismail (Turkey), on the other hand, had a Polish pen friend from Poznań, whom he met on the internet to practice English. This participant in study had quite a rich intercultural experience, having spent three years intermittently in the United States. However, he found the United States to be a country incomparable to Europe and described it as an “entirely different world than Europe” (31). Due to his previous experience of living abroad, he did not pay much attention to preparing for his stay in Poland.

As already mentioned, many respondents took no effort at all to prepare for the sojourn, as explained by Marco (Italy):

EXTRACT 4

- 11 R: I was not prepared at all, because it... it was first
*** [incomprehensible] period abroad far away from my
12 country so I was just... hoping that I will meet
nice environment and nice people and this is
13 what... what happened.

His compatriot Antonio spoke in a similar vein, honestly admitting that he knew little about Poland. His knowledge of the host country was mainly based on the information he had learnt during his history and geography lessons in junior secondary school. He never read about Poland or its customs on his own initiative nor made adequate preparations. In a similar way, Josip from Croatia, perceived Poland before his sojourn as a very cold country whose inhabitants consume a lot of alcohol:

EXTRACT 5

- 9 R: Unfortunately, before coming to Poland
I had no information about this country except
10 that... it is very cold in winter and that people drink a lot.

Cora from Greece followed a similar train of thought and took clothes unsuitable for the Polish climate (19–21).

The lack of preparation may indicate little interest in the host country, or youthful spontaneity, and the belief that a longer stay abroad, especially with the Erasmus+ programme, should be university-controlled, and therefore a positive and safe experience. The interviews reveal a picture of young people thirsty for new experiences and intercultural interactions, open to whatever they find upon their arrival. Monika Popow (2015, pp. 89–90) also drew attention to a similar attitude towards Poland as the place of study. In her research, Poland was defined as the “random country”, to which the respondents came because it was available “on the Erasmus programme list”, or to which they were assigned when applying for the exchange.

4.2.1.1. Knowledge about Poland

The respondents knew little about Poland, its culture and customs (e.g. Oksana, Oscar, Meghan, Klaudia, Semiramida, Sandra, Luika). Some students, e.g. Marco, knew absolutely nothing about Poland: “it was a total surprise” (28). Just like Sabine from Germany, for whom Poland was not the country of her first choice to study within the Erasmus+ programme. Nevertheless, she decided to come to Poland, also to get to know her homeland’s neighbouring country a bit:

EXTRACT 6

- 78 R: [...] is the reason why I choose Poland.
It is near country and I do not know nothing and I have
79 never been there.

During the interview, most of the students mentioned that they knew typical Polish dishes, and some heard stories about popular places of historical interest or values considered common to Poles, such as hospitality (Jura, 39). A good example is Monica, an Italian student of Polish philology who speaks Polish at a B2 level:

EXTRACT 7

- 34 R: Yeah, I know Poland because I study Polish and Polish culture, Polish
35 language and culture. And I was here as well two years ago. I was living
36 in Krakow for another Erasmus, so at least I knew some habits of Polish
37 people and how, for example, the food, about the food, about the currency
38 /because it is different than/ euros.

Respondents also expected Poles to be very religious (Carla, Jura). Furthermore, their sojourn, some students were convinced that they were going to a country that was not very developed in terms of economy and infrastructure. This may be well illustrated by the words of Carla from Spain: “I thought Poznań is not so developed” (54).

Most of the respondents stated that they knew basic historical facts about Poland. Most often they mentioned the Second World War as the most important event in Poland’s history, which was sometimes the only one they knew. This was reflected, for example, in the accounts shared by Luika, Steve, Carla and Noah, who said that Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and that the latter suffered significant damage and loss of lives during the Second World War. José from Spain, who admitted that he knew almost nothing about contemporary Poland (32–33), still had knowledge about the Second World War and other historical facts. Oscar, a student from Colombia (84–97), also knew about Poland’s participation in both world wars. Sophia from Greece mentioned history, describing it as (56–57) a “really big issue” (41) because of the two world wars. However, she was the one of the few people who mentioned Polish artists and expressed her admiration for Polish film directors, especially Pawel Pawlikowski (46–48). The other Polish artist, mentioned by Ada from the Czech Republic, was the singer Margaret.

Fabiano from Italy (20) admitted that Western Europeans do not pay much attention to the countries of Eastern Europe. However, just before leaving for the exchange, he began to read about Poland’s history, which further strengthened his motivation to come. He felt a greater desire to visit the place with such a significant history.

Other respondents knew about the partitions of Poland in the 18th century and the role of Christianity in its history (e.g. Semiramida from Azerbaijan) or Poland’s membership in the European Union (e.g. Esmeralda from Armenia). Jae, a student from South Korea, associated Poland with Fryderyk Chopin, Nicolaus Copernicus and the communist regime:

EXTRACT 8

- 16 R: there was not many information about Poland
in Korea so it was scared. [laughter]
- 17 I: And, uhm, what was your level of Polish language skills?
Do you know Polish or not at all?
- 18 R: Very, very low, low level, I, I can only speak
very few words in Polish, like “dziękuję” or
- 19 “dzień dobry” or “dobra”, like that [laughter].
And so, so words, like, yeah, yeah [laughter], because it

- 20 *** [incomprehensible part] when I'm shopping.
 21 I: Uhm, okay. And did you know anything about Poland?
 What was your knowledge /uhm/
 22 of this country?
 23 R: I... did... I know, I knew about that (2.0) Poland is a...
 Poland is a the national for
 24 Chopin and Copernicus and Curie and about the... it,
 Poland was a communist country for
 25 long time and about that it's a Central Europe country,
 not the East Europe /mhm, mhm/. That
 26 was all.

Interestingly, the respondents focused rather on those issues concerning Poland that were important from their point of view. For example, Noah, a student from Cameroon, was intrigued by the fact that Poland had never established any colonies in Africa:

EXTRACT 9

- 81 R: Yeah, historically I learnt about the issue
 of communist party, how the Polish people
 82 were attacked by the Germans. I also learnt
 about Poland has never been involved in
 83 colonisation. They never had colonies in Africa [...]

Another student, Ismail, showed some basic knowledge of major Polish cities and “what happened to Poland” during the Second World War. However, it was more important for him that Poland and the Ottoman Empire had a centuries-old history of mutual relations, and that there was a Polish village near Istanbul. The same theme of looking for similarities appeared in the narrative of Andrei who pointed to some similarities in the history of Romania and Poland: “I learn to discover that me, my country and Poland have, like, a similar connection; we have similar history. The Ottomans, communism and Russians” (56–57).

Summing up, it can be stated that before the respondents' arrival they had basic knowledge about Poland, and the most typical pattern of preparation for the trip was talking to friends and browsing the internet.

4.2.1.2. Attitude and expectations

Before arriving in Poland, most respondents had a positive attitude ($n = 44$), and only a few had some negative expectations ($n = 8$). One person did not have

any expectations at all (Table A3 in Appendix 2). Most students treated their stay within the Erasmus+ programme as an international or even cosmopolitan, and not a local/cultural, experience. Moreover, the respondents expected that the main means of communication in Poland would be English (e.g. Gael from Spain).

With regard to the respondents' expectations, excitement was a primary theme in their narratives, often further enhanced by such words as "profound", "really" and "very" (e.g. Steve, Helena, Meghan, Luika). This can be exemplified by the words of Sabine from Germany:

EXTRACT 10

- 49 R: [...] I was really excited to go, like, to have a new experience to
50 prove my languages. Yeah, I was curious how many Erasmus
people are here in Poznań.
[...]
56 And what else can I say. I was also a bit sad
because of family and boyfriend at home.

Sometimes excitement was quite overwhelming: "I was so excited that every day I woke up. A month before leaving I woke up and opened Google Maps and I walked around Poland" (Meghan, 15–16). This was often intensified by unspecified difficulties that the foreigners anticipated upon their arrival in Poland (e.g. Steve, 17; Oksana, 4). On the other hand, for Semiramida, studying abroad was her childhood dream which got fulfilled in Poland (179–180). Marco, who stayed abroad for the first time, recalled the feeling of a great emotional shake-up and the expectation that something nice was going to happen:

EXTRACT 11

- 16 R: I had *** hopes, because as it was my first experience
abroad I really, I was really excited
17 and I had [all of that feeling] that something nice
would have happened. And in fact I had
18 wonderful time, I met wonderful people
and I am really happy of what had...

The respondents who had previous intercultural experiences got accommodated in a new place of stay in a relatively stress-free manner (e.g. Tom, Eduardo). Thanks to those experiences, they were more confident and independent and knew that they would survive in a new environment. Fabiano (8) recalled that earlier

experiences helped him get rid of his fear of other people. Although he expected temporary difficulties, he was not particularly worried, which is reflected by the following extract: “when you come to a different country, you have to get used to its customs. I mean, it is normal and okay” (44). Some people felt anxiety or even fear, e.g. María from Spain, who expected everything to be different: “Poland is a totally different country” (4). As South Korean Jae confessed:

EXTRACT 12

- 14 R: Uhm, before right before I came to Poland
 honestly it was really scared but because it was
 15 my first time to live in foreign country
 without my family, so I'm all alone.

Some interviewees were afraid that they would have communication problems or experience loneliness during their stay in Poland, as exemplified by Josip:

EXTRACT 13

- 26 R: I was afraid before I came here...
 and I was almost sure I will face problems (2.0) and
 27 maybe that..., yyy..., I won't find friends
 or that my English will not be so perfect to
 28 communicate with people... But the worst for me
 was the fact that I will miss my family,
 29 my friends or that I won't pass... exams here.
 It is really difficult, ehm..., to pack all things
 30 and go somewhere, eee..., to the place that...
 you even don't know and, yyy, all this, yyy..., paper
 31 works at university... This whole process
 before coming to Poland was a little bit...
 32 stressful. But now I think [laughter] it about, ehm...,
 to choose Poland and to take part in this
 33 programme, eee..., it gives you a lot of possibilities
 and it is the best opportunity to know
 34 (2.0) myself better.

In turn, Erva from Turkey expected to get acquainted with the new culture, language and people. In an essence, she was ready for new experiences that she treated not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity for personal development:

EXTRACT 14

- 14 I: Mmm... And what were your expectations of this stay abroad?
15 R: /To get to little/ (2.0) know more about
the culture that I'm going to be
16 exposed, which is now Poland, to learn
their language, meet new people, experience new
17 things and to open up, I don't know...,
new windows for myself... different points of views.
18 Yeah..., kind of, like to challenge myself as well, so...

In the case of Monica from Italy, the reality has exceeded, in a positive sense, her wildest expectations:

EXTRACT 15

- 19 R: Well, yes! I did not... expectation. I did not expect to be so good here,
20 especially the university. I knew that it was a high standard university,
21 but I expected less. So, my expectation as they were, really good fit. As
22 far as the city,
23 I thought it was smaller, actually...

Negative feelings related to staying in Poland were rare, but they still appeared in some individual narrations. For example, María believed that food in Poland was unpalatable (10) and she stuck to the stereotype of Poland as a dangerous place. This conviction was nurtured by her friends: “You are going to a dangerous place, so watch out! Maybe there are wars, it is a strange place” (20). Moreover, she claimed that Poles “are very closed, not open” (María, 110). Semiramida had some fears related to the climate (150) characterised by, in her opinion, cold weather and lack of the sun. Lucy shared the same concerns; however, she changed her mind during her stay in Poland:

EXTRACT 16

- 33 R: Ehm, because maybe because we didn't know
much about the country also... and we
34 knew it is a cold country, and we are not cold persons.
We can't, we can't much stand it
[...]
46 R: My expectations at the beginning
47 before coming here and nowadays
are really different. [laughter]

The discrepancies between expectations and a rather negative image of Poland as an underdeveloped and poor country and the actual reality were particularly strong in the case of Tom with American-Taiwanese roots:

EXTRACT 17

- 108 R: Yeah, actually, actually I almost know
zero about Poland. The... yeah.
- 109 But of course I have some, like, mis...
misunderstanding about this country as
- 110 well. I've always been thinking Poland is kind of like...
East European. So, people are...
- 111 very poor here. And then there is no resource here.
Until the moment I come
- 112 here and I realised – Oh, la, la, I was wrong.

In general, the most negative expectations we collected were related to studying and the host university, cold weather, fears regarding the economic situation, the level of Poland's economic development and its security, food as well as allegedly reserved people.

4.2.1.3. Reasons for exchange and motivation to take part in it

On the whole (Table A4 in Appendix 2), the most important reasons for coming to Poland were the desire to experience a different culture, broaden the worldview, meet new people ($n = 41$) as well as the desire to obtain education and the opportunity to complete a Master's degree ($n = 36$). This does not seem surprising given that most interviewees were Erasmus+ students. Previous positive intercultural experiences ($n = 32$), which became a strong motivator, ranked second. Antonio (Italian) even mentioned that Erasmus+ was all about gaining intercultural experience and studying itself not have to be a priority (78–79). For example, previous positive intercultural contacts played a decisive role in motivating the Spaniard Eduardo to come to Poland:

EXTRACT 18

- 3 R: ...Okay, so I think that I was, I came, I come
to Poland really well prepared because in the,
- 4 eee, two previous years I had the opportunity
of having the experience of living abroad because
- 5 I got a, eee, grant during the last two summers
in order to study in, in

- 6 R: /Yhm./
7 I: Wales for a short, eee, period, so this experience
taught me that I was that I'm able to live far from
8 home, far from family, from my friends and from my city...
and also that I can learn everything in
9 in English as it's as it was my mother tongue...

The willingness to have fun and make new friends ($n = 30$) as well as leisure opportunities ($n = 30$), were next on the list. The words of Manuel, an Ecuadorian living in Spain, can be considered representative in this matter – he pointed directly to the desire for unlimited opportunities to have fun and establish relationships with the opposite sex, which he succinctly summed up as follows:

EXTRACT 19

- 67 I: What were your expectations of your stay in Poland?
68 R: Okay, uhm. I was thinking about that, ehm,
I will go crazy here because
69 he, he I know that parties, Erasmus, ehm, money
70 I: /girls/
71 R: is cheaper so my... my expectations wasn't so high.

The theme of having fun was also present in the narrative of Jaroslav from Lithuania, who had rather vague, albeit positive, expectations: “As any other student, you know, I simply [wanted] to have fun..., meet new friends” (9). Jaroslav had previously spent a year in the United Kingdom working at a food processing plant to earn some money, which he believed to have been a “wonderful experience” (30–38). Klaudia from Germany said that getting to know a new culture, as well as having fun and a good time, was the essence of participating in the Erasmus+ programme:

EXTRACT 20

- 16 R: I just wanted to meet new culture because
it's different from the German culture. I just
17 wanted to enjoy, just have fun because
Erasmus is about this, should be.

Esmeralda from Armenia referred to her expectations concerning her stay in Poland in a similar vein:

EXTRACT 21

- 7 R: Actually, I was expecting really, really great time
in Poland to spend. I was expecting, eee, a
8 lot of trips, very amazing time and a lot of new friends,
and I can say that my expectations
9 really came through.

Other types of motivation can also be extracted from the collected data, including those related to the development of professional qualifications and increasing one's labour market competitiveness ($n = 23$) as well as the good reputation and educational offer of the host university ($n = 20$). These were the reasons that motivated Oscar to choose of Poland as a place to study. He was mainly encouraged by the specific educational offer that met his needs, i.e. Master's studies in robotics and automation conducted in English at the Poznań University of Technology. Although his stay in Poland was not preceded by any preparations, Oscar had a positive attitude towards the host country and its inhabitants, which resulted mainly from the opinions about Poland he had heard from his friends (18) and read about in a few unspecified sources. Apart from acquiring a prestigious Master's degree, his other expectations were rather vague: "I don't know, [if] I want to... meet people, travel and go to... some cities..." (Oscar, 52–53) or: "this is all I expected... it is not so different" (64).

Noah from Cameroon, a biology student who expected a high level of technology and a well-equipped laboratory, also treated the subject of his studies seriously. These factors played a decisive role in choosing Poland, which he perceived as a technologically advanced European country:

EXTRACT 22

- 71 R: Actually, I knew I was leaving from
a less equipped environment most of the
72 laboratory, because I'm studying biology.
So, I was expecting to see, you know, high
73 technology. I was expecting to see – Poland is in Europe
– so I was expecting to see how, you know,
74 electricity not being a problem,
good portable water. Then, too, I was
75 supposed to see, you know,
advancement in the technology.

The interviewees who had previously completed internships abroad showed a particularly deep understanding of the benefits offered by a stay in Poland. For example, Fabiano emphasised that internship mobility within the Erasmus+ programme made it possible to establish relationships with others or achieve lasting, though unspecified, results: “I will try to use Erasmus programme not as other Erasmus students – at parties and such stuff, but to create something that is worth it” (56).

Some respondents mentioned the need to change their place of residence and travel ($n = 18$, cf. “Tourist attractions, a good starting point for travel” in Table A4). Steve, a medical student, confessed: “I just wanted to go” (19). He wanted to visit a destination he knew nothing about to get to know it better. He liked the very idea of transitioning from the state of *tabula rasa* to knowledge by getting first-hand experience, which he believed was “a better way of learning” (Steve, 23–24).

Some respondents chose Poland to learn the local language ($n = 12$), but practically all of them wanted to improve their global language skills (in this case, English). This is exemplified by the reflection shared by Ada from the Czech Republic:

EXTRACT 23

- 10 R: (2.0) Of course, of course I wanted to improve my English...
because still I think that I, I
11 need to learn a lot... and on the other hand,
I wanted to learn Polish (3.0) and what's more, I
12 wanted to gain some experience abroad
experience in studying and maybe (2.0) in job and I
13 really wanted to visit Warsaw and other popular
cities and meet new friends or party with them.

Personal recommendations ($n = 19$) and previous positive experiences with Poland or its inhabitants ($n = 17$) played an important role in deciding to come to Poland. For example, Saskia, who came from Spain, chose Poland because she had a very good rapport with Polish teenagers who visited her during the International Youth Day: “When you meet people from there, you think: okay, the country must be good, because people are nice, so it will be nice” (13). On the other hand, Helena and Meghan decided to return to Poland due to the positive experience during their first exchange. Meghan had stayed in Łódź during her first visit and decided to come to Poznań for her second one. She mentioned some difficulties she had experienced during her first visit in terms of language, bureaucracy, transport and medical care, but she was very

enthusiastic about the second exchange and the new destination city that she ultimately defined as “perfect” (196).

It is worth mentioning that some students confessed to have selected Poland because of the low cost of living ($n = 15$). This theme echoed particularly strongly in the interviews with Tom, Eirini, Manuel and Jae. The latter came to Poland mainly for that reason, which was a great financial relief for his parents, who supported him (19). Although Jae had travelled around Europe before, he had never been to Poland. The only objection he had to Poland was the language barrier – he was not sure if he would be able to communicate in English. Meanwhile, the reality surpassed his expectations. It turned out that most of the people he interacted with spoke English. It is noteworthy, however, that he did not even consider mastering the basics of the Polish language to be able to communicate with the local population. During his stay, he only managed to learn a few basic phrases. Gael from Spain was also driven by financial factors and the location. This argument often appeared in the interviews with Spaniards:

EXTRACT 24

- 25 R: Well, actually I wanted, uh, because...
I'm gonna stay here for one year, so
26 I wanted a cheap place.

Several respondents mentioned that they were motivated to leave their home country mainly by the desire to become independent from their parents and to try to live on their own. Such reasons for participating in the exchange were sporadic and therefore not included in the overall summary. They are illustrated, for example, by the words of Sophia from Greece:

EXTRACT 25

- 6 R: Uhm, firstly, I was living with my parents,
so I need to go abroad in order to live on my
7 own.

The weather was not a factor that encouraged the foreigners to stay in Poland. Only seven respondents found the climate attractive. The vast majority (especially people from the southern countries) treated Poland's weather conditions as a challenge or one of the negative aspects of their stay, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

To sum up, the students participating in the study most often chose to stay in Poland to combine learning with fun. They looked forward to new life experiences

and Poland turned out to be an accessible and affordable choice for them. Similar motivations were indicated by Monika Popow (2015, p. 91, transl.), whose research points to “a rather global experience of being a foreign student in Poland” as well as the benefits of staying in an international environment, i.e. getting to know new cultures, learning openness, tolerance, establishing international relations). Conditional values appeared less frequently. It was only more experienced students, who had previously stayed abroad for a long time, that chose Poland because of the benefits it had to offer.

4.2.2. Challenges

The respondents who had previously completed a foreign internship or visit of some kind did not find their stay in Poland particularly burdensome. A good example is Jae from South Korea who replied as follows when asked about the problems or challenges he experienced:

EXTRACT 26

- 227 R: [...] I don't have any,
228 like, problem or challenge. I love my life in here.
I'm enjoying my life in here fully, like, more
229 than one hundred percent. This is much more than I expected in Korea [...]

Problems usually appeared at the beginning of the stay (first week) and pertained to organisational issues (e.g. Ada). For Eduardo, a student from Spain, the differences between Poland and his country were minor (8; 19) and limited to timetables and means of transport (Extract 27). The attributed all difficulties to the fact that he did not speak Polish (Extract 28):

EXTRACT 27

- 54 R: No, not really. I think that, eee, (4.0)
the style of living in Poland, eee..., is really, eee...,
55 really similar to any other (2.0), eee,
European city, just maybe timetables are little bit different.
56 Okay, for example..., eee (2.0), like, yeah,
that's timetable for lunch, for dinner, this is the only
57 difference. But for the rest of the daily life more or less
it's the, eee, same you know, buses,
58 work, exactly, eee..., the same, trams also...,
eee, lectures also. So not, not a big difference
59 between this and my country.

EXTRACT 28

- 63 R: No, not really, not really I think that...,
 yyy, there are a lot of difficulties for us, but, yyy,
 64 just because of the language barrier. But, yyy,
 once that you learn a few vocabulary in Polish,
 65 yyy..., the system works more or less the same as,
 as in a Spain... I mean, yyy, it's like I
 66 think I think, yyy, that if I could speak Polish,
 I could find the same difficulties here in Poznan
 67 than in other big city in Spain, like Valencia or Malaga,
 is the same you know sometimes for
 68 example the, eee, transportation system...

Some respondents, especially those from the southern countries, complained about the weather ($n = 12$). For example, Gael, a Spaniard from Barcelona, stated that he found the cold to be the greatest challenge (235). Another challenge was the initial feeling of loneliness, which fortunately was temporary and passed after making new acquaintances ($n = 11$). This was the case for Sofia from Greece:

EXTRACT 29

- 13 R: I didn't face many difficulties, eee,
 except from the first time, the first day when I was
 14 here in Poznań, aaa, it was difficult for me
 because I was alone. I didn't have anyone and I
 15 didn't know anyone I /Poznań but/
 16 I: /Yhm./
 17 R: Later next week, aaa, was better
 because I met some, aaa, friends.
 18 No, I met some guys actually, eee, students also from Erasmus
 and it was better from time to time.

4.2.2.1. Language barrier as the biggest challenge

The data shows that the language barrier was the most serious problem faced by the study participants ($n = 45$). At the beginning of their stay, only a few foreigners spoke Polish to a degree that enabled trouble-free everyday functioning. Problems related to the lack of language proficiency appeared in almost all narratives collected. Polish was perceived as very difficult and was even dubbed “black magic” by Svetlana from Bulgaria (17). Some students clearly admit that

a “language barrier really exists” (Sandra, 73). The foreigners whose native languages belonged to the Slavic group (e.g. Jura, Oksana, Michalina, Sasha) also faced difficulties, which contradicts the popular stereotype that all Slavs can easily communicate with each other. Josip from Croatia recalled the following:

EXTRACT 30

- 36 R: ...I had no knowledge of the Polish language.
I heard only that Polish is the most
37 difficult or one of the most difficult and...
also beautiful at the same time... But as I said
38 before it... I know only some words, eee,
which my friends taught me. But even, eee..., after
39 my stay here I still don't understand many words in Polish...
I, I even enrolled in Polish
40 class but, eee, it didn't give me a lot.
You have a lot of difficult words to...
41 pronounce [laughter]. After I came back to Croatia...
I'll have motivation to learn that
42 language. I really want to learn (2.0) it.
I decided to buy some books to make my Polish...
43 better.

Apart from a few respondents (e.g. María from Spain and Jaroslav from Lithuania), most of them did not speak Polish upon arrival. Michalina from Ukraine (17) was aware that she would not be able to fully integrate with Poles due to her not speaking the local language. Fabiano, a student from Italy (46), noted that proper understanding of the local language required spending enough time talking to Poles. He also says that “pay[ing] attention to details” is required to understand the subtleties of the language used. Due to the language barrier in Polish, it was impossible for him to understand jokes or fully participate in social life. The same issue was mentioned by Antonio and Carla, who agreed that translating jokes from the native language was very difficult and sometimes even impossible, which rendered the jokes unfunny for the recipient. Carla pointed out the following:

EXTRACT 31

- 108 R: if you want to understand a joke, you cannot ask to repeat,
because it would spoil the fun...

- 109 you cannot say all the time: “once again, once again”,
because the conversation would be...
110 irritating for the other person.

Fabiano also referred to his initial ignorance of the rules of writing stylistically correct e-mails. While exchanging e-mails, he noticed that his messages differed greatly in style from those sent by his professor, which prompted him to work on improving his writing style. “I have never seen such a style of writing e-mails and I started to use it following my knowledge and experience” (33), he said.

Insufficient knowledge of Polish or the lack thereof was a particularly acute problem for those studying outside the Erasmus+ programme. Such students had to take up a standard curriculum with Polish as the language of instruction and classes conducted by lecturers without foreign language teaching. The words of Sasha, a hydrology student from Ukraine, accurately reflect this experience: “I was overwhelmed by Polish. You had to communicate with students, with teachers. You had to read, learn and think in Polish” (256–257).

Some foreigners living in Poland mentioned that they were disappointed with the fact that not all information, especially that exchanged between teachers and students, was available in English. They felt that they received lower marks on the tests because of that, and sometimes they did not know that there were assignments to be submitted at all. Fabiano learnt to accept those circumstances by treating the entire academic experience as a game (54), that is, not very seriously. Problems were also reported by Oscar, who found it difficult to pronounce Polish words and phrases (82). Fortunately, his Master’s studies at the Poznań University of Technology were carried out in English, thanks to which the language barrier in the academic community was easily overcome.

Steve’s (35) narrative revealed an interesting issue concerning the process of learning and understanding Polish content in the context of medical sciences. Steve first learnt a given portion of material in Polish, i.e. the language of his medical lectures, and then repeated it to himself in English. Thus, he acquired medical knowledge through translation, which took the form of an internal conversation, bringing an increase in his medical knowledge in the two languages at once.

Without contesting the usefulness of English in today’s world, it should not be taken for granted that speaking it is sufficient for a successful life in a non-English speaking country. Although at the beginning of the conversation the locals willingly exchange polite phrases in English, sooner or later they switch back to their first language, and a foreigner without a sufficient command of the local

language remains excluded from the conversation. This conclusion is confirmed in the report by Klaudia from Germany, for whom the language barrier was the only negative aspect of her stay in Poland:

EXTRACT 32

- 80 R: [...], but actually because of the people
I feel happy here. I can travel, meet new people, so
81 this is a good thing, that I appreciate,
but the negative thing is maybe the Polish language. I
82 think the negative is only the language,
because the other things you can manage, but
83 sometimes without the language you can't get
what you want and it's hard to just show
84 people what you want without saying any word.
Okay, I was trying also in German, but they
85 don't speak even English or German.

Jae from South Korea had a similar experience. He communicated mostly in English but encountered communication barriers at health care centres and pharmacies. He also pointed out the “very weak English of the [medical] personnel” (127–128) and complained about the attitude of health care workers in Poland who, unlike, for example, Korean doctors, are very cold, aloof and unfriendly to patients (137–138). Moreover, Monica complained about difficulties in communicating at the bank, even though she was a student of Polish philology and could speak Polish well enough (B1/B2). Additionally, she lacked the specialised vocabulary and was not prepared to negotiate a flat lease agreement or deal with formalities at banks (e.g. opening a personal account, 81–82). She managed, however, to handle these situations because she could easily switch to English.

Ismail admitted that before coming to Poland his knowledge of Polish was “a total zero”. Nevertheless, during the first year of his stay in Poland, he attended a basic preparatory course. As it turned out, the course did not meet his expectations because he still could not communicate. Later, he decided to enrol in a three-month beginner’s language course, which, like the previous one, did not prove effective. Due to these setbacks, during his first four years in Poland Ismail used just a few words, phrases and numbers:

EXTRACT 33

- 102 R: (2.0) I consider that not learning Polish
when I first came here was a mistake because

- 103 especially on legal issues like applying
for a residence permit and extending your stay...
- 104 I: /Mhm./
- 105 R: ...Polish is essential. Sometimes it's not really
possible to find enough help.
- 106 I: /Mhm./
- 107 R: Like, people in foreign's office,
like, they don't want to speak English basically...
- 108 I: /Mhm./
- 109 R: ...and they are treating you bad. For example,
in my first year, I was applying to resident card as
110 a student and I was not able to speak Polish
and they're, like: "If you are not speaking Polish, why
111 do you want to have a resident card?
This is card given to people who live in Poland." I'm, like...,
- 112 I: /Mhm./
- 113 R: "Okay, I wanna live here, but I'm a student.
Come on, it's my first year. Like, how do you
114 expect me to speak in Polish?"

Ismail was convinced that not learning Polish was a big mistake. His very poor proficiency in Polish turned out to be a major drawback, considering the legal issues he had to deal with, which included applying for a residence permit. He emphasised that the employees of the Department for Foreigners were reluctant to communicate in English, thus as a consequence he was forced to seek help from his peers. Problems also emerged while making friends and in everyday functioning at a Polish university. Ismail also mentioned friends from his dormitory who studied at the same university. He had rather negative experiences related to contacts with Poles because they were "quite nerdy" (121) and reluctant to integrate. Making friends proved a real challenge. In his narrative, almost all the challenges he experienced were related to his insufficient knowledge of Polish.

Nonetheless, the interviews also include positive experiences in this regard. For example, Tom knew only two phrases before coming to Poland ("good morning", "thank you") but managed to reach the A1 level in two years, which he was proud of:

EXTRACT 34

- 103 R: Yes, so two words I know... "dzień dobry" and "dziękuję".
Of course, I'm trying



104 to learn Polish, and... I now, I have, it's obligated to learn Polish for us. So, I
105 say right now my level (2.0) I have almost A1 level in Polish I say. Yeah.

Mastering the local language contributed to a more positive perception of the stay in Poland in the case of several respondents. For example, Manuel managed to establish better relations with Poles:

EXTRACT 35

344 I: [If you knew] Polish you would have a better experience?
345 R: I think yes... because, because not all Polish people can talk in, in, in
346 English... but if you don't know Polish it's
347 more difficult..., so if I learn
348 I: To integrate.
349 R: /Polish/ yes, yes because it's, it's, eee, difficult because always when I am
350 talking in English and people cannot understand me I really realise how
351 angry they are feeling because they *** [overlapping and hence inaudible]
352 *** [irrelevant discussion among the interviewers]
353 R: Okay, [laughter] so,
354 I: Sorry.
355 R: aaa, no problem... so, eee, yes I, I think that if I learn Polish all would
356 be better...

Despite the language difficulties experienced by the respondents, some of them did not want to learn Polish. For example, Luftar, an Albanian from Kosovo, was aware of the challenges of not speaking Polish but was not going to learn it anyway:

EXTRACT 36

141 R: Sometimes, yeah. I would like to...
I'm not taking any Polish courses, so I still don't
142 know much of Polish except for the basics...
but I'm surviving. [laughter]

4.2.2.2. English as a communication tool in Poland

Although Polish is Poland's only official language (except for small areas where auxiliary languages are allowed), many students included in the study chose to learn English as one of the goals of their stay in our country (e.g. Ada, Luftar, José). Many of them were also convinced that "everybody speaks English more or less" (Monica, 99). Though she did not speak Polish, Dina, a native speaker

of Russian, communicated in English without any problems while in Poland, especially when interacting with young people:

EXTRACT 37

- 12 R: Eh, I don't speak Polish *at all*. And I can't say
it's kind of survival here for me,
13 because almost everybody speaks English
and I usually in Poland I... I speak English.

Dina mentioned only one situation in which she was able to communicate in her first language. When shopping at a pharmacy, it turned out that the staff did not speak English, prompting Dina to switch to Russian, which the staff understood (19–20).

The majority of the respondents found it surprising that it was not possible to communicate in English everywhere across Poland. For example, Carla stated that, while being with a group of Poles, she wanted to integrate with them, but “it is impossible, because they simply speak Polish, only Polish, and we know only the basics” (108). María shared a similar observation: “Sometimes when I want to buy something, I must speak Polish because they don't really speak English” (65). Oksana (14), a Ukrainian, also agreed with this opinion. According to Klaudia, even simple shopping can be a challenge because Poles speak neither English nor German (85–86). The Poles' reluctance to make the effort to communicate in any foreign language was also noted in the narrative of Hans from Germany:

EXTRACT 38

- 120 R: [...] the guys that cannot even do their own laundry
when there's, like, one lady who cannot
121 speak at all English and she's not even willing
to communicate on Google translator or
122 something like this, because she, she's, like,
telling, telling, them that that they are in
123 Poland so they should speak at least something in Polish.

This theme resonated particularly strongly in the narrative of Sandra who, as a native speaker of English from Canada, takes other people's competences in English for granted and becomes irritated when she encounters obstacles in communicating in her native language. In fact, her attitude to this lack of knowledge of her first language could be considered “colonial” as she found it astonishing that English was not widely spoken by the locals. Realising

how difficult it is to learn a foreign language, she still expected everyone to communicate in English. The efforts she took in this regard did not include mastering at least the basics of Polish, but were limited to speaking her first language slower:

EXTRACT 39

- 106 R: Yeah. So again... the teachers liked to ask me
to just... double-check what they're
107 saying is correct... and... really the other students'
English level really varies...
108 So I know I speak fast so I have to, like,
constantly... work on myself... to, like, going
109 slower and, like..., making sure everyone
understands what I'm trying to say [e.g.
110 already at the airport after her arrival
to Poland she realised that she was speaking too
111 fast and her buddy was not able to understand her.]

EXTRACT 40

- 138 R: [...] and maybe young people know English,
so I can, kind of... use English, but with old
139 people it's really difficult, and you don't
realise about it until you are in this kind of
140 situation. And that was just one example,
but it's the... simple things that can happen
141 every ten minutes and... at the end of the day it's like:
"Uh, I need language just for a
142 bit". [laughter]

The expectation that it will be possible to communicate in English in Poland, especially in large cities, was also expressed by Tom, a native speaker of English with American-Taiwanese roots. Right from the beginning, he got the impression that no one at the airport was eager to help him, even when he asked for it directly. Additionally, the people he encountered immediately blocked the interaction by speaking Polish. In his opinion, they did not want to understand him. This caused him substantial discomfort and made the beginning of Tom's stay in Poland extremely difficult:

EXTRACT 41

- 185 R: Yes. Yes, especially in Poland.
So, as I mentioned – because I don't
- 186 speak Polish at all at that time
– so when, when I come here, for example
- 187 when I came here for an interview.
When I..., after I arrived airport, I have to
- 188 change money, I have to ask how to take bus, right?
Even though I was in
- 189 Warszawa. Okay. It's a capital city, right?
Supposed to be more..., like,
- 190 international. But no. It's so wrong.
Because nobody wanted to help me.
- 191 Okay, they wanted to help me,
but the thing is that when they see a
- 192 foreigner, especially a guy with a weird looking,
they just feel weird and they
- 193 don't, they just don't dare to talk to me.
Sometimes I approached them,
- 194 they just back off, and, and shake their hands,
and saying "Nie, nie.
- 195 Nie rozumiem". Something like that.
So actually, I had a lot of... difficulty.
- 196 I faced a lot of hard time
while coming here at the first moment.

Most respondents stated that communication problems concerned the public rather than the private sphere and most often appeared outside the academic settings. For example, Svetlana noticed that employees of shops and health care facilities did not always speak English yet communicating in this language with peers or at the university was not a problem (39–42). Manuel pointed to problems with communicating in English, especially with the elderly (e.g. in a student dormitory or a grocery store):

EXTRACT 42

- 187 R: Yes, no, uhm... I didn't have problems...
I only had challenge... For

- 188 example, uhm..., here, uhm...,
Polish people cannot talk in English... Not
189 all, but I mean young people yes, but not all,
because sometimes when I'm in
190 the street and I ask to young people in English
they... cannot talk in, uhm...,
191 in English and are like "wow".
192 [Everybody: laughter]
193 R: Uhm..., but, uhm, this was, uhm...,
about the thing. Because in my... dorm
194 or in... Biedronka [store] or in any place
that I am there, uhm..., most of the
195 people there are old, not old, but like fifty...,
and they cannot talk in
196 English and... is difficult.

Similar sentiments were shared by Gael, who communicated in English with his colleagues, lecturers at the university and the entire international community of Erasmus+ students without much difficulty. He encountered potential difficulties in other areas of everyday life (e.g. shops):

EXTRACT 43

- 250 R: No, actually no. Maybe some places that for,
uh, they don't understand
251 English... but usually I, for example,
I just tell, if I have to go to the
252 supermarket and I know what I want,
so I just need like some words to
253 pay.
254 I: Mhm.
255 R: "Karta proszę", whatever, and
that's it for the others. No any problem,
256 actually. In all the bars, restaurants
they talk in English, also the faculty
257 everyone has a very good level of English,
so I don't have any problem.

With regard to the level of English proficiency, the respondents often indicated a huge generation gap. Young Poles, unlike older ones, speak English very well.

Semiramida noticed a gap concerning communication problems in the public sphere – especially at medical facilities and means of transport (80) – and the complete lack of a language barrier in contact with peers who speak fluent English (90).

The expectation that English should be used everywhere was widely shared by the respondents (e.g. Saskia, 40), but its verification in everyday life caused great disappointment or even dissatisfaction. The frustration with communication problems was vividly reflected in the narrative of Frank from Congo, who believed that Poles neither speak English, nor appreciate the efforts of foreigners to speak Polish:

EXTRACT 44

- 39 R: Well, my first challenge is the language.
 Uh..., Polish people don't want to... how can I
 40 say... If someone is trying to speak Polish,
 I have noticed that Polish people, they don't
 41 make an effort to understand what other person
 is saying. You want to speak exactly that
 42 way that you have to say correct Polish,
 but you are learning the language. We need at
 43 least to be understood, so I have problems
 when I have to, maybe to send something in the
 44 post office or a... I am, for example,
 in the store or shop where are people can't speak
 45 English. Sometimes even in the bank,
 you are in front of someone that... that doesn't make
 46 an effort to understand what you want to say.

The leading role of the local language in everyday functioning was particularly strongly emphasised by Lucy, an English philology student:

EXTRACT 45

- 128 R: Yes, absolutely because... I didn't know
 before coming here, but I realised once
 129 I'm here that language is everything
 and if you don't know language, everything is really,
 130 really, really, really difficult. Just... simple,
 simple things that you don't really realize, but
 131 then once you live in the place
 and your daily basic thing relies about it.

Such linguistic sensitivity and awareness are not common among international students who share the belief that English is a global language that enables communication anywhere. The findings of the study show that, despite the worldwide dominant position of the English language, one cannot do without knowledge of the local language, especially in countries considered to be monolingual, e.g. Poland, as well as during longer stays abroad. Co-constructing meaning in a language that users know well enables them not only to communicate meaningfully but, above all, to be more aware of what is being said and how. It gives a sense of control over the conversation and the environment.

The myth that English is an international language and a universal communication tool was deconstructed in the remaining part of Lucy's narrative:

EXTRACT 46

- 149 R: Yes, at the beginning when I came here,
my thoughts and my ideas were like: "Okay, I
150 know English and English is international",
but no, not really. [laughter]
151 I: [laughter] Yeah.
152 R: So, I started learning Polish because of that.
Because... not only to talk with old people.
153 I don't know, just to connect more or to feel
more home... or to... to do the things
154 easier, but the language is not so easy,
so... [laughter] I tried that though.

Although English is widely used in academia, it would be difficult to draw a consistent picture of its use in Poland. It happens that Poles – especially young ones – are praised for their knowledge of the English language. José from Spain admitted that the level of English proficiency among young Poles is much higher than that among his countrymen and that his stay in Poland contributed to improving his English language skills. He experienced communication difficulties only when interacting with the dormitory receptionists:

EXTRACT 47

- 124 R: Yeah, I mean... not a lot, because of the language,
but I have to say that if you have any
125 problem and most of the Polish people is really helpful and...
not all people but, eee..., people

- 126 who are studying, they know a lot of English
not compared to the Spanish people that we
127 have very low level in English, so... sounds really nice.

The theme of the lack of foreign language skills among the reception staff in student dormitories appeared quite often in the students' narratives. Some Spanish students (e.g. Cora) made fun of this fact and treated it as an integral part of the stay abroad. They described attempts to communicate using various compensation strategies and all other ways of communicating (e.g. drawing, gesturing, facial expressions). Azra from Turkey mentioned a receptionist who, having discovered that Azra and her friend did not understand anything in Polish, made attempts to teach them some basic phrases. This, however, proved too challenging for Azra as the Polish language turned out to be very difficult, especially in terms of pronunciation (170–172).

Several respondents also noted the reluctance or fear of some people to communicate in English in public places. Cora referred to a situation in a supermarket where the staff was not very helpful and her attempts to speak English caused irritation and fear among her interlocutors:

EXTRACT 48

- 85 R: Supermarkets for example..., like,
people didn't really seem,
86 like, they wanted to help and
or they seemed annoyed when
87 I... spoke to them /mhm/ in English...
88 or they were scared when
I talked to them in English

Tom encountered similar reluctance of Poles to offer help and communicate in English:

EXTRACT 49

- 196 R: [...] Yeah. Another thing
197 is that the, the study here as you know Polish...
maybe English is not your
198 mother language, so not every Polish
speaks English. For me. Yeah. Maybe
199 some professors or my classmates.
They speak Polish, oh, they speak English.

200 Sorry. But for some workers, or some staff
in our university [sirens wailing in
201 the background] no, basically they don't use English.
Or probably they, you,
202 they, they know at least they, they know how to say
"yes", "no", "thank you" but
203 they just choose not to use English at all.
So, sometimes when I approached
204 to them, I ask for help [and], you know,
what, they just: "Nie, nie, nie, nie, nie." And
205 shake their head and wave their hands, say no.
So, I feel very stressful of this
206 part.

This view was not limited to speakers of non-Slavic first languages. Jura, a student from Belarus, expressed his amazement as follows: "[...] it's quite terrible because always [in a shop] there is some old lady... and they don't speak even... a few words in English. I had to show with my finger things I want to buy... even water or anything else, they do not know what I am telling them" (48–50).

Summing up, the analysed narratives do not unequivocally resolve the issue of the use of English as a communication tool in Poland. On the one hand, the respondents indicated a very good command of English among young people and academic staff (although there were exceptions in this regard) and, on the other, they sometimes claimed that the knowledge of English in Poland is not common and it is difficult to communicate in it. The following response made by Eirini from Greece can serve as an example:

EXTRACT 50

272 R: But, like, the biggest challenge is, aaa,
the language because not so many
273 Polish people speak, uhm..., English.

However, the words by Erva from Turkey seem to be more representative of the entire corpus of the narratives collected, as she aptly sums up the issue of using English as a communication tool in Poland:

EXTRACT 51

53 R: Only problem that I could say, is just...
I mean, [in] Poznan the number of people

- 54 speaking English are really high, so I didn't have
any problem. But... in... some specific
55 shops, like this... offices with the public
transportation issues that you get the card or
56 something, or post offices. Then they don't really
speak English, so ever since I don't
57 know it, then there are some problems whenever
I have some complicated thing to do. And
58 when I do then I just call my friends and I solve it,
so it's actually not a problem. But I
59 could say that it would be easier if I knew Polish
60 because of a lot of students, young people.
Even though you don't know anyone, erm..., there
61 are some young peoples who would always talk in English.

According to her, many people in Poland, especially young people, are fluent in English but its command cannot be taken for granted. English language skills are by no means universal, particularly in the public sphere, which can cause many difficulties in day-to-day life. Erva emphasised that speaking Polish would make her life much easier and independent, without the need to seek help from others. Therefore, it can be stated that despite the improving knowledge of the global (English) language, speaking the local (Polish) language is crucial for a successful longer stay in Poland for educational and professional purposes.

4.2.2.3. Investment in a local language

Only one person, Natasha, learnt to speak Polish at a level that enabled her to function stress-free before coming to Poland. She attended a one-year course in her homeland of Belarus. Consequently, she did not encounter language barriers and was never afraid to speak up (33). However, most of the interviewed students limited their Polish language learning to the acquisition of basic words and phrases enabling them to perform simple activities, i.e. shopping or asking for directions (e.g. Luika). This challenge was not taken too seriously by them. Usually, they preferred to use available language learning applications (e.g. Steve, Fabiano, Esmeralda, Klaudia). Some respondents did not even make this basic effort and came to Poland without any knowledge of Polish (e.g. Oscar, 66–68). As Carla said: “I didn't know a single word in Polish. I even didn't know how to introduce myself when I came here” (34). Luika from Greece, who had made no attempts to master basic phrases necessary for everyday functioning, such as “good morning”, before coming to Poland, spoke in a similar vein.

Others tried to learn Polish, but quickly abandoned this idea. Some gave up after the first attempt and immediately limited themselves to using only their native language. According to Carla from Spain, the participants in exchanges organised within Erasmus+ “live in a bubble” (65), surrounded by other foreigners, and do not have to speak Polish because everything is perfectly adapted to them. This translates into the lack of contact with Poles because, according to Carla: “we don’t really integrate to the Polish community” (67) or: “we don’t get the real Polish experience from being on Erasmus” (68–69). A similar opinion was expressed by Eirini from Greece, who surrounded herself with people from all over the world and had sporadic contact with Poles:

EXTRACT 52

- 91 R: /To, like, to meet/ many people from all over the world. Like, we have
 92 people even from India, from Korea, and, uhm, of course, we met Polish
 93 people, but not so many,
 94 I: /Aha./
 95 R: /because/ we always, aaa, we always have with Erasmus people.

This was fully accepted and even expected by the respondents. In their opinion, staying in a foreign country within the Erasmus+ programme is an international, multicultural experience, which is not limited to the local culture or language. Therefore, the very participation in the exchange is important, not the specific location. Monika Popow also reached similar conclusions in her study (2015).

Those individuals who used their time in Poland to gain education, and in the long run a lucrative job, invested much time and effort into learning Polish. Interestingly, this motivation did not depend on the place of origin. For example, Steve, a Canadian living in the United States as well as Jura and Oksana from Belarus, all shared a strong motivation to learn Polish. Thus, geographic proximity was not an important motivating factor.

The material analysed contains several examples of learners successfully mastering Polish. However, success did not come easy, and the interviewees pointed to the enormous effort and difficulties associated with learning the language. For example, Sandra from Canada learnt Polish using a telephone application but she did not find it effective (26). Afterwards, she started attending a Polish language course, which was a major challenge for her. Despite the significant effort put into learning Polish, she failed to achieve satisfactory results (93). In contrast, Semiramida, who knew only a few basic expressions in Polish before her arrival, obtained an A2 proficiency certificate in Polish after two years. Meghan, a Kurdish woman from Turkey, came to Poland without any Polish language

skills. During her first internship in Łódź, she learnt a few basic phrases to deal with everyday situations. Later, however, she grew to appreciate the knowledge of her host country's language and decided to learn it on a regular basis during her second stay in Poland, which involved covering the costs of private lessons. In her case, taking the time to learn the local language had a material dimension:

EXTRACT 53

203 R: Now I can catch the
 204 words, so I can understand what they are saying to me,
 if they talking about something
 205 interesting for me. Like, before if you don't know
 even a word... it's, it's hard...
 206 it's really hard.

Another example of perseverance in learning is the story of Saskia. This respondent made several attempts at learning Polish at a course in Munich. However, after settling in Poland, her motivation increased and allowed her to achieve success, which she expressed as follows: "I am proud that I can understand something" (9).

4.2.2.4. Difficulties in everyday life while staying abroad

All interviewees experienced certain difficulties during their stay in Poland, especially at the beginning. They often described that period as strenuous and believed that they had done "hard work" at the time (María, 61). Tackling the challenges of daily living is an integral part of staying abroad. Such difficulties are much easier to overcome with the support of others. A good example in this regard is another story told by Saskia, who initially had problems with finding a suitable apartment and fell ill. She even thought about leaving Poland, but a Polish friend invited her home for Easter. She experienced great hospitality at his home and was able to confide her problems in her hosts. As a result, they managed to not only convince her to stay, but also to find a better accommodation. This was crucial for her decision to remain in Poland and changed her perception of reality. Thanks to her friend's nice gesture and her meeting new people, Saskia came to the following conclusion: "Oh, my God, the world is so nice! [laughter] Nice people exist" (96). Finding a friend also helped Jura feel more at home in Poland. Thanks to her Polish boyfriend and friends, Oksana also stated that she did not feel "not welcome" (37) anymore.

María's interview responses also testify to the fact that the success of a stay abroad really depends on other people and relations with them. The young



woman went through a self-discovery process which made her realise that such success depends on communication skills: “in the beginning, relations with people were the most difficult. I didn’t know how to react, how to greet others” (30).

Typical problems most frequently reported by the interviewees concerned transport ($n = 24$), medical care ($n = 23$), shopping ($n = 19$), and accommodation ($n = 18$). According to Svetlana, medical facilities are not prepared to provide services to foreigners. While she did manage to eventually obtain medical help, she did not even know where to look for it at the beginning of her stay in Poznań (Svetlana, 44; 50–51). Furthermore, accommodation may be perceived as a problem by those who intend to rent a room or a flat on their own – the entire process of finding and renting a flat was significantly hampered by a language barrier (e.g. Klaudia, 42). On the other hand, the majority of the students living in dormitories were satisfied with the accommodation (e.g. Esmeralda, Sandra, Luika). Daily shopping was usually not a challenge, although there were some remarks about the lack of English language skills among older store employees (Svetlana, 40).

Almost every narrative alluded to problems with using public transport at the beginning of the stay, especially when buying tickets or choosing a travel tariff. The foreigners reported problems understanding the transport networks (Jura) or – like Fabiano and Carla – did not know which ticket to buy. Sometimes they did not buy a ticket at all, which resulted in getting a fine. Students from Spain and Turkey were used to buying tickets directly aboard the means of transport and were surprised that this was not always possible in Poland.

Problems with public transport usually appeared during the first week of stay. The foreigners quickly obtained help from the international office or their Erasmus+ buddies (peer guardians). Some students coped with this issue perfectly from the very beginning, praising the public transport system in Poznań, especially the reliability of tram connections and the high standard of new carriages as well as the functionality of the *Jak dojadę*⁸ application (e.g. Klaudia, Esmeralda, Jaroslav, Steve) that makes it very easy to get around the city.

Steve was satisfied with the fact that one can do without a car in Poland thanks to the efficient public transport: “you can get without having a car comfortably here” (25). However, he noted that destination names, especially street names, should be correctly pronounced in Polish. Incorrect pronunciation can severely hinder communication; also, mastering the ability to read proper nouns in the local language is of great importance in overcoming language barriers and avoiding misunderstandings. Steve offered a very apt example: “maybe you ask

⁸ The equivalent of the UK Traveline app.

a local for directions and they have no idea what you're talking about because you're pronouncing it all wrong" (31).

Polish cuisine and habits were a challenge for a small group of students. In this case, the students from Spain, most of all, pointed to different meal times. The Italians and Greeks also expressed their reservations, as they are convinced that the broadly understood Mediterranean cuisine is simply tastier. An extract from the interview with Cora from Greece can serve as a representative example:

EXTRACT 54

- 128 R: [...] the food here
 129 in Poland is, like, not that good [laughter]
 130 I: / [laughter] /
 131 R: compared /aha/ to the Greek food
 132 the Mediterranean cuisine is much better.

Polish cuisine was not to the liking of Jae from South Korea (117) and Luftar from Kosovo (52). Both of them missed the flavours and dishes of their home countries. In contrast, Dina from Russia pointed to the Polish and Russian cuisines sharing many similarities while remaining distinct. As a result, the dishes she was familiar with tasted differently in Poland:

EXTRACT 55

- 58 R: Yes, of course, I have some challenges, ehm,
 at the first time I think it's some I've already
 59 mentioned that sometimes it's about food.
 Sometimes, I don't know, I want to try something but I
 60 don't like it. You have really a lot of different, eh,
 dishes and even just food in supermarkets or
 61 which are completely different. It, it's like salad,
 it looks like Russian salad, but it's not.

She pointed to the ubiquitous use of onion, which in her opinion, is treated almost as a "Polish treasure" (39):

EXTRACT 56

- 39 R: Because in Russia we have almost the same but...
 a bit different. But here onion is everywhere,
 40 it's like Polish treasure, I don't know. [laughter]
 Sorry, that's true. [laughter]

For the sake of balance, however, it should be emphasised that there were also enthusiasts of Polish cuisine among the respondents. Ada from the Czech Republic had some flattering feedback to share:

EXTRACT 57

- 84 R: [...] another positive
85 aspect for me is (4.0) this traditional food, which I,
which I could... taste here... because I'm
86 really into your soups and, and... your recipes.

Bureaucracy was an everyday challenge for nine respondents, though in most cases it was not deemed a typical Polish ailment. There were mentions of burdensome bureaucracy in the context of preparing the Erasmus+ programme documentation. Only Jaroslav's narrative made note of formalism being a legacy of Poland's communist past. He made the following observations:

EXTRACT 58

- 42 R: [...] Red tape. I
43 hate Poland for that, red tape that's a terrible thing.
Those all documents. You have to
44 bring fixing documents for everything. This is crazy.
People are crazy about that here.
45 That's one of the things that my mom told me about it.
The past thing of the
46 communism. You know, some people still believe
that they live in communism here.

By no means was this an isolated opinion, both in the context of the alleged bureaucracy and the common cultural heritage of post-communist countries.

4.2.2.5. Studying at Polish universities

Although studying abroad resulted in many challenges for the respondents (cf. Table A5 in Appendix 2), mainly due to the organisational culture and requirements at Polish universities or workplaces ($n = 34$) and the problems encountered there ($n = 19$), the data shows a very positive image of staying in Poland. The reality at the universities exceeded the expectations of some respondents. They were perceived as student-friendly institutions with an interesting educational offer for exchange participants and teaching staff who, in the opinion of the respondents, was predominantly prepared to work with foreign students in terms of language and culture alike.

Despite some differences between their home universities and Polish universities, the organisation of the courses, the level of study programmes and the requirements set for them were highly rated by the students. Most of the academics were praised for their openness, approachability and willingness to assist. Only students at some technical universities reported isolated cases of discriminatory behaviour or prejudice.

Oscar was satisfied with his studies in Poland, both in terms of the content and the quality of the curriculum. He believed that his Polish academics were more open and communicative than those in Colombia (292–293). Additionally, he drew attention to the fact that Polish lecturers tried to be very helpful and made sure that students: “really understood what is explained to them” (298). In terms of requirements, Oscar found the classes conducted in Poland to be comparable to those in his home country. Oscar was also pleased with the university’s international office service. Meghan, a Bachelor’s student from Turkey, also expressed great satisfaction with the educational experience and cooperation with the university’s international office. Esmeralda, the English philology student from Armenia, appreciated the help of the university coordinator at the international office, who provided her with extensive help in organising the course of study. She was also pleased with the understanding and approachability of teachers and their friendly attitude towards Erasmus+ students. Semiramida enthusiastically described the academic staff as “awesome” (115); the only problematic person in her environment was the secretary (112). Svetlana was yet another student who was very pleased with the quality of teaching (slightly higher than in Bulgaria) and the attitude of the teachers who were very helpful to her. They offered many learning opportunities, different from the curricula at Bulgarian universities (82–84). Sandra from Canada, on the other hand, believed that the education programmes in Poland were “super easy” (92).

Nonetheless, some students mentioned some drawbacks of Polish university realities. Sasha pointed to the reluctance of some academics to explain complicated issues (327), and Jaroslav’s opinion was that some professors were very stiff, distant and conceited, and treated students as potential enemies:

EXTRACT 59

- 91 R: [...] they see in my
 92 opinion, they see students as enemies
 not as somebody they can teach something, but
 93 you do this, you do that, and ok you’re my slave.
 My opinion is very bad, bad, very bad,
 94 behaviour... That’s not the way someone who is intelligent...
 this means that a person has
 95 problems with mentality [...].

Such attitudes can be explained by a significant degree of power distance in Poland as well as by the high social standing of Polish professors, which may be both responsible for an asymmetrical relation between students and lecturers.

Regarding other challenges, Klaudia from Germany, who attended English studies at the time of the research, mentioned some problems with adjusting her learning agreement and selected courses to the timetable. Semiramida did not find studying in English a problem as she had done it before in Azerbaijan, but the length of the classes turned out to be a considerable challenge (90-minute blocks without breaks). Long classes impaired her concentration, making it impossible for her to focus on the taught content (132).

Hans also pointed out many differences between studying in Poland compared to Germany. First, he was surprised that the classes were conducted in relatively small groups, unlike in Germany, where lectures are often attended by as many as 300 students. On the one hand, it made him feel “like in high school or something similar, in the beginning something simply funny” (144–145). On the other hand, such an organisation of classes required a greater commitment. Hans complained that the attendance rules had not been clearly established. Although lectures were not officially compulsory, teachers started to check the attendance list in the middle of a course due to low showing. This made students feel pressured to attend classes to avoid possible problems with taking the exam. Further, during the classes, lecturers negotiated the form and scope of the exams with students, which made Hans feel “like in kindergarten” (246). He found such practices unacceptable in Germany, where all the rules and curricula are clear and available to students well before the beginning of a course. These rules are strictly adhered to by both teachers and participants and amending them in the middle of a course is not an option. In his opinion, there is much less distance between students and teachers in Poland compared to Germany. According to Hans, Polish lecturers are much more accessible and they conduct informal conversations with students more often (265). Over time, Hans began to appreciate the smaller class groups and the quality of the relationship between students and the teaching staff as well as peers. In his view, teachers were more available and ready to explain problematic issues, and smaller groups implied cooperation with other students. Contrary to highly theoretical classes in Germany, the content of classes in Poland was closely related to the realities of the labour market (276). This prompted Hans to consider taking up a Master’s degree course in Poland. He found that it could better prepare him for the challenges of his future professional life (270). Similarly, Andrei, a student from Romania, was also considering taking a Master’s degree course at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, which, in his opinion, provided

a higher level of education than his alma mater, despite some differences between studying in Poland and Romania (e.g. compulsory attendance or a dispersed campus in Poland).

In addition to their excellent English, Jae, a student of the humanities, appreciated the professional didactic and subject-matter preparation of the professors and their helpful attitude. He considered minor differences in the organisation of the academic year to be insignificant. Gael from Spain also appreciated the flexibility of the courses as well as the accessibility of academic teachers and their positive attitude:

EXTRACT 60

- 260 I: How, uh, do your courses look at the university in Poland?
 261 R: Well, actually I like it, I like it. There's a lot of, like, a free choices
 262 or also, of course, depends on your form of university, but, yeah, the classes
 263 are so good. There are a lot, like, a lot of participation, you know, in the
 264 classes. The teachers also are so nice, are so close to the people and, uhm, I
 265 really like it. They are so interesting, actually.

Lucy also noted the differences between the Polish and Spanish study systems. In Poland, groups attending language classes are much smaller (approx. 18 students), as opposed to large groups in Spain (50–100 students). She appreciated the fact that classes were focused on developing speaking skills, in contrast to writing- and reading-oriented classes at her home university, but she was greatly surprised to learn that class attendance in Poland is compulsory with only two absences allowed per semester. Even though this requirement thwarted Lucy's travel plans, she accepted it and was genuinely pleased with the effectiveness of the learning process and its outcomes. In her opinion, teachers were mostly friendly but strict and demanding at the same time. However, she was deeply disappointed with her classmates whom she found to be rather withdrawn and completely uninterested in interactions outside of academia. The reluctance to build relationships noticed at Polish students, experienced by her two other compatriots, was evidenced by the fact that they conversed only in Polish after classes, which automatically excluded the Spanish women from any interaction (212–229).

The teachers' command of English and the availability of courses in English were often mentioned in the narratives collected. Opinions on these issues varied among the respondents. On the one hand, the majority of the students expressed deep satisfaction with the linguistic competence of lecturers (e.g. Jae, 58; Eirini, 522–523):

EXTRACT 61

522 R: /Like here,/ I feel safe, Uhm, I didn't have any problem with my teachers,
523 they all speak very good English [...].

On the other hand, there was some criticism, including complaints by Noah about the English proficiency of certain lecturers:

EXTRACT 62

176 I: And... Okay, so, uhm, what about the challenges in your studies at a foreign
177 university? So, what's different in the university culture?
178 R: You know, Erasmus is a..., the Erasmus we...
I am in to in they teach in English, purely
179 in English, so I don't have difficulties,
unless maybe one some lecturers, they really find
180 some professors, they're..., some of them are not very good in English...
181 I: /Mhm./
182 R: But that is not a big problem, you know.
They are also learning, I think there is no
183 problem...

Noah also pointed to the differences in the way are conducted laboratory classes, which involved mainly the lecturer rather than the student, a practice that he was not used to, considering the practices at his home university:

EXTRACT 63

190 R: Firstly, the lectures here are, the way
they are given to the students, are so easy for
191 students to grab it, you know... I am in a laboratory
where the lecturer will do everything,
192 the professor will do everything, and I just come in to,
to very little. Now up in my place
193 you have to walk. You go look for your samples, you walk.
It's quite different here.

Manuel, a philosophy student from Ecuador, who lives in Spain, found it difficult to find suitable courses in English: "I was on AMU-PIE⁹ and I did not

⁹ Study Abroad Programme and Centre at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań operating until 10 July 2019.

find philosophy; I only found two courses which I already completed on the first year” (247–248). For this reason, he was forced to take up several miscellaneous and rather irrelevant courses in the context of his path of study (e.g. a course in pedagogy or literature) conducted at five different departments, which brought about many logistic challenges (254–255). However, since Manuel did not prioritise his studies, he did not mind. He rather wanted to gather various non-university experiences during his stay in Poland within the Erasmus+ programme.

For Ada, a student of economics at the University of Economics in Poznań, mathematics classes were a huge challenge – one that she considered to be the most negative aspect of her studies in Poland (59). She also complained about poor contact with teachers who communicated with all students in Polish, although they were capable of speaking English:

EXTRACT 64

- 67 R: And... so, yeah..., so I have a problem with maths,
and I study a lot. Another challenge for me
68 it's not... that I'm not in touch... with other people
from my group. When it comes to receiving
69 mails from lecturers... and mostly they write to us
in Polish. That's why I have to translate
70 every mail from our lecturers.

It is also worth paying attention to the differences between various Polish universities. Ismail, who was a student of the Warsaw and Poznań Universities of Technology, experienced such differences. During the interview, he reported a lot of problems with his studies at both universities, related mainly to the lack of help from research and teaching staff. He mentioned that it was difficult to build friendly relationships with professors and described them as “quite old and quite old-fashioned” (137). He believed that professors were too demanding and complained about the unsatisfactory level of their language skills, which made it difficult for him to obtain answers to the questions asked. Additionally, he repeatedly emphasised that lecturers were not sensitive to intercultural differences, which caused challenges to foreign students. Ismail also mentioned the negative attitude of lecturers towards foreigners, resulting – in his opinion – from the lecturers’ conviction that foreign students have a negative impact on the level of education at the university. Worryingly, he described this negative attitude as “a kind of hidden racism” (197–198). According to him, when a foreign student does not pass an exam, he cannot appeal against an unfair score, and the professor’s stance is usually backed by the faculty authorities.

According to Tom, a medical student with American-Taiwanese roots, the Polish higher education system is “quite different” (254) from the American one, and Polish requirements do not coincide with the requirements and exams in the United States. Tom also provided interesting observations on the prevailing relations in the academic medical environment, claiming that compared to the United States, the most important differences concern the status and competences of professors. Tom believes that professors in Poland are treated “like gods” (279) and “have a huge power” (280). Students and lower-ranked academic staff not only treat them with respect, but are rather obedient or even servile. The professor always has the last word and her or his opinions and judgments are not to be challenged or criticised – no matter how subjective they are. Achieving such a special status does not result from their merits, but from reaching the appropriate age. According to Tom: “when you become an old «granny» or old guy, you can become a professor. The moment you become a professor, you are like a god in your faculty” (272–274). Tom also complained about the lack of open-mindedness, poor command of English and insufficient teaching skills among the professors whose classes he attended. Tom believed that (321), compared to American universities, Polish ones are still developing – they are currently at a transitional stage and have not yet fully developed their potential, which is reflected by world rankings¹⁰.

In contrast, Eduardo, another medical student, praised the system of continuous evaluation in Poland, which forced him to study systematically and facilitated the process of acquiring knowledge. Further, mastering the material for a weekly or a monthly test was much easier compared to the preparation for semester exams which are the only form of testing students’ knowledge in his country:

EXTRACT 65

- 78 R: Eee, no not really, not really because here
I think that the system is easier than in my
79 country because here you have weekly exams,
eee, or monthly exams, yyy, you call it test not
80 exam, but weekly test or monthly test.
And in my university, we just have one exam per
81 semester, so here is easier to study, to study,
because the volume of things that you have to

¹⁰ The University of Warsaw, one of the top Polish universities, is ranked in the fifth hundred of the world university ranking (cf. www.shanghairanking.com).

- 82 prepare for, for... every test is smaller,
so is easier to study the materials from two weeks than
83 material from six months.

Eirini from Greece made a similar comment:

EXTRACT 66

- 539 R: There are courses that we have assignments to do before the final exam,
540 but in most courses we have only the final exam,
541 I: Yhm.
542 R: that we have dread, and then take the exam. But here we have to do the
543 assignments, presentations and then the final exam.

Azra, a biology student at Adam Mickiewicz University, also appreciated the continuous assessment system as well as the extended duration of examination session in Poland, which is limited in Turkey to 1–2 weeks. She also mentioned the understanding attitude of academic teachers towards Erasmus students as well. Due to her narrow specialisation in molecular biology, the curriculum for her studies, covering a wide range of compulsory general subjects in various fields of biology, was a big challenge. However, despite the high level of credits, she believed such a system of study organisation to be good, because it enabled frequent repetition of material and learning “different things” (186–187). This sentiment was also shared by Cora, another biology student, who highly appreciated the attitude of the academic staff that proved accessible and willing to help students. Even though the English of their lecturers was not “perfect”, students had no problems with understanding them (Cora, 112–113). Paula, a PhD student from Spain, also described her supervisor from the Faculty of Biology in Poznań as supportive and helpful but demanding and motivating at the same time. She admitted that the inspiration for her coming to Poland for doctoral studies was an article in the prestigious journal “Nature”, describing a modern, well-equipped university laboratory in Poznań.

Erasmus+ students are convinced that Polish academics are rather lenient towards them. According to Sabine (206), the requirements for Poles are higher than those for participants in international exchanges. Studying did not pose any problems to her; she found some classes easy, and lecturers devoted a lot of attention to her and at the same time they were not too demanding (212–213). Sabine also appreciated the flexibility of the curriculum and the wide range of courses offered at the host university, allowing her to choose what she found genuinely interesting. Sophia from Greece expressed a similar opinion, believing

that the academic staff was understanding. The only problem for her was the compulsory attendance and the limit of three absences per semester which affected her time management and travel plans.

The studies at the philological faculties of Adam Mickiewicz University were highly rated by our respondents, also because for years they have ranked first among Polish universities¹¹. Luftar from Kosovo, who chose the Faculty of English of this university because of its prestige and reputation, shared that enthusiasm. Driven by the faculty's leading position in the rankings and its excellent reputation, Luftar had high expectations even before his arrival, and these expectations, in his opinion, were met. As an ambitious student who prepared himself for intensive studying during his stay in Poland, he appreciated high linguistic and subject-matter level of his curriculum. He was very pleased with his choice and considered continuing his studies at this faculty:

EXTRACT 67

- 14 R: ...Uhm, before coming here I checked
the English faculty is one of the best if not the
15 best faculty of English in Poland...
16 I: Yeah, it is.
17 R: So, obviously, I had very high expectations
and I'm glad to say that most of these expectations
18 were met. I'm very happy and I think
that faculty, the classes here are great.

Dina from Russia, a student of German studies at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures at Adam Mickiewicz University, spoke in a similar vein. She particularly appreciated the organisation of studies, as it turned out, to be much more effective than the one implemented at her home university. Moreover, she was impressed by the transparency of the study curriculum and syllabuses, their availability, and the consistency with which the lecturers implemented their content during the classes. This offered her a sense of control over the learning process as well as enabled her to notice systematic progress. At her home university, lecturers prepared for classes "more spontaneously" on an ongoing basis and students did not know the curriculum subject-matter. Dina believed that the level of her studies at the university in Poznań was very high, as evidenced by the fact that despite attending Master's studies in Russia, her language level forced her to undertake Bachelor's studies in Poland (108). She also

¹¹ Cf. www.ranking.perspektywy.pl/2021

expressed her satisfaction with classes with native speakers of foreign languages, which her home university was unable to provide:

EXTRACT 68

- 88 R: And, eh... I think in general, like,
 presentation lec-lec, yhm, lectures they are the same,
 89 but of course here it's a great benefit that, eh,
 you have opportunity to have
 90 the classes with native speakers. 'Cause, eh,
 we study languages, German, English and in Russia
 91 we don't have such opportunity.

The most difficult challenge for Dina was the lack of communication skills in Polish, which made it difficult for her to network with her peers and understand instructions. She was surprised that some of lecturers provided homework instructions in Polish, which confused her.

For Monica from Italy, the high level of the study programme at the Faculty of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University proved to be a challenge. She had to resign from two courses because she was unable to meet the lecturers' requirements:

EXTRACT 69

- 114 R: Yeah! I had actually to resign from two courses at university because
 115 they were too tough for me.
 116 I: Yhm.
 117 R: I did not understand anything basically. All the way they were in
 118 Polish, but maybe the level was /too high/,
 119 I: /Too high./
 120 R: and they were talking about their specific topics in literature, and I did
 121 not have idea
 122 I: Yhm.
 123 R: on what was going on, so, yeah! I think that was the kind of failure...

Despite the feeling of failure, Monica managed to complete a different subject, more suited to her Polish proficiency level, with the help of a supportive lecturer (128). In general, she assessed studies at the Faculty of Polish Philology in Poznań very well, even going as far as to consider them "perfect" (184). She particularly liked the organisation of the studies as well as the wide range of specialisations and subjects to choose from:

EXTRACT 70

- 175 R: I think, generally speaking, is very positive. I told you, I did not expect
176 it to be this good,
177 I: Yeah!
178 R: especially the university because in Italy we do not have... the... at least
179 the... Polish /philology/,
180 I: /Yhm./
181 R: faculty speaking. In Italy, this, we do not have this kind of big faculty,
182 is really organised and the... You can find whatever you like.
183 I: Yeah!
184 R: Basically, Polish philology, so, as far as university goes, it is perfect.

An interesting thread that appeared in the narratives of two respondents was the issue of security at Polish universities. Eirini drew attention to the fact that Greek campuses are a type of restricted area and are excluded from police control. Due to physical separation and exemption from the rules prevailing in the given area, university campuses began to attract criminal activities, such as drug trafficking. In Poland, however, Eirini felt safe at the university (522). Noah from Cameroon shared similar reflections.

To sum up, most narratives portrayed studying at a Polish university as an overwhelmingly positive experience. The students particularly appreciated the high level of study programmes and an attractive educational offer as well as the small number of class participants which required activity and commitment on their part, a factor most often emphasised by the students from Germany and Spain. The grading system was also appreciated as something that forced systematisation and facilitated the acquisition of knowledge in smaller batches. Comparably with the study by Monika Popow (2015), the students (especially from Eastern Europe) praised not only the ways and methods of education at Polish universities, but also good contact with academic staff, in particular their openness and accessibility.

4.2.2.6. Social networking and building relationships

One of the most important aspects of studying abroad is establishing new contacts and building intercultural relationships. Only four respondents experienced problems in establishing connections with Poles or other foreigners (Table A5 in Appendix 2). The narratives generally show that while social life is indeed very lively, it takes place primarily within the international group of Erasmus+ students and the foreigners' contacts with Poles are limited. Similar

conclusions were shared by Popow (2015), who explained that this is mainly due to the language barrier.

Host universities, which usually offer abundant social programmes, play a vital role in animating student meetings. They also organise many activities to facilitate networking and maintain bonds between international students, such as an orientation week for Erasmus+ participants and numerous cultural and entertainment initiatives. Erasmus+ buddies also play a crucial role here. They accompany international students during their first days in the host country, and in many cases develop deeper relationships over time. Josip's words can serve as an example:

EXTRACT 71

- 97 R: I have my mentor, Ola. She's really nice.
She showed me... a lot of clubs,
98 pubs and restaurants where we spend time and, yyy (2.0),
where I can taste new food... Last
99 weekend I ate Polish, yyy, bigos [dish]. I love this one.
It is really great. She showed me culture
100 and people. (2.0) I think that I'm going to fall in love with Poland. [laughter]

Foreign students socialise in their dormitories. Initially, social gatherings are held in large groups. As the bonds between people tighten, the gatherings become increasingly smaller and only include a circle of the closest newly met friends who spend a lot of time together. The intensity of these contacts fosters the deepening of lasting friendships. Some respondents admitted that this was the first time that they had such an intense social life in their peer group during the exchange, e.g.: "Never before I belonged to so many types of groups" (Azra, 209). The students also appreciated the possibility of being surrounded by open, helpful and friendly people. Many of them considered the foreign exchange as the best period in their lives (e.g. Eirini, 580–581). Even Luftar from Kosovo, who, in general, focused on studying and limited his contacts to the academic staff, admitted that he tried to socialise during the exchange because he was interested in meeting people from different countries:

EXTRACT 72

- 121 R: Pretty much yes. In Kosovo, I lived in a dorm, yeah,
I live in a dorm; I tried to spend most
122 of my day with university stuff so reading,
doing some work, going lectures. So, it's pretty

- 123 much to say. Only that I'm trying to socialise
a bit more here since there are more
124 international people here and I'm just curious to see and meet.

The circle of friends was crucial during the stay abroad since the students were separated from their families for many months. For example, Eirini did not see her relatives at all during her five months in Poland, which she treated as a challenge and a step towards adulthood. In her case, friends helped her forget about longing for her family and ensured that she had a good time:

EXTRACT 73

- 598 R: they are always friendly and helpful, and I really like the way you, like,
599 we don't have families here, but we have a kind of as /more fun ***

Thanks to the support of a network of friends and acquaintances in Poland, staying abroad proved less of a challenge (e.g. Marco, 84–85). Erva from Turkey appreciated the fact that her stay in Poland allowed her to get acquainted not only with Poles and Polish culture, but also to establish relationships with representatives of other nations and cultures, which eased her culture shock.

EXTRACT 74

- 49 R: Not really... because (2.0) maybe it made it easier
coming as a student that I
50 am also not surrounded with only Polish culture.
So, I have, like, my Polish friends but also
51 foreign friends... internationals. So...
having that kind of circle that really helps. That you
52 are not really... having a culture shock or whatever.

Monica from Italy mentioned that while some of her many friends were Poles, networking with them was more difficult than building relationships with other foreign students:

EXTRACT 75

- 185 R: Also the city... events and all the..., yeah, parties [laughter] and
186 everything that you... There is a lot going around in the city, so I think
187 this also plans my stay. And also friends. I made a lots of friends here,
188 also Polish friends, let's say. Even though if get tough to getting in
189 touch with them... but, yeah!

Similarly to Monica, Noah admitted that establishing deeper relationships with Poles can be a challenge for some people. For him, this was caused by the language barrier and the specific monocultural mentality of Poles which, in his opinion, was the reason for the lack of openness to otherness and diversity:

EXTRACT 76

- 194 R: ...interactions with students, there is a difficulty,
 you know. Many people don't, they don't
 195 find it easy to interact with foreigners, with foreigners.
 Polish people in particular, those
 196 from Poland, they really find it difficult,
 interacting with people but I don't think it's a
 197 bad thing. It might be language barrier, can be the reason.
 And also, you don't know what
 198 mentality, you know, because this a mixed culture
 where you are Buddhists, Muslims,
 199 Christians, you know, you are afraid maybe of somebody
 changing your... your
 200 mentality...
 201 I: /Mhm./

Despite these barriers, Noah managed to establish relationships with Poles thanks to his being very sociable:

EXTRACT 77

- 202 R: ...yeah. That is just a difficulty, interaction with students,
 but I think I have a lot of
 203 friends from Poland, Ukraine, Italy
 that I interact with them because I am very sociable.

The nature of interpersonal relationships was aptly summed up by Sabine who, like Carla, believes that they were locked in an “Erasmus bubble” (171) with contacts limited to other foreign students. Sabine expressed a sense of insufficiency with regard to contacts with Poles and the Polish language:

EXTRACT 78

- 170 R: [...] it's like
 171 Erasmus bubble, like, all the people in Spain,
 as we speak no Polish, and I was a little bit sad,

- 172 because when you go to Poland,
you want to be in contact with Polish people.

At this point, it is worth recalling Noah's interesting, albeit isolated reflection. In his opinion, studying in Poland is largely associated with leading an intense social life, whereas in his country a student is primarily supposed to focus on learning:

EXTRACT 79

- 133 R: That is it [laughter], there is too much laxity,
yeah, the way I see. You know, back
134 in... I..., I... was comparing with my place, you know,
I don't know the standard, I don't
135 know the standard we to give but students here
are more free you know, uhm, and they
136 socialise too much, like, go out for picnics,
go out for drink, go out for a walk. It is
137 quite different from my culture.
Because when you are a student, you aim a student,
138 you see...
139 I: So, you foc-focus on the...
140 R: /The studies./
141 I: ...the studying itself.

4.2.2.7. Instances of discrimination

Eight respondents reported incidents of discrimination during their stay in Poland. Jura and other foreigners in his group did not receive good grades from a university lecturer, who paid attention to grammatical correctness: "it was something that I feel that she hates everybody on my year there were about five or six people from Belarus, Ukraine and one person from Russia, and she didn't give us good grades" (51–52). The same issue was noticed by Sasha, who complained about the negative attitude of some academic teachers towards foreigners (241). Semiramida mentioned some problems with a Russian classmate and the immediate support offered by her Polish colleague from the same class (123). In addition, Saskia (32) encountered discriminatory behaviour during her stay in Bydgoszcz, where several people did not want to sit close to her and her friend in a park due to Saskia's slightly darker skin (they moved to a different bench). It made her feel like her "own dark skin became darker" (33). Moreover, everyone was staring at her and her friend, which she explained by pointing to the fact

that Bydgoszcz is not a popular tourist destination, attracting few visitors from abroad. Saskia also had problems with roommates who were not helpful when she fell ill with bronchitis. They made fun of her, e.g. they locked her in a dark bathroom and threw insults at her. Sabine described an incident that took place during her stay in Leszno, a medium-sized city in Greater Poland:

EXTRACT 80

- 235 R: [...] but only one negative aspect was
in Leszno with my German class,
236 and we talked German and then somebody came
and said “k*a, k*a” and also “Hitler”,
237 so..., yeah, I think it’s he was really no ***.
I think that this does not represent all Polish
238 people, but I think Poland and Germany
they should work together on their history, like,
239 about the second world war because it’s, like,
important topic and, yeah. I don’t know
240 maybe this was the only negative experience I had.
It was really shocking for me.

Since there is a prevailing belief in Greece that Poles do not like foreigners, Eirini was afraid that she might experience racist behaviour during her stay in Poland. Her experiences largely dispelled these fears:

EXTRACT 81

- 149 R: In general, amm, before I came here
everybody was saying, like, uhm, Polish
150 people they don’t, ehm, they don’t, do not want,
like, foreigners and they may
151 be strange,
152 I: Aha.
153 R: stuff like that, and I was really afraid that...
everybody was gonna be
154 /racist./
155 I: /Oh my god, yeah./
156 R: But they are not, /they are not/
157 I: /Yeah/, its some kind of stereotype.
158 R: Yeah, exactly, there are some people that are racist.

Although Eirini expressed a positive opinion about Poles and rejected the stereotype of their being racist, she did experience racist comments and aggressive behaviour from drunken men. In her opinion, intolerance towards foreigners is only manifested by the elderly and middle-aged people. Her experience in this area is illustrated by the following extensive fragment:

EXTRACT 82

- 440 R: I think that, amm, they, there, the, we had some problems with, like, old,
441 older Polish people,
442 I: Yeah.
443 R: because they can be kind of racist.
444 I: Yhm.
445 R: Like, for example, we were, aaa..., in bar Prywatka and we don't, we don't
446 speak Polish,
447 I: [cough]
448 R: but, amm, we should, of course, because we are in Poland. But then we asked
449 the guy what was, what the sign would say, and he said that: "you should know,
450 because you are in Poland".
451 I: Oh my god.
452 R: Yeah, but, ehm, he spoke English, he could just explain to us and
453 I: Yhm, so, how old are yyii /was her, yyy was he/?
454 R: /He was four-/ forty years old.
455 I: Aha.
456 R: Yeah, and then there were another Polish, yeah, and, o..., Polish man. He was
457 really old, he was, like, sixty,
458 I: Yhm.
459 R: and he said something... really racist to my friend and in /Polish/,
460 I: /Yeah./
461 R: and we wouldn't understand, and we ask a Polish girl and she said: "You
462 don't want to know what he said to you".

Although Oscar (350) did not personally experience acts of discrimination, he mentioned that his friends from India were assaulted at a railway station in Poznań (358). Ismail, on the other hand, stated that he dealt with a racist attack only once, but it was not a life-threatening incident and it did not adversely affect his opinion of Poles. His account of the event was factual and unemotional. In line with Ismail's interview responses as well as his non-verbal communication and the manner of narration, it can be stated that even though

a part of the Polish population has a negative view of foreigners, this fact did not seem to neither distort nor negatively affect the respondent's general impression of Poland.

4.2.2.8. Stereotypes versus reality

Some respondents directly referred to the improvement of their intercultural competences due to a comparative view of the culture of their own country and the host country enabled by the stay abroad. For example, Fabiano stated that the greatest benefit of his stay in Poland was the “openness to other cultures and to a different point of view, a different way of behaviour” (33). In turn, Oksana stated the following: “during these three years I understood Poland and its culture” (26). Luika, on the other hand, owes her general intercultural competence to her multicultural attitude:

EXTRACT 83

85 R: [...] society is multicultural, and I like it personally, I think it's a good
86 thing that people from different backgrounds live together.

A sojourn in a host country naturally evokes reflection on stereotypes and opinions about it and prompts one to verify them. As to significant aspects of Polish culture, characteristics mentioned by the foreign students, are distant interpersonal relations, which particularly troubled the respondents from the southern cultures, especially from the Spanish-speaking countries. Oscar believed that Poles are shy, less open and claim more personal space compared to Colombians (127–128). As Manuel put it, Poles were very closed, especially at the beginning, which meant that his circle of friends included only other students participating in the Erasmus+ exchange:

EXTRACT 84

310 R: Things that I, that I don't like it is the... the behaviour, Polish
311 behaviour because they are closed... Many people told that if you get their
312 confidence, eee, it change but I always hang out with Erasmus people,
313 never with Polish people.

Spaniards (e.g. Lucy) were a particularly numerous group of the respondents disappointed with the aloofness initially shown by Poles. Saskia pointed to the following differences between the behaviour of Poles and Spaniards: “You keep a distance. [...] But when you tear down this wall, you have a Polish friend

for life” (99). María had a similar view of this issue as Poles initially seemed a bit reserved but became true friends over time. She believed that “some Poles have a Spanish character” (34). Despite the generally positive perception of Poles, the students from southern countries occasionally complained about Polish coldness and reserve. Lucy shared the following opinion about Poles:

EXTRACT 85

- 79 R: Also, I'm not saying that nowadays I think like that,
but people told me that, ehm..., the
80 people here are, like, cold or reserved or... not much like,
ehm..., maybe it's not the word
81 “friendly” [...].

José also referred to the reserve showed by Poles and noted that they remain quiet in public transport unlike the loud, talkative and laughing Spaniards:

EXTRACT 86

- 119 R: I..., I mean it's... I don't know if Polish people are cold,
but I have to say that Spanish people
120 are, like, very talkative and very active and...
this may be is the tendency.

The confrontation with a different culture also prompted the students to reflect on their native cultures. For example, referring to his own experiences in Poland, José noticed the cultural similarity of the southern European countries, such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal, which share a similar mentality, sense of humour or approach to life:

EXTRACT 87

- 128 R: Okay, I realised... that... in Europe (4.0)
there could be a country that could be called
129 South Europe because... we were... I realised that... as Spanish, Italians, Greeks,
130 Portuguese we have an extremely similar mentality...,
aaa, and different to the rest of Europe.
131 So... that, that will be the group I, I belong,
like southern European, because... we, like, the,
132 eee, same kind of jokes, same we have the same kind of,
of mentality, the same kind of attitude.

Meghan referred to the hospitality that Poles pride themselves on, stating that while they are “really nice” (138), they are not as hospitable as Turks, whose conduct she considered the model example of hospitality (134). In turn, students from Eastern Europe typically looked for similarities and differences between their compatriots and Poles. According to Oksana “Poles are similar to Ukrainians” (8). Jaroslav from Lithuania did not notice any significant differences: “We, from Lithuania, are more or less the same as people in Poland” (10–11). Ada from the Czech Republic described Poles as friendly and tolerant (95–96). In contrast, Helena from Ukraine noticed some differences between Poles and her compatriots, claiming that “Poles are calmer, I don’t know, you are calmer, you keep other rules, Ukrainians usually do not have any rules” (245–246). She also mentioned that Poles are more reserved and introverted; they cherish their personal space and like it when others respect its boundaries (253). Esmeralda pointed to a different position of women in Poland. Polish women enjoy more freedom compared to Armenia, where there exist certain behavioural constraints regarding women (e.g. concerning drinking alcohol or smoking in public places; 152–154).

Some interviewees changed their opinion about the host country. They expected Poland to be underdeveloped. However, they found that in some respects – especially the service sector – their host country offers good or even superior customer service standards than other countries. For example, María’s parents advised her against staying in Poland, but she fell in love with Poznań after spending a week there. Carla stated the following: “for example, you have Uber Eats and – seriously – this is the best invention in history, but Germans do not have it, Spain does not have it [...]. You can pay by credit card everywhere... It is impossible in Germany – you need to pay cash” (54–57). Michalina from Ukraine began to appreciate Poles’ honesty, which she contrasted with her countrymen and some Germans: “When I came to Poland, it was fascinating for me that these people simply say what they think, and when they do not want to talk to you, they don’t when they smile, you can tell that..., that are not double-faced, these people are not double-faced” (35–36).

Given globalisation and free access to the media, some of the stereotypes cited by the respondents seem quite astonishing. For example, before coming to Poland, Meghan was convinced that “all people wear skirts in roses” (24). The reality had nothing to do with what she imagined. Several respondents mentioned stereotypes related to the alleged excessive alcohol consumption in Poland. Lucy pointed to the differences in how alcohol is consumed, with wine being the primary drink of choice in Spain and vodka in Poland (73–76). As Svetlana holds it, stereotypes were often verified by real-life experiences:

EXTRACT 88

- 26 R: ...on preparing myself, so you know, I know that the Polish people like
27 alcohol for example and I've heard that everyone is really, really nice, so
28 and I also heard that it's really cold here but, but it wasn't like that.

Tom emphasised that he respects Poles for appreciating what they have, sharing with others, being helpful, religious and not very materialistic, unlike Americans who are always insatiable. Nonetheless, he mentioned excessive drinking and alcohol-related aggression as one of the flaws of Polish people. Similar observations were shared by Manuel from Ecuador, who believed that Poles drink mainly vodka, which results in aggressive behaviour. He witnessed fights in a club or discotheque on several occasions. He found it incomprehensible, as he associated such places with fun, not fights:

EXTRACT 89

- 91 R: It's okay but is not so common and...
another thing. Vodka... is so
92 cheaper and Polish people are always...
drinking and... nothing more.

EXTRACT 90

- 204 R: ...okay, one problem that I had was...
at, uhm, disco... discotheque,
205 because, really, always when I'm going
to parties there always happens a fight...
206 there, inside the, the club or out...
One night it happened four
207 times, it was, like, really?
People wanna come here to have fun or fight?

Klaudia commented only on the difference concerning drinking in public, which is allowed in Germany but forbidden in Poland (29–32).

Due to the history of relations between Armenia and Turkey, Esmeralda was afraid of meeting Turks in Poland before joining the internship (84). However, her stay in Poland allowed her to form a view that it is character and personality that matter in interpersonal relations, not nationality. In a way, she learnt to ignore national stereotypes, and began to pay more attention to individual characteristics in intercultural encounters:

EXTRACT 91

- 90 R: The most important thing is the character, so you don't need to
 91 pay attention to the nationalities. You just need to understand.
 You just need to discover
 92 different persons and everything is gonna be okay.

Luika's positive attitude towards Poles was influenced by historical issues. It was based on stories about Polish economic migrants who came to Greece in the 1980s and 1990s (60).

An important thread running through the narratives was also the religion of the host country and its influence on many aspects of social life. Manuel referred to the deeply entrenched stereotype of Poland as a very religious, Catholic country. In his opinion, the Catholicism of Poles, like that of Ecuadorians, has a cultural dimension rather than a deeply religious one and does not apply to the entire society. Secularisation is particularly evident among young people who give up on the religious practice, but define themselves as Catholics because of a certain tradition and the belonging to the church of their parents and grandparents:

EXTRACT 92

- 85 R: /Uhm/ only stereotypes..., like, all...
 Polish people are Catholic... and
 86 they are always going to... the church...
 something like that... but now
 87 I know that... is not true.
 88 /[Everyone: laughter]/
 89 /Like, maybe/ it was true in the past...,
 maybe for your parents... or
 90 for your grandparents [...]

Erva from Turkey perceived Poland as a country that is less conservative than Turkey, but not as secular as Western countries. In other words, religious issues still play an important role in shaping the rules of family and social life in Poland, but to a much lesser extent than in Turkey:

EXTRACT 93

- 39 R: I mean, yeah, like... Being from Turkey,
 I wouldn't say that we are really

- 40 European. I mean... regionally it's not really far away,
but I think there are some
41 differences. In Turkey, we are a bit more religious
and we are more conservative, I'd say.
42 And, like, family relations and also personal relations
are a bit tighter, and in my opinion,
43 they are a little bit warmer and more, you know, strict.
But..., yeah, here it's a little bit
44 different. I mean... I find now Poland,
according to western Europe, to which I was
45 exposed before, a little bit more religious and conservative
than the western part, but still...
46 more open and a little bit different than Turkey...

Cultural differences in the principles of social life, particularly those shaping the relationship between men and women, were difficult to accept for Noah, a Muslim brought up in conservative Cameroon. He found it particularly difficult to accept the ubiquitous public expressions of feelings towards women, something that his culture forbids:

EXTRACT 94

- 111 R: ...then the second challenge I have
is the cultural differences, you know, ah, the way
112 Polish people interact with one another
is not the same like we...
113 I: /Yeah./
114 R: interact with one another. You know,
we give respect so much to women, for example it
115 is a taboo, you know, in my culture to kiss a woman
in public but here it's so common [...]

Noah was particularly negative about students being promiscuous and bragging about their intense sex lives. Sharing knowledge on sexual conquests and being with many partners strongly violated his hierarchy of values and the accepted way of treating women:

EXTRACT 95

- 239 R: Eee..., no. Generally, I have not witnessed...
anything really negative. I... I am not, I

- 240 don't have that power to say it's negative but...
- 241 I: Yhm?
- 242 R: I must say the cultural difference (2.0) promiscuity...
I don't know whether it's a
- 243 negative issue. Among the students there is high level
of promiscuity... I... I had a lot of
- 244 experience where, where I have my friends, you know,
- 245 I: Yhm.
- 246 R: they claim to be dating five girls.
- 247 I: Yhm?
- 248 R: You date five girls... what for? That I don't know.
When I say general case that may
- 249 become a special case. But... generally...
I've not witnessed anything so (2.0) negative.

Despite these reservations, Noah considered Poles a hospitable nation and felt safe in Poland. He appreciated the fact that human rights are respected and there is no threat of terrorism:

EXTRACT 96

- 222 R: I must say, (2.0) eee, Polish guys are...
- 223 I: /Okay/
- 224 R: are really welcoming. That one I appreciate and it's positive.
Then secondly... human
- 225 rights are very fundamental here.
- 226 I: Mhm.
- 227 R: You can point a finger at somebody here
and you go to free court. (2.0) I've never heard
- 228 of any incident of terrorism.
- 229 I: Mhm, yeah.
- 230 R: Nothing. So, I think it's very good thing.
Then thirdly... students are been well
- 231 protected. You know, I come into the campus...
somebody is there to give my
- 232 jacket... protect it for me.

Based on his own rich intercultural experience, Tom made some comparisons between Poland and the countries of his previous internships. Compared to Burkina Faso, where he was on a medical mission, he perceived his stay in

Poland as being “in heaven from the first moment [...], especially because it is much cooler here than in Africa” (138–139). He also referred to the student experience in Dublin, claiming that there were similarities between Poland and Ireland. As an example, he referred to stereotypes about alcohol and potato consumption in both countries:

EXTRACT 97

- 142 R: [...] actually I studied in Europe for a while.
Okay. I have studied
143 in Dublin... in Ireland. It is very similar.
It's a country very similar to Poland I
144 say. Because you guys all, like...,
potato and alcohol [laughter], right?

Gael also verified his views on Poles as reserved individuals, coming to the conclusion that they can open up on closer acquaintance:

EXTRACT 98

- 356 R: Polish people I thought that they were more like,
let's say, closed people,
357 but no, no. They're really open once you, you,
you know them, you meet them more
358 than one time ***.

The analysed narratives clearly showed the strength of national stereotypes and their embeddedness in the minds of the respondents as well as their easy dissemination without deeper reflection. These simplified beliefs had some influence on the student's decision to come to Poland and their attitude towards the host country and its inhabitants. They often caused unjustified concerns about the climate or the political and economic situation. They also influenced their preparations for the trip, for example, making some students bring thick warm clothing unsuitable for the Polish climate, because of the stereotypical perception of Poland as an always cold country. Staying in Poland allowed the respondents to partially verify the stereotypes, especially those related to culture and human behaviour. However, their narratives lacked a deeper reflection on the very mechanism of the emergence and dissemination of stereotypes and their influence on the shaping of intercultural relations.

4.2.3. Assessment of the results of the stay in Poland

When summarising the results of staying abroad (Table A6 in Appendix 2), the respondents most often mentioned personal development, in particular open-mindedness ($n = 17$), increased intercultural competences ($n = 16$), better Polish language proficiency ($n = 16$), change of the opinion about Poles ($n = 15$), intellectual growth ($n = 14$) and global-mindedness ($n = 10$). Only two respondents expressed a negative attitude towards the host country.

José from Spain illustrated the process of opening up to another culture while also raising the awareness of one's own cultural identity:

EXTRACT 99

- 73 R: Before coming I... I felt, like, I knew...
I really liked my country, my traditional food, my
74 culture and... but... when I came here it was very weird
because... on the one hand I learnt that
75 [4.0] there are lot of different possibilities,
more than Spanish things, like, the food or the
76 traditions. On the other hand, I learnt too,
that it's... it's beautiful, like, to be abroad and know a
77 lot... a Spanish people and identify with that people
and can speak, like, your own language.
78 And even more in my case, because I'm from Galicia
and I know Galician people that stay
79 here and I can talk in my own language other than Spain [Castilian].
And even the Spanish people don't
80 understand me, so I think it's very... beautiful.

The respondents with rich intercultural experiences saw themselves as cosmopolitan “global villagers” (e.g. Tom, Michalina, Noah), without a specific national identity. For Tom, contact with other cultures was a good lesson in tolerance and respect for diversity. He even claimed that he did not experience a culture shock thanks to many stays in other countries:

EXTRACT 100

- 170 R: ...then I was in South America. So sometimes I just feel, like..., actually...
171 different culture doesn't give me too much culture shock. But, but that..., that's
172 very good for me, because it means that I know how to respect each other. I

173 know how to respect different culture. And it works right here because I think
174 we should respect to Polish culture as well.

Apart from the individual benefits listed, the overall impressions of the stay in Poland were undoubtedly positive (Table A7 in Appendix 2). The new acquaintances and friends that determined the satisfaction of the respondents and the positive perception of their experiences to the greatest extent ($n = 37$) came to the fore. The other benefits mentioned were studies ($n = 10$) and the university ($n = 4$), the city ($n = 7$), interactions with other international students ($n = 5$), career prospects ($n = 5$), the opportunity to travel ($n = 3$), intercultural experiences ($n = 3$) and social life ($n = 3$).

“Friends, my friends” (377), the quote from Gael’s interview pointing to friends as a decisive factor in the success of a stay abroad, can serve as an example of the importance of interpersonal relations. Gael emphasised the value of international contacts and the ability to communicate with representatives of different cultures, despite the existing barriers:

EXTRACT 101

351 R: [laughter] Okay, I will say in general,
in general but..., but the people,
352 international people because I met a lot of,
uhm, international people from a
353 lot of different countries or different culture
but finally were, like, all
354 the people act, like, the same, you know,
people is here for, for fun, for, for
355 study, for knowing of the culture,
in this case the Polish one ***.

Sabine also considered interpersonal relationships the most important aspect. She expressed satisfaction with her internship and emphasised that she was positively surprised by Poland:

EXTRACT 102

222 R: The most important issue [is], like,
the people you met because you need, like, yyy, social
223 life, you need, like, people in your age ***
you could talk with..., so this was really good. So, I

224 turned home say I really liked my stay here,
 it's really positive and I also really surprised
 225 of Poland [...].

According to Erva, a positive perception of studying abroad largely depends on the individual attitude and expectations related to the trip, but the final assessment is primarily influenced by people and the relationships established with them (90–91). She emphasised the openness of the Polish society to foreigners (especially the inhabitants of Poznań) and the sense of comfort and security during her stay in Poland. The host university and the studies it offered also met her expectations:

EXTRACT 103

89 R: Yeah, it's a very complex question,
 because it really depends on what your
 90 expectations or how ready you are... but...
 basically it's the people. I really found people in
 91 Poznań are really open and..., uhm...,
 ready for having foreigners in the community. So
 92 that's why I didn't have any single issue about racism
 or where you're from and all. So, I
 93 felt really comfortable in that sense, so I think
 that had a great influence. Other than that, in my
 94 studies were also kind of lucky. I was lucky with that
 because everything was really clear
 95 and I liked that /the/ my studies. I get to know
 a lot of nice people and now I'm making
 96 real good Polish friends as well, which is, like,
 also again with the people, that /the/ ones
 97 that I got to know, we really made some great connections
 that I could really count on
 98 them, so the feeling that really makes you
 feel like home is, I think, one of those, so you
 99 really feel like home, so you have some bonds that you can really trust.

A similar enthusiasm about the stay in Poland and the friends made along the way was shared by Eduardo from Spain (Extract 104), Cora from Greece (Extract 105) and Josip from Croatia (Extract 106):

EXTRACT 104

98 R: [...] especially the people, I think that I made friends during these months
99 here in Poland that will be my friends for the rest of my life.

EXTRACT 105

126 R: [...] meeting, like, people from
127 different ***, with different culture backgrounds...
128 which was kind of interesting.

EXTRACT 106

100 R: [...] and people. (2.0) I think that
I'm going to fall in love with Poland. [laughter]

It is worth paying attention to another excerpt from Josip's interview, which emphasises the role of speaking Polish in establishing relations with Poles and discovering the country and culture, bringing general satisfaction with the stay in the host country:

EXTRACT 107

104 R: My stay was very positive..., ehm,
at first certain that I had some problems regarding the
105 language, but with... the help of my mentor
everything, everything became easy. (2.0) I
106 got used and I started to learn Polish...,
also I made many friends and I have discovered a
107 wonderful country a new culture
and wonderful people of which before I knew nothing...
108 And I am very satisfied..., and now I have left
this country with so many beautiful
109 memories of my life hoping to come back
[laughter] another day...

Ismail, too, seemed pleased to be able to visit Poland and learn about its history and traditions. Even though he went through some difficult situations, he chose not to give up and stayed longer. As he said in the interview, he had been living in Poland for five years. The decisive factor in his positive assessment of his stay was the strong bond between him and his colleagues whom he met while moving to Poznań. Moreover, at the time of the study, they were all working on a project aimed at bringing different cultures together. Ismail said explicitly that working

together on that endeavour brought him a lot of joy. However, he expressly pointed to problems with establishing friendships with Poles, a factor that made it difficult for him to fully integrate and immerse himself in Polish society. For this reason, mastering language skills proved a major challenge for him. Ismail assured of his positive attitude towards the host country. He emphasised the value of intercultural experiences which enriched him and broadened his view of other cultures. He also touched upon the linguistic aspect of his stay. While he used English only in the educational context in his home country, he spoke it every day during his studies in Poland.

Significant benefits of participating in the Erasmus+ programme include not only contact with the host country's culture, but also the programme's international dimension and the possibility of travelling. For young people participating in the study, establishing relationships with representatives of various cultures and building a network of contacts all over the world proved a major benefit. José from Spain said that he became more open and now has "a big family around the world" thanks to his stay abroad and numerous trips:

EXTRACT 108

169 R: [...] I, I didn't say any negative thing about Erasmus. It
 170 was all perfect, but the rest things, it's, like, you know,
 all the people I knew here that now it's I
 171 would go to my home and I will have, like,
 a big family around the world. And now I consider
 172 myself a more open-minded person, and... in fact
 I would say that Erasmus probably changed
 173 my life before, after coming... before coming.
 It was, like, travel for me, it was really, really
 174 difficult, and... the English and the relationship
 with international people was really different.
 175 Now I only want to, like, discover the world,
 go to a lot of countries. And what's more... I don't
 176 know. I mean the most important thing for me
 was the people that I know here, and... if I had
 177 to say something negative from here,
 maybe I don't know, the work probably [...]

Sandra from Canada also pointed out that staying abroad created a unique opportunity to establish contacts with people from many countries and learn about their cultures and languages. In her narrative, she underscored the community

of Erasmus+ students and the support provided within it. Spending time together and having an active social life was a crucial aspect of these relationships:

EXTRACT 109

- 193 R: Because it's, like, no difference for me,
at the end I'm meeting also foreign, foreign
194 students and I am able to learn their,
their culture and so on. Uhm, I can learn languages
195 and the, it was just perfect for me,
and regular students here. They were, like, always
196 treating me well and when I was attending
at the same class with them, they were, like,
197 uhm, trying to help us, somehow, and also we were,
like, really well, uhm. We were going
198 together, like, uhm, I mean maybe every,
every weekend we were able to go together for
199 some parties and so on. I mean, the Erasmus students
and regular students also, yeah, so.
200 It was just perfect staying and I don't see that
with many negative sides of, of staying.

Dina from Russia also noted the positive support from the student community. What she found important was the very fact of being in Europe and the unlimited travel possibilities that this offered:

EXTRACT 110

- 126 R: Ehm, of course it's a positive environment here
around me. It's people, ehm, with whom I have
127 already mentioned that I had no trouble,
everybody is so helpful. Ehm, really everybody is, always
128 ready to help me as a foreigner, ehm... Of course, ehm,
the, of course the feeling that I'm in
129 Europe, that I can traveling, ehm, I can travel,
and I really travel a lot. I have already been in
130 Prague, in, ehm, in Germany, yeah, and I go to Italy this Saturday,
so I'm, of course I'm happy. [laughter]

In her account, Michalina, who left Ukraine at the age of 17, expressed the feeling that her identity was not bound by national borders. After spending

three years in Germany, she started university studies in Poland. She described herself as European: “I should say I identify myself like European but not a Polish girl or German..., German girl or Ukrainian..., just [...] a European person” (33).

Many respondents described their stay abroad within an Erasmus+ mobility as the best period of their lives, as illustrated by Eirini’s response:

EXTRACT 111

- 579 R: Hmm, in general, I think that my stay here
is really nice, that we were
580 talking with my friends yesterday that, eee,
I think, that this is one of the
581 greatest period of my life because here we are always free...
582 I: /Aha./
583 R: /We/ do not stress about anything..., yeah,
everything is really easy for
584 us. I don’t know, if is because we are Erasmus
and everybody starting to help
585 us or it’s in general here, that everybody’s /helping/ each other,

The interviewed students highly valued relationships with their peers, the sense of belonging to the international student community and the support it provides. They valued their lightheartedness, fun and travelling opportunities, which give them a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. For many of them, this was the first time that they had ever left their family home and faced the challenges of adult life. Nonetheless, by no means is this a brutal clash with reality, but rather a controlled process, regulated by the provisions contained in the learning agreement concluded within the framework of Erasmus+ programme. These provisions ensure financial and personal security as well as favourable conditions for studying.

4.2.3.1. Conditional values

The extracts cited so far indicate the significant role of emotional and social values. Most students participating in the study treated their stay abroad as an opportunity to have fun and relax as well as to travel and make friends with people from all over the world. However, the analysed narratives, especially those shared by older, more experienced respondents who had studied abroad before, also reveal conditional values. According to Dina from Russia, the experience of studying abroad is recognised by employers and offers a competitive advantage in the labour market. In detail, Erasmus+ participants are seen as resourceful, able

to face many challenges and fluent in English (179–185). Based on positive personal academic experiences, a good opinion about Polish universities, the curricula available and the level of study offered, some respondents considered continuing education in Poland. This can be exemplified by the response offered by Luftar, an Albanian from Kosovo:

EXTRACT 112

- 158 R: Aha, the overall view that I have for this semester
[in] Poland is a good country and the
159 university here is very, very good and
I'm very satisfied with the courses that I'm taking and,
160 uhm, I think that I'm, I'm kind of considering it
for my master studies... this faculty here, so
161 (2.0) you can imagine that I have
pretty good impressions from this place.
[...]
173 R: Well... I'm..., uhm..., seriously considering it because,
like, the focus, the focus on
174 my career, I would say..., language studies is very...
Like this, this faculty here gives a lot
175 of importance for those language studies...
surely what I want to be and do in the future [...]

Jae's (South Korea) extremely positive experiences convinced him to move to Poland:

EXTRACT 113

- 252 R: I don't miss my family. I don't miss my friends.
I don't miss my country. I'm just fully
253 concentrated in my life in here.

EXTRACT 114

- 259 R: My Korean friend and I are seriously thinking
about how can we stay in, like, Poland or some
260 other European place because we really want to.

The respondents from southern Europe, especially Spaniards and Italians, pointed to the low cost of living in Poland and the good situation on the labour market. They were worried about the high unemployment rate in their home

countries and potential problems with finding employment. For this reason, despite a different lifestyle and harsh climate, they considered settling in Poland, where life seems easier than their home countries. In this regard, Marco from Italy said the following:

EXTRACT 115

- 73 R: Wonderful. I had a wonderful experience with the...
with Poland and people that I met
74 there.
75 I: Okay... Some other things you would like to add?
When it comes to challenges.
76 R: That, to be honest, I, I think that
I've been very lucky, because I had the impression that
77 at, at least for a person from Italy...
things in Poland are way easier than in, in Italy.

Moreover, the analysed narratives reveal a very positive image of Poznań as a student-friendly city that offers educational, professional and cultural opportunities. According to Ada, Poznań is the best place to live in Poland:

EXTRACT 116

- 77 R: I have many friends from university now and it's amazing.
So... I think that Poznań best... is the
78 best city in Poland... I meet a lot of foreigners so,
so it's another positive aspect of
79 studying here... And actually,
I'm thinking now of staying here a little bit longer...

Luftar, who appreciated Krakow's tourist attractions, spoke in a similar vein, but also drew attention to the ideal size of Poznań, which provides its residents with all amenities while minimising the typical drawbacks of large cities at the same time:

EXTRACT 117

- 195 R: Krakow is most attractive for tourists
and Poznań is not that overcrowded and...
196 it's big enough, so it, it doesn't look like a village,
cities in my country, but it's small enough to be
197 successful...

Eirini from Greece was delighted with the excellent organisation, the reliability of transport and the cleanliness of the city, something that stood in contrast with her native Thessaloniki (252–262). Some Germans shared similar opinions about the city, e.g. Sabine:

EXTRACT 118

- 225 R: ...So I liked the cities we travelled;
I like to live in Poznań. It's like a good size
226 of city and, yeah, I think, I don't know, I enjoyed till now...

4.2.3.2. Negative aspects of staying in Poland

Almost half of the respondents ($n = 23$) did not mention any negative aspects of their stay abroad (Table A8 in Appendix 2). In spite of the generally positive picture of Poland as a host country, foreign students mention some drawbacks, with the most tangible being the language barrier, resulting mainly from not speaking Polish ($n = 14$); local cuisine ($n = 5$); cold climate ($n = 4$); manifestations of racism ($n = 3$); and in isolated cases, personal reasons related to homesickness ($n = 2$); feeling lonely ($n = 2$); or problems with medical care ($n = 2$) and aloofness of local people ($n = 2$). The words of Antonio from Italy can serve to illustrate the difficulties in communicating with residents and his inability to accept the local cuisine:

EXTRACT 119

- 90 R: Okay, yeah. The outcome is positive.
Up to now it was really nice experience. [...]
91 Yeah, it was *** it is *** it's been a very nice stay...
The fact is (3.0) the
92 only bad thing is about... sometimes..., yeah,
cultural differences with people and difficulties
93 to communicate with locals sometimes,
the bad thing which I can think about, and... and the
94 food which is quite different, and it's been sometimes
a challenge, to... to cook what I wanted.
95 But (2.0) the best things about my stay here in Poland
was the Erasmus life in general, so, like (2.0),
96 learning about other countries, learning about Poland,
learning... also how people react, culturally
97 behave, in different countries, in different situations.
And in general, it's been a really fun

- 98 experiment also, like..., sharing my culture,
and other people sharing your *** their culture.
- 99 And this exchange of ideas, of culture
is the best thing to me of this experience.

Despite these problems, the overall tone of Antonio's narrative is overwhelmingly positive. He appreciated the contact with Polish culture and the international community of Erasmus+ students and very much enjoyed sharing his own culture with others. He considered the exchange of thoughts, experiences and values to be the most important aspect of his stay in Poland.

It was primarily the students from southern countries who were bothered by Poland's cold climate. For example, Manuel from Ecuador mentioned that the winter in Poland was a real challenge for him. He also looked for a link between the cold climate and the emotional coldness and the reserve of Poles, as he found it difficult to get to know them (300–313). Manuel's dissatisfaction with the range of relations with Poles often reoccurred in his narrative, for example:

EXTRACT 120

- 322 R: yes... I, I think I really want to
hang out with Polish people because I
- 323 am never with Polish people really...
only in Biedronka and in my dorm.

However, Manuel found his stay in Poland successful. He particularly liked the work-life balance, the spring season, beautiful parks and the zloty/euro exchange rate. Manuel established friendships and acquaintances primarily with students from other countries, just like many other respondents. In his narrative, he even referred to the "Erasmus mentality" (335) and the common experiences of Erasmus+ students:

EXTRACT 121

- 327 R: Now I, I can contrast the truth and, eee, and, and what I am thinking about
328 because...
- 329 [inaudible] is that it's cheaper and beautiful and the part that I don't
330 want to be here a lot of time is the behaviour and the weather.
- 331 I: So final grade: are you happy or unhappy... with your stay?
- 332 R: I am happy I mean, /okay/, because I have, eee, friends for from another
333 countries, so we understand each other how we feel *** [overlapping and

- 334 hence inaudible]
335 R: Erasmus mentality.

Although the students often spoke about the difficulties they experienced, those did not determine the final assessment of their stay in Poland. The respondents accepted them as an integral part of life abroad. This can be exemplified by the words of Ada from the Czech Republic:

EXTRACT 122

- 98 R: Hmm... Sometimes I feel a little bit lonely
because my family is not here but on the
99 other hand, I have my friends here. So, so... it's not that bad.
But nothing special. I think apart
100 from the fact that the maths is quite hard for me,
as I said a few minutes ago... that makes my
101 stay here or less pleasant. But..., but I think that nothing more.

Sabine jokingly stated that the only negative aspect of her stay in Poland was its inevitable end. At the same time, she noted the one-of-a-kind nature of her experiences and the unique constellation of relationships she established, an experience that will most likely never happen again:

EXTRACT 123

- 227 R: I think I have no negative aspect.
I think it's the only negative aspect just like this, it's..., it
228 will end, I don't know, [in] six weeks or seven weeks.
And it is always said when it comes to the
229 end you consider you don't know
if you will meet all the people again and you will never
230 meet [them] in this constellation again.

The analysis shows that the negative aspects were not decisive in the overall assessment of the mobility that was generally deemed positive. Issues like missing one's family or struggling with different cuisine or climate receded into the background once there appeared the possibility of interacting with other cultures and establishing unique relationships with Poles.

4.3. Conclusions

The findings of the study confirm the researchers' earlier assumptions and make it possible to draw important empirical conclusions, including the fact that several basic issues matter in the overall assessment of the stay abroad. The first one is personal experiences built on relationships with people from the closest environment. What matters is who belongs to this circle and how one can communicate with them. According to Steve, "people are always a... huge factor... you know, 'cause everything is person to person, every interaction you really make this down to a person" (37–38). Additionally, Sasha mentioned that when you do not know any locals and your proficiency in Polish is poor, you may feel "like an animal [...] surrounded by other animals who speak other languages" (264–265).

Getting to know a local person is always the key to a fruitful and fulfilling stay. This was reflected, for example, in the account of Borys from Ukraine. In most cases, foreigners began to feel more confident thanks to a person who started to keep in regular touch with them (Helena, 278; Jura, 59). In the case of Helena, support came from academic teachers, who encouraged her to stay in Poland. She recalled it as follows:

EXTRACT 124

- 278 [...] two of my teachers from the university
really inspired me and they are also
279 from Ukraine, but they actually taught me, aaa...,
different, aaa... aspects of Polish culture and
280 showed me that Poland is a really cool country
and they encouraged me to continue my life
281 here, so they were like my other parents.

Esmeralda also spoke of building such rapport (64–65).

The respondents highly appreciated their relations with Poles: invitations to their private homes, participation in family gatherings, or joint celebrations of holidays such as Easter or Christmas (e.g. Meghan, 151–153). In their opinion, these were opportunities to delve into the essence of Polish culture, which you cannot experience as a tourist.

Saskia from Spain (5) stated that a longer stay abroad is always a challenge. Like any other move to a new place, it involves making new friends and loosening the existing ties. This view was shared by Oksana and Michalina, who also admitted:

“I think... the hardest was this... this integration” (57). The difficulties most likely arise from the fact that a language as the primary means of communication plays an important role in the process of establishing rapport within a group. Unfamiliarity with the language of the host community excludes an individual from its metaphorical boundaries – “people put you outside” – and therefore, you have to “put more effort in the learning of the language” (Fabiano, 56). A solution to this predicament was to meet people who share a similar position. Nonetheless, this sometimes resulted in relying on the international student bubble, which limited the possibilities available in the host country. This was the case for Helena from Ukraine, who initially conversed primarily with her compatriots and thus failed to learn Polish so as to be able to start a professional career or even build deeper relationships with Poles. This changed once she moved to another city, where she established an extensive network of contacts and integrated with Poles to a greater degree.

Some foreigners realised how crucial proficiency in the local language (e.g. Luika, 175–176) and assistance from local residents really are. The role played by their Polish buddies proved particularly crucial in day-to-day functioning in Poland, which would be very difficult without this support, as confirmed, for example, by Sandra:

EXTRACT 125

- 114 R: Yhm, I would say..., like..., uhm...,
like, my mentor has been a really, really
115 positive influence. I was in contact with him
before I came here. And now being here
116 he's been and he helped me, like, bus pass...,
and a bank account started and a phone and
117 all these good things... So, without him, I think,
I would be very lost. Just doing that stuff
118 now... So, yeah, meeting the people...
is always new people and they always show you
119 new things, like, this cute place..., so, yeah, things like that.

The need to speak Polish came to the fore in the case of the students who have become more aware of their long-term (professional) goals based on conditional values. Helena, a Ukrainian, studied applied linguistics in Lublin for three years. At that time, she did not learn Polish because she interacted exclusively with Ukrainians and the languages of instruction at her university were English and Russian. Only after visiting a professional event in Warsaw did she realise that she

would not be able to always communicate exclusively in these languages. Helena then came to the following conclusion:

EXTRACT 126

- 176 R: I faced problems with language again,
 because lots of people spoke Polish especially people
 177 from administrative part so... my English wasn't enough,
 and of course Russian as well because
 178 it was Warsaw, so not Lublin, and...
 that is why I saw that at the time I need to study Polish more
 179 in order to be able to continue my career, so I need Polish.

She noticed the benefits of investing time in learning Polish, which further motivated her to improve her new skills. Several other interviewees also confirmed the idea that mastering the local language becomes a means of gaining agency in everyday life and building higher self-esteem. Contrary to their expectations and a strong belief in the status of the *Lingua Franca English*, most of the respondents realised during their stay that speaking Polish is a ticket not only to everyday functioning or career development in Poland, but also to deeper private relationships.

The analysed narratives enabled a detailed insight into the experiences of the persons studying and working abroad. Based on them, it can be concluded that the stay of young people abroad is a huge step towards adulthood and a chance to take responsibility for oneself. Acquiring unique life skills and international contacts, whether academic, professional or personal, is invaluable. It is also an opportunity to improve social and communication competences as well as develop intercultural awareness and problem-solving skills. For example, during their stay in another country, students have to face new situations or difficulties related to medical care or public transport. The data gathered by us shows that they usually try to solve problems on their own. Only in a few cases, where they could not communicate with local residents, did our respondents depend on their Polish friends. The data also indicates that studying abroad is a lesson in openness and cultural awareness as well as a chance to improve proficiency in English and learn about new customs and traditions.

The data obtained also made it possible to analyse the respondents' attitudes towards the education system in the host country, which turned out to be mostly positive. The respondents appreciated the possibility of studying at a foreign university and getting to know another system of higher education. In their

opinion, the academic staff was sufficiently competent and equipped with the necessary skills to teach in English. They also appreciated the interesting ways in which lecturers conducted their classes.

Considering all the information collected, it can be concluded that the respondents found their stay in Poland successful in many respects, including, among others, the study abroad experience. They also appreciated the opportunity to see both their host country and their home country from a brand new perspective.



Final remarks



The analysed narratives share a common theme which can be described as a “journey towards maturity”. Overall, they illustrate the process of transforming the fun-seeking student into a young, open-minded adult who is more aware of herself or himself and of cultural differences. The initial motivation to participate in the student exchange programme was primarily based on the desire for personal development combined with the need to discover (Deakin, 2014; Gómez et al., 2018), which included the pursuit of independence, the desire for adventure, travelling, meeting new people as well as going far away from home. Therefore, when choosing a host country, young adults were mainly driven by emotional, social and cognitive reasons (Gómez et al., 2018).

The development of intercultural competences was rather superficial for most respondents studying abroad for the first time. Despite their openness and positive attitude, they (with some exceptions) did not show a deep interest in the culture or language of the host country. Their narratives revealed many naive beliefs about culture and language, pointing to a rather simplified perception of reality. Above all, they shared the conviction that there is a universal culture that facilitates communication and eliminates all kinds of barriers. This was related to the belief in the status of English as a global language and a universal means of communication, which eliminated the need to communicate in the language of the host country and justified not taking the time to learn it.

Nonetheless, the analysed narratives deconstruct these myths. Contrary to previous assumptions, the local language becomes the main tool of communication and the key to intercultural understanding during a stay-abroad context. Additionally, a shift from vague “universality” towards a specific culture can be seen, as documented by the narratives of several respondents who shared more insightful reflections on their experiences (e.g. Oksana) and were able to identify many benefits of mastering a local language. Apart from the previously mentioned emotional, social and cognitive values, which translated into more spontaneous and satisfying communication and improvement of the quality of relations with Poles, some respondents pointed to the conditional value of knowing the local (Polish) language using which ensured access to the local labour market and created new professional career prospects.

It can therefore be concluded that studying abroad for the first time is often only a starting point in the process of multidimensional development of an individual. This experience undoubtedly plays a decisive role in personal growth and contributes significantly to the development of linguistic and cultural awareness. With regard to the present, it is also important to emphasise its role in debunking the myths concerning the use of *Lingua Franca English*. Contrary to popular belief, the data revealed that speaking English is not

enough to function effectively in places where it is not an official language and does not provide satisfactory control over conversation (cf. Parks, 1994). Thus, mastering the local language becomes an undeniable asset and a means of in-depth communication based on mutual understanding and a stronger rapport.

The conducted study has some limitations that should be considered in future research. First, it focused on young foreigners studying or working in large Polish cities. In the future, it would be beneficial to collect data from a wider group of respondents, e.g. foreigners travelling outside their home country for other purposes and to smaller towns – not only in Poland – or from respondents of a different socio-demographic profile. This would make it possible to take into account different cultural perspectives. We are fully aware that cultural background influences common attitudes and value structures. Therefore, future research could focus more on the impact of value systems on selecting a particular destination and the quality of foreign experiences (cf. Gómez et al. 2018). Moreover, the short duration of the research process made it difficult to collect more extensive data or to make regular visits to respondents. Therefore, systematically conducted longitudinal studies seem to be more insightful in the field of narrative research on experiences of foreigners. The analyses could also be enriched by diversification of data sources, e.g. diaries written by respondents, which would make it possible to look at the studied issues from a broader perspective.



Practical recommendations



While it is difficult to make a universal list of recommendations that could make a stay in Poland more comfortable for foreign students, it seems that the following could be helpful.

Regarding foreign students

■ Guidelines for preparing for the arrival in a foreign country

Students lack information at the stage of preparing for a stay abroad. They do not have clear guidelines on what documents they should bring, whether ID photos are required to prepare the documents, and how long it takes to receive them.

■ Faster scholarship payouts

Since a stay abroad makes it necessary to cover the costs of travel to the destination, accommodation, purchase of educational materials, public transport tickets, etc., the procedure for paying out scholarships should be facilitated and accelerated.

■ Information on climate and weather conditions

Providing reliable information on the climate and weather conditions in specific months as well as recommendations for the necessary clothing, would also facilitate proper preparation for a stay abroad. Though Poland is typically associated with a very cold climate, winters have not been too harsh in recent years and temperatures can get rather high even in early spring. Many students find themselves undaunted by low temperatures yet find it challenging to cope with the rapidly fading daylight in the autumn and winter. It would be advisable to prepare them for this and show them how to deal with mood drops caused by the lack of sunlight.

■ Off-campus accommodation

Students often decide to rent accommodation on their own, so it seems necessary to prepare a guide on renting apartments or rooms outside the campus, containing such things as addresses of websites or search engines for tenants, a list of recommended real estate agencies as well as templates of rental agreements in both Polish and English.

■ City transport

Before arrival, students should receive a detailed explanation of how public transport works, the types of tariffs as well as ways to buy public transport tickets and the locations where they can do so. Students should postpone purchasing season tickets as initially they often do not have a student ID entitling them to discounts, meaning that any discount ticket they hold is effectively invalid. It is also worth teaching them how to use local mobile apps (e.g. Jak dojadę) that facilitate moving around the city.

■ **Local language – absolute minimum**

Even though some students attended the basic preparatory language course, the classes did not meet their expectations and they still could not communicate in Polish. The absolute minimum that could make one's stay in Poland much easier is the knowledge of the alphabet and the basic rules of reading in Polish, enabling e.g. the correct pronunciation of destination names and addresses, especially street names.

■ **Language survival kit**

Upon their arrival, students should receive some practical information, e.g. a survival kit in the form of a language guide. It would present the most common everyday situations in which the lack of knowledge of the local language can be troublesome, e.g. shopping, doctor's appointments, conversations at the reception desk, renting a flat or purchasing public transport tickets. Bilingual or multilingual instructions on how to act in specific situations, or sample phrasebooks with bilingual dialogues for various occasions, can be prepared during translation classes held as part of foreign language philology courses conducted at universities hosting foreign students.

■ **Health service**

Due to the problems with access to medical services, frequently mentioned in the interviews, it is crucial to provide a local guide explaining the rules of accessing the health service along with contact details of primary care physicians. It is worth attaching sample forms to be completed (e.g. a declaration of choosing a primary care physician) as well as informing students about the possibility of using paid medical care.

■ **Providing a peer guardian**

Providing a foreigner with a buddy who can help solve non-standard problems and show her or him around the university and the city is a very effective form of support in the first weeks of stay. Young Poles volunteering to perform such services may include them among the achievements that constitute grounds for applying for scholarships or awards.

■ **Sharing one's experience with other foreigners**

It is worth encouraging foreigners who have been in Poland for a long time to develop informal guides on day-to-day life in a given city or provide relevant social media posts or videos.

■ **Internet access**

When abroad, one needs easy access to a free wireless internet connection. This allows students to resolve most problems, including searching for any information they need as well as dealing with matters related to the course of study or living conditions. The role of the internet is also invaluable

in maintaining contacts with relatives in the home country who can support students emotionally at the initial stage of their stay.

■ **Establishing local contacts**

It is worth emphasising in guidelines and other information materials that making an acquaintance with a local person is the key to a fruitful and satisfying stay abroad.

Regarding university personnel

■ **Training for all university employees to raise awareness of the needs of foreign students**

Employees of all levels and types of positions are advised to take part in training sessions aimed at sensitising them to the needs of foreign students and presenting forms of assisting and facilitating their stay in Poland. Such training may be effected through self-study (e.g. webinars). Training materials are available on the websites of EU-funded projects such as SOLVINC¹². Attention should also be paid to university jobs that do not require regular use of foreign language skills. Respondents often reported problems in communicating with doormen at student dormitories as part of day-to-day interactions. Such employees should be offered basic training focusing on greater openness towards foreigners, and if necessary, developing the ability to use an online translator.

■ **Transparent rules for assessing students and communicating with them**

Students are very often unaware of the grading system with respect to the subject taught by a given lecturer. Lecturers with foreigners in their groups should provide a short note on the grading scale they apply and the tasks that the student should perform to be able to pass their subject. Such information is normally published in the syllabus, but foreign students do not always know how to find it – they need clear, concise guidelines. Students should also be well informed about how to communicate with the group outside of on-site classes. If the lecturer sends additional information, e.g. to the group's e-mail, the foreigner should be included in the mailing list.

The developed materials should be available primarily online or in a printed form. It is worth involving both Polish and foreign students in their development to minimise the distance and increase the accessibility of the information provided.

¹² A project aimed at solving intercultural conflicts in cooperation with students from different countries, cf. Online tool – SOLVINC: solvinc.eu

Appendices



Appendix 1: Guidelines for interviewers

- I. Introduction to the interview: present the topic, goal and description of the research
- II. Demographic data of respondents: collect the following data:
 - name (pseudonym),
 - gender,
 - age,
 - country/nationality/(ethnic group),
 - mother language/other languages,
 - Polish language proficiency (acc. to CEFR),
 - English language proficiency (acc. to CEFR),
 - place and period of stay in Poland (in months),
 - field of study,
 - main reason for coming to Poland: study/work/other.
- III. Proper part: thematic threads
 1. Preparation of respondents to stay abroad:
 - expectations towards the stay abroad,
 - level of proficiency in Polish and English,
 - knowledge about Poland,
 - length and type of earlier stays abroad,
 - cultural identity profile of respondent.
 2. Challenges related to the daily functioning of respondents abroad, especially related to language proficiency:
 - If applicable, in what situations did challenges emerge (e.g. accommodation, transport and orientation in the area, shopping, medical care, communication channels, activities outside the university, contacts with citizens of the host country, other)?
 - If applicable, what kind of challenges were they?
 - Were the challenges related to the Polish or English language competences of respondents?
 3. Factors that had the greatest impact on the final positive or negative assessment of the respondents' stay in Poland
- IV. Finalising the interview (including thanking the respondent and assuring them of the ethical aspects)

Developed based on: Szczepaniak-Kozak (2012; 2014).

1b. Guidelines for interview transcription

- // Speech overlapping from the first to the last slash.
- ... Pause lasting one or less than one second.
- (2.0) Pause lasting longer than one second during the speech or between the speeches; the number indicates the length of the pause.
- *** Skipping or deleting.
- [] Explanatory comment.
- italics* Word or a part of the word emphasised by a person speaking.

Developed based on: Boje (1991).

Appendix 2: Information about the respondents

TABLE A1. PSEUDONYMS AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Name (pseudonym)	Sex	Country/nationality/ (ethnicity)	Age
Luftar	M	Kosovo (Albanian)	21
Esmeralda	K	Armenia	21
Semiramida	K	Azerbaijan	25
Natasha	K	Belarus	21
Jura	M	Belarus	22
Svetlana	K	Belarus	21
Josip	M	Croatia	21
Ada	K	The Czech Republic	24
Manuel	M	Spain/ <i>Ecuadorian</i>	22
Luika	K	Greece	22
Sophia	K	Greece	22
Eirini	M	Greece	24
Lucy	K	Spain	21
María	K	Spain	27
Saskia	K	Spain	22
Carla	K	Spain	21
José	M	Spain	20
Eduardo	M	Spain	23
Paula	K	Spain	23
Gael	M	Spain	24
Rahid	M	India	24
Noah	M	Cameroon	24
Jack	M	Canada	24
Sandra	K	Canada	20
Oscar	M	Colombia	23
Pablo	M	Colombia	22
Frank	M	Congo	29
Lin	K	South Korea	22
Jae	M	South Korea	24
Jaroslav	M	Lithuania	23
Cora	K	Germany/ <i>Greek</i>	22
Klaudia	K	Germany	22
Hans	M	Germany	23

Sabine	K	Germany	21
Dina	K	Russia	23
Bogdan	M	Russia	24
Andrei	M	Romania	20
Steve	M	United States/ <i>Canadian</i>	20
Tom	M	United States/ <i>Taiwanese</i>	30
Ismail	M	Turkey	24
Azra	K	Turkey	21
Erva	K	Turkey	24
Meghan	K	Turkey (Kurdish)	21
Sasha	M	Ukraine	21
Anhelina	K	Ukraine	19
Borys	M	Ukraine	22
Helena	K	Ukraine	22
Michalina	K	Ukraine	22
Oksana	K	Ukraine	22
Fabiano	M	Italy	24
Antonio	M	Italy	20
Monica	K	Italy	23
Marco	M	Italy	24

TABLE A2. PREPARATION FOR GOING ABROAD

Action	N		
	Yes/ To some extent	No	Not mentioned
Formal (documents) and informal (practical skills) preparation	41	0	12
Knowledge of the country's history	40	5	8
Cultural preparation (media) to integrate with the local community	26	3	24
Investing in language acquisition to access symbolic (e.g. friendships, education) and material (e.g. money and material goods) resources	19	29	5
Ethnocentric attitude (avoiding cultural differences, denying their existence, defending against them, minimising their importance)	9	13	31

TABLE A3. ATTITUDE BEFORE ARRIVAL

Attitude	<i>N</i>
Positive	44
Some negative expectations	7
Negative	1
None	1

TABLE A4. REASONS FOR GOING ABROAD

Action	<i>N</i>		
	Yes	Did not cause problems ^(a)	Not mentioned
Experiencing a different culture, broadening the worldview, meeting new people	41	2	10
Obtaining education/Master's degree studies completion opportunities	36	0	17
Previous positive intercultural experiences	32	13	8
Entertaining/making new friends	30	2	21
Spending leisure time	30	1	22
Better chances of getting a good job or gaining a competitive advantage in the labour market	23	0	30
University/organisation reputation	20	4	29
Recommendations of other persons	19	4	30
Tourist attractions, a good starting point for travel	18	2	33
Previous positive experiences with the country or its people	17	19	17
Low costs of living	15	2	36
Learning Polish language	12	29	12
Attractive climate	7	8	38

TABLE A5. CHALLENGES DURING THE STAY IN POLAND

Subject	N		
	Yes	Did not cause problems ^(a)	Not mentioned
Polish language as a barrier	45	6	2
Different organisational culture/requirements at the university or the workplace	34	14	5
Transport and orientation	24	23	6
Healthcare	23	24	6
Shopping	19	28	6
Problems at university or at work	19	21	13
Accommodation	18	28	7
Weather	12	11	30
Loneliness	11	16	26
Bureaucracy	9	30	14
Discrimination	8	31	14
No assistance from the host institution	4	36	13
Financial issues	3	41	9
Crime, including acts of violence against the respondents	3	41	9
Problems with other foreigners	2	40	11
Problems with the locals	2	38	13

^(a) Appropriate assistance was provided.

TABLE A6. RESULTS OF THE STAY IN POLAND

Subject	N		
	Yes	No	Not mentioned
Personal development (open-mindedness)	17	0	10
Improving the fluency in the use of Polish	16	3	6
Improving intercultural competences ^(a)	16	1	10
Change of opinion about local people	15	0	12
Intellectual growth	14	0	13
Global-mindedness	10	0	17
Negative approach/attitude	2	5	20

^(a) A comparative overview of cultures but also an opportunity to see the uniqueness of one's own culture, revising one's worldview and starting to reject stereotypes.

TABLE A7. FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE STAY ABROAD: THE MOST POSITIVE ASPECTS

Subject	<i>N</i>
People/friends	37
Studies	10
City	7
Professional opportunities	5
Other foreign students	5
University	4
Travelling	3
Relations with lecturers and other students	3
Social life	3
Intercultural experience	3
Entertainment	2
Meeting new people	2
Becoming independent	2
Good organisation	2
Interest in the country	2
Improving English skills	1
Foreign volunteering	1
Religious customs	1
Getting good grades	1
Low prices	1
Staying in Europe	1

TABLE A8. FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE STAY ABROAD: THE MOST NEGATIVE ASPECTS

Subject	<i>N</i>
None	23
Polish language	14
Food/local cuisine	5
Climate/coldness	4
Racism	3
Loneliness	2
Distanced people	2
Longing for one's family	2
Healthcare	2
Bureaucracy	1
Accommodation/transport/shopping	1
Distanced classmates	1
Feeling lost at the beginning of the stay	1
Interpersonal relations	1
Lack of the contact with Poles	1

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Summary

The monograph focuses on the interrelations between language and intercultural communication, with particular emphasis on the importance of foreign language skills in shaping positive personal, professional and educational experiences of students during longer stays abroad, mainly within the Erasmus+ programme. The authors present a critical perspective on the understanding of the role of English as a *lingua franca* in intercultural relations and highlight the key role of the local language (in this case, Polish) in the processes of conversational control and social integration. The monograph begins with a literature review that focuses on the types of motivations underlying the decision to go or stay abroad and invest in learning the local language. In the next chapter, the authors focus on methodological aspects of narrative research in the context of intercultural communication. The theoretical part is followed by the presentation of the findings of a study based on a narrative interview, which over the course of two years (2018–2019) involved 53 respondents – representatives of 24 countries, who share the experience of an extended stay in Poland for educational or professional purposes.

Contrary to popular belief, the research revealed that English is not sufficient to function abroad successfully. The results indicate that people who decide to stay abroad for a longer period should invest in learning the local language, which sooner or later becomes a medium of deep intercultural communication in terms of positioning themselves, building relationships and increasing their cultural and linguistic resources.

KEYWORDS

- intercultural communication
- multilingualism
- local language
- English language
- *lingua franca*
- narrative interview

Streszczenie

Monografia jest poświęcona wzajemnym relacjom między językiem a komunikacją międzykulturową ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem znaczenia znajomości języków obcych w kształtowaniu pozytywnych doświadczeń osobistych, zawodowych i edukacyjnych wśród studentów przebywających przez dłuższy czas za granicą, głównie w ramach programu Erasmus+. Autorzy przedstawiają krytyczną perspektywę postrzegania roli języka angielskiego jako *lingua franca* w relacjach międzykulturowych i podkreślają kluczową rolę języka lokalnego (w tym wypadku polskiego) w procesach kontroli rozmowy i integracji społecznej. Monografia rozpoczyna się od przeglądu literatury, który skupia się na rodzajach przyczyn leżących u podstaw decyzji o wyjeździe lub pobycie za granicą oraz inwestowania w naukę lokalnego języka. W kolejnej części przedstawiono teoretyczne i metodologiczne aspekty badań narracyjnych w kontekście komunikacji międzykulturowej. Rozważania kończy prezentacja wyników badania opartego na wywiadzie narracyjnym, w którym na przestrzeni dwóch lat (2018–2019) udział wzięło 53 respondentów – przedstawiciele 24 krajów doświadczających dłuższego pobytu w Polsce w celach edukacyjnych lub zawodowych. Wbrew popularnym przekonaniom badanie wykazało, że znajomość języka angielskiego nie wystarczy, by swobodnie funkcjonować za granicą. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują, że osoby decydujące się na dłuższy pobyt poza krajem pochodzenia, powinny zainwestować w naukę języka lokalnego. W dłuższej perspektywie staje się on środkiem pogłębionej komunikacji międzykulturowej pomiędzy rodzimymi mieszkańcami a obcokrajowcami, którzy za jego pomocą mogą budować trwalsze relacje, kreować własną pozycję w społeczności przyjmującej, a zarazem powiększać osobiste zasoby kulturowo-językowe.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

- komunikacja międzykulturowa
- wielojęzyczność
- język lokalny
- język angielski
- *lingua franca*
- wywiad narracyjny

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