

# Preparing Higher Education Language Students For Their Period Abroad Through Telecollaboration: The I-TELL Project\*

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## Abstract

The period abroad (on Erasmus or work placement) is a significant part of the higher education student experience. While it is crucial to increase the opportunities for students to go abroad, it is also paramount to prepare them for their stay in a foreign country through reflection and analysis so that they can benefit fully from this experience. The better prepared they are before their placement, the better their experience will be (Byram & Dervin, 2008a). The main objective of the project described in this paper was to respond to this need for preparation.

In order to do so, the I-Tell project was initiated. It aimed at raising intercultural awareness amongst students and at promoting language practice through online exchanges between students of Spanish in Ireland and students of English in Spain prior to their sojourn abroad. As part of the project work, students had to conduct in pairs a series of telecollaborative tasks covering a range of cultural and intercultural topics. The virtual exchanges were carried out using e-mail, video recordings and videoconferences on Skype.

The data analysis reveals some encouraging results. Students reported an improvement in their fluency and range of vocabulary and expressions. The data also contains many examples of them comparing, reflecting and learning about differences and similarities between both cultures, which are important steps in the intercultural learning process. The project was also instrumental in preparing students for their mobility programme, both logistically and psychologically.

**Keywords:** Interculturality; Period Abroad; Intercultural Awareness; Telecollaboration

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\*URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[278\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[278])

## 1. Introduction

The period abroad (on a study programme or on a work placement) is a crucial element of the higher education (HE) experience of many students. In recent years, going to a foreign country during the course of their studies has become all the more significant for Irish HE students as concepts such as internationalisation, globalisation and intercultural competencies have gained a prominent role in HE curricula, in the list of graduate attributes as well as in universities and institutes' strategic goals (Penman & Ratz, 2015). The rolling out of the new Erasmus+ programme in 2014 points in this direction as it aims at "promoting the mobility of learners" (Erasmus+ programme guide, p. 12).

Byram and Dervin (2008a) have shown that while it is crucial to increase the opportunities for students to go abroad, it is erroneous to assume that students will automatically benefit from this experience. The research they have conducted highlights that it is paramount to prepare students for the mobility period so that they can fully benefit from their stay: the better prepared they are before their placement, the better their experience will be.

In the last few years, initiatives have emerged in various HE institutions that address these issues. This paper will focus on one of these pre-mobility preparation programmes: the I-Tell project (Intercultural Telecollaborative Learning). This initiative was developed conjunctly by the University of Limerick, Ireland and the University of León, Spain and aimed at raising intercultural awareness amongst students and promoting language practice through online exchanges between students of Spanish in Ireland and students of English in Spain. As part of the project work, students had to conduct in pairs a series of telecollaborative tasks covering a range of cultural and intercultural topics over a period of eight weeks in the semester prior to their mobility period.

In this paper, we will first position the I-Tell project within the current trend of initiatives aimed at preparing students for their time abroad, especially in relation to intercultural learning. We will specifically focus on research in the field of telecollaboration as it is the approach adopted for this project. The methodology

used to analyse the data will subsequently be described and some findings from the data will be discussed. We will finish with some conclusions and recommendations based on the results from this project.

## **2. Preparing Students To Their Mobility Period: Current Trend Of Initiatives**

Despite some preconceived ideas, student mobility is not a new phenomenon. Welch (2008) dissipates this misconception which is one of the many myths associated with academic mobility. The advent of European exchange programmes such as Erasmus in 1987 increased the opportunities for students to travel and study abroad but many other mobility schemes existed prior to these programmes and are still in place today. Yet, it is true to say that student mobility has risen rapidly in recent years (Dervin, 2011) and in research, a greater emphasis has been placed on the period abroad (Coleman, 1997; Byram & Feng, 2006; Byram & Dervin, 2008a & b; Jackson, 2008; Teichler, Ferencz & Wächter, 2011; Dervin, 2011). Benefits of the sojourn abroad have been underlined in many studies where it is presented as a key step in the development of the linguistic (Coleman, 1998; Freed, 1995; Cubillos, Chieffo & Fan, 2007) and socio-pragmatic (Cohen & Shively, 2007) abilities of the language students. Kinginger (2009) offers an exhaustive and comprehensive review of studies carried out on study abroad and highlights the outcomes of this experience.

Beyond the language learning outcomes, the study abroad experience is also viewed as pivotal in the development of an intercultural awareness amongst students (Bennett, 2009). Even though the definition and concept of intercultural learning are still highly contested (O'Dowd, 2003), practitioners tend to agree that foreign language learning provides an ideal platform to discuss differences in cultures and to develop an openness towards others (Byram, 1997). As a natural extension, the period abroad is also perceived as an important element to foster the intercultural communicative competence and research has been carried out to assess this (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 2009). However, it has also been acknowledged that contact between cultures does not automatically lead to intercultural learning (Coleman, 1998). In 1997, Coleman highlighted that

preparation was “all-important” (p.15) before the period abroad and that “[p]reparation for the cultural dimension of discourse [could] obviate certain problems” (p.2) but that in general, that the preparatory tasks in this domain were non-existent or inadequate as they were often limited to practical or linguistic advice.

Recent research on mobility preparation has shed light on the importance of intercultural awareness. Gutiérrez, Durán and Beltrán (2015) highlighted the need for departure programmes/modules that use awareness-raising tools and for an increase in opportunities for students to interact with people from their host country prior to their period abroad. The findings from Holmes, Bavieri and Ganassin (2015) indicate that intercultural learning is possible in a pre-departure programme aimed at Erasmus students. The research led by Borghetti, Beaven and Pugliese (2015) also explores intercultural learning within peer-to-peer interactions between future mobility students.

Over the past few years, various initiatives have been implemented in different institutions to address the need to get students interculturally aware and ready before their departure: the *IEREST project* (<http://www.ierest-project.eu/>); the *Third Year Abroad initiative* in the UK (<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com>) or the *UETandem/TéléTandem Aide à la mobilité* (<http://uni-collaboration.eu/?q=node/1029>). All these projects put the emphasis on the intercultural dimension of the preparation for the stay abroad.

The I-Tell project joins this trend as it is a programme that aims to ensure that students are prepared for their mobility period. It also explores the impact that this pre-departure intervention has on students. Telecollaborative tasks based on intercultural topics were selected for the project as raising cultural awareness and developing students' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is of vital importance to foster an enriching experience during their study or work abroad. Furthermore, the plethora of research publications on intercultural learning through telecollaboration before the web 2.0 area (Warschauer, 1996; Little, Ushioda, Appel, Moran, O'Rourke & Schwienhorst, 1999; Schwienhorst, 1999; Sakar, 2001; Woodin, 2001; Kramsh & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003, 2006, 2007; Thorne, 2003,

2006; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Belz, 2007) and with the use of web 2.0 technology (Lee, 2009; Guth & Helm, 2010; Chun, 2011, 2015; Schenker, 2012; Lee & Markey, 2014) endorse the use of telecollaboration in the context of our project.

### **3. The I-Tell Project**

The project described and studied in this paper started in September 2014. Its objectives were to prepare students for their period abroad and improve their cultural, linguistic and digital competences. The main focus of the research was to investigate the impact of telecollaboration on students' preparation for their mobility programmes.

#### ***3.1. Participants***

The participants consisted of a group of eight Second Year students (A2-B1 level), who had started to learn Spanish in their first year at the University of Limerick, Ireland and who were set to go to Spain on Erasmus or work placement. They were paired up with eight students from the University of León, Spain. These latter students were learning English (B1-B2 level) and were also preparing for their Erasmus placement either in the UK or in Ireland. The Irish students participated in the project on voluntary basis and they received a certificate of participation at completion while their Spanish partners received 2 ECTS credits.

#### ***3.2. Project Description***

As part of the project work, students had to conduct a series of telecollaborative tasks covering a range of intercultural topics (introduction and the home university; Finding out about the Host Country; Expectations about living abroad; Comparing university life and academic systems in the two countries) during a period of eight weeks in the semester prior to their stay abroad. A range of tools such as e-mail, video recording (e.g. voicethread) and video-conferencing tools (e.g. Skype) were suggested to students to conduct their virtual exchanges. For the duration of the project, the Irish students had a weekly face-to-face contact session with the project

facilitator. They were also advised to have two weekly exchanges with their international partner using the tools of their choice for communication. Each exchange had to be conducted half in Spanish and half in English, i.e.: the email had to be half written in Spanish and half written in English; the skype conversation had to be of 40 minutes, 20 of which were in Spanish and the other 20 in English. As the project was running for eight weeks, the students had to complete a task every two weeks. A task-based approach was adopted for this project as “[r]esearch has proven that [...] the negotiation of meaning and the resultant learner modifications are much more prevalent in goal-oriented, task-based interaction than in usual conversation” (Pellettieri, 2000, p. 64).

#### **4. Data Collection And Analysis**

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data were gathered using a feedback questionnaire. This questionnaire included a total of ten questions. Six of them were rating questions based on a five-point Likert scale. The remaining questions were multiple choice or yes-no questions. For each of the questions, students were invited to elaborate on their answers by leaving an additional comment. This allowed the researchers to explore different viewpoints.

The qualitative data were collected both from a reflective portfolio completed by the participating students at the end of their exchanges and from a class journal filled by the project facilitator of the Irish group at the end of each face-to-face session with the students. Students had to follow a template for their portfolios, which had five different sections related to the various topics discussed during the exchanges between partners and a final conclusion. The analytical methods used to analyse the portfolio were based on the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This data analysis technique enables the classification of the data content into different categories through the process of constant comparison. Initially, all the data is gathered and an inductive approach is used to generate substantive codes. These are then used and refined into distinctive categories. After reading the portfolios and coding the categories, common topics and recurrent ideas were identified, leading the researchers to connect them with the three domains

established for this study: linguistic, intercultural and preparation for mobility. The content of the facilitator's journal was structured into two different sections: researcher's impressions and incidents/anecdotes which summarised the issues raised by students during the course of the project. These data were added to the students' data and were coded in a similar fashion.

## 5. Impact Of The I-Tell Project On Developing Students' Skills And Preparing Them For The Period Abroad

### 5.1. Improving language learning skills

Overall, the students who participated in the online exchanges and completed the survey showed a mixed reaction concerning the usefulness of the project to their linguistic skills (Figure 1).

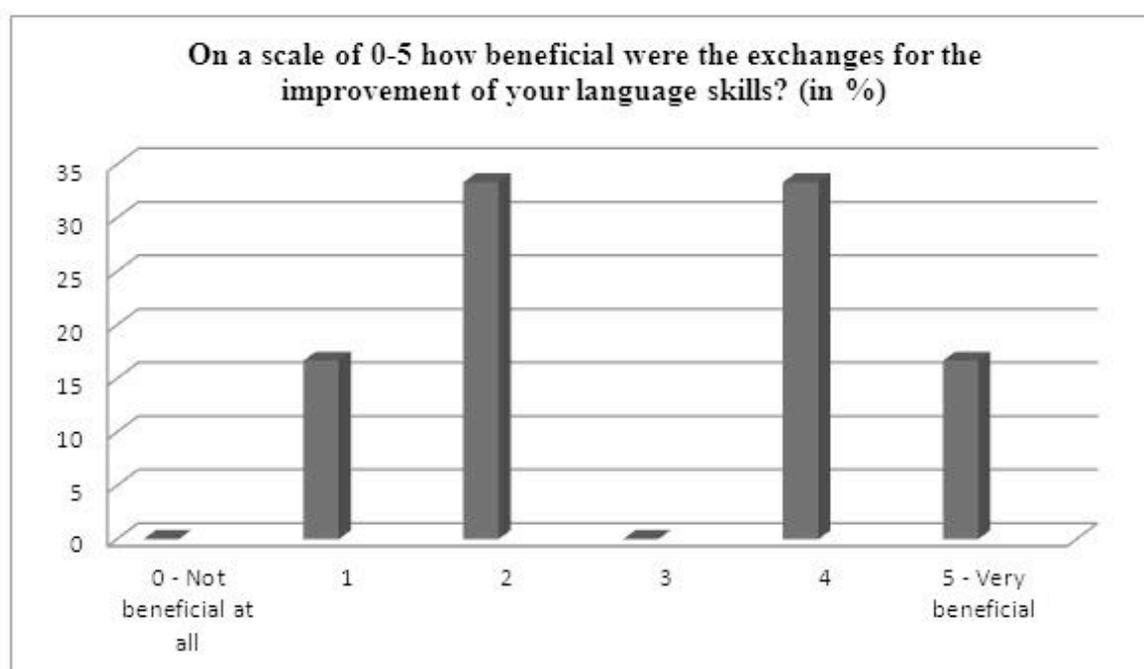


Figure 1: Usefulness of the project for language learning purposes

They perceived that their grammar and writing skills benefited the most from the exchanges (see Figure 2). However, an analysis of the qualitative data reveals more details regarding the linguistic development of the participants.

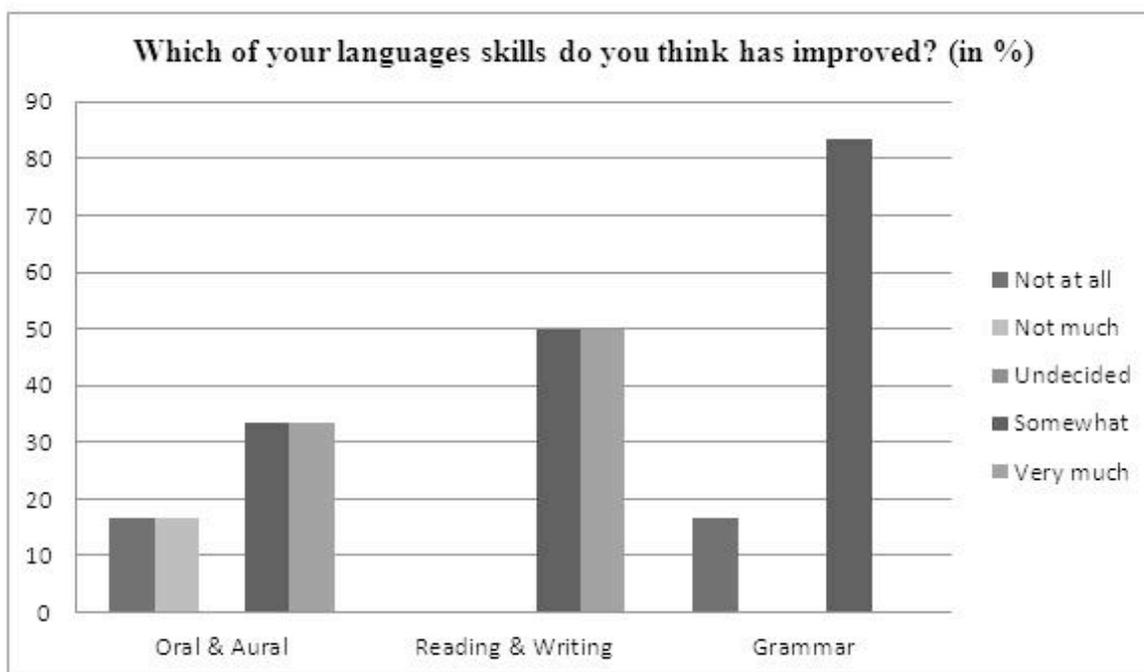


Figure 2: Skills improved during the project

First of all, several students acknowledged that the project has helped them with their oral and aural skill and with their fluency in general. The students also mentioned improvement in their writing skills and highlighted how the exchanges led them to learn new vocabulary and expressions (see Table 1). Furthermore, as the project relied on peer-learning, students had to ensure that their partner understood well what they were discussing. Even though this constant negotiation of meaning (Pellettieri, 2000) between partners focused more on the overall meaning than on the structure of the language (in line with O'Rourke's (2005) findings), these negotiations still fostered language learning and instances of students learning from their mistakes and from misunderstandings were identified.

***"Have a good one"** un día que nos comunicamos por Skype, al despedirnos, mi compañera Laura me dijo estas palabras. Al principio no sabía a qué se refería con "one". Luego me explicó que era una convención de "Have a good weekend", ya que el día en el que hicimos la video llamada era viernes.*

*["Have a good one" one day that we communicated on skype, on the farewell, my partner [student name] told me these words. At the beginning I did not know what she was referring with "one". Then, she explained to me that it was a convention of "Have a good weekend", because the day we did the videoconference was Friday.]*

*"Get it" tras hablar con ella y tras explicarle mi modo de vida ella me repetía una y otra vez esa expresión. Más tarde me di cuenta de que es un sinónimo informal de "I understand".*

*["Get it" after talking to her and after explaining to her my lifestyle, she kept repeating over and over this expression. Afterwards, I realised that it is an informal synonym of "I understand"]*

Spanish student P

Impact on Language Learning	Student quotes:
<u>Oral skills</u>	Irish student A2: <i>"helped my Spanish a lot because I was using the language outside the classroom in a modern and enjoyable manner which helped me to enhance my fluency and frequency of use of the language"</i>
<u>Written skills</u>	Irish student C: <i>"it was very beneficial as it helped with my reading, writing and oral skills"</i>
<u>Vocabulary and expressions</u>	Irish student L: <i>"I learned vocab regarding college" "I also learned the names of Spanish food and introduced her to traditional Irish breakfast"</i>  Irish student A1: <i>"I think it improved my language skills because I learned new expressions and learned to talk about different topics"</i>

*Table 1: Quotes from students on the impact of the project on their Language Learning*

Vocabulary and expressions were learnt in context (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985) and the majority of participants enjoyed the fact that they were learning in a relaxed atmosphere and from a native speaker.

Finally, the facilitator's journal contains some interesting anecdotes in relation to students' attitude towards accuracy and correction. It would appear that students were more concerned about accuracy when talking to their virtual partners than when in class. In some cases, the partners corrected each other orally during the Skype conversations but never did so in writing in the e-mail exchanges. They had not received any instruction regarding corrections and none of the pairs discussed this directly. They seemed to have had a tacit agreement based on respect for each other. They all agreed on the importance of correction and on the need to develop a peer-learning dynamic during the exchanges. The students performed as learners when talking in the foreign language and as experts when using their native language. The students felt very comfortable about their L2 identities (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011) and acknowledged their learner aspects of this identity.

### *5.2. Developing students' intercultural awareness*

The data we analysed contain many instances of intercultural learning taking place within the exchanges as students were continuously discovering new elements about the target culture (TC) and comparing the new findings or the previous knowledge they had of the TC with their own culture.

The responses to the questionnaires show that a vast majority of Spanish participants (especially the students who had never been to the TC country before) thought that the project was beneficial to improve their cultural knowledge of the TC (4.6 out of 5). These figures were lower for the Irish participants, but 3 out of 5 revealed that they had already spent time in Spain or knew a lot about Spanish culture, which might explain the lower rate.

The exchanges between the learners followed different learning stages that went from factual to deeper reflection on culture. Authors like Bennett (1986, 1993), Deardorff (2009) or Witte (2004, 2015) talk about the intercultural learning as a progressive process that follows different steps or stages. Following Witte's principles model, we could identify some of the stages he establishes in three of his nine principles: initial links to the life-world of learners and their differences; awareness of stereotypes and attributions; increasing awareness of cultural

relativity.

Our participants compared both cultures in several ways. Table 2 shows some examples of how students talked about cultural diversity between Spain and Ireland, starting with factual information and moving to more pragmatic communicative situations.

Besides the differences regarding everyday life, some critical cultural awareness arose in the comments that students left in their portfolios. As shown in the examples below, the virtual exchanges can be particularly useful to make students conscious of certain aspects of cultural knowledge (Byram, 1997), such as belief systems in the target culture (O'Dowd, 2011).

*"What caught my attention was that [student name] explained me that the Catholic Church had a big power in her country and, especially in the education. Furthermore the figure of the Pope is very important for them. Most of the population (90 per cent, more or less) is Catholic. So I have noticed that the religion is more powerful than in Spain. Obviously, Ireland is a democratic country and its constitution guarantees freedom of religion."*  
Spanish student P

*"Before talking with her, I didn't know how similar both countries were in r e l i g i o n"*  
Irish student B

Developing intercultural competence and going through an intercultural learning process were not achieved by just comparing, reflecting and learning about the differences and similarities between both cultures. In some cases, some pre-conceived ideas about the TC were broken, as illustrated by these examples taken from some Spanish students portfolios.

*"I have always thought that British universities were like American's ones, but I was mistaken, they are the same as here, this task changed my main idea."*  
Spanish student D

*"I think that talking with [A2] has changed the way in which I consider Ireland."*  
Spanish student B

*"Something that has surprised me is that they cook with 'aceite de oliva' as we do in Spain, I thought that they cooked with butter!"*  
Spanish student B

Cultural Differences	Excerpts
Timetables	Irish student G: <i>“Se come más tarde donde vive Inés – a las ocho y media hasta las once! En Irlanda comemos normalmente a las seis. Será muy difícil pero a mi me gusta comer con los otros a la mesa juntos.”</i> <i>[“They eat later where Ines lives – at half past eight until eleven! In Ireland we usually eat at six. It will be very difficult but I like eating together with the others at the table”]</i>
Routines	Spanish student P: <i>“In Ireland people get up earlier and they don't have lunch in family, they usually take a pack lunch (a sandwich, an apple, a salad, etc) and they eat it in their offices, in their schools/colleges/universities, on the street...”</i>
Prices	Irish student A2: <i>“Nights out are much later in Spain, alcohol is a lot cheaper and entries to clubs are cheaper also”</i>
Celebrations & Festivals	Facilitator Journal: <i>“Some students mentioned that the VIP shared a link about bullfighting; others mentioned that the VIP talked about barrio húmedo in León;</i>
Social Interaction	Spanish student D: <i>“On Ireland, while they always have respect, they talk to them [the teachers] using their first name, which it's more casual”</i>

*Table 2: Quotes about students' awareness of culture differences*

All the excerpts presented demonstrate how the online interactions helped students to broaden their perception of the other culture. Issues linked to intercultural awareness are constantly present in the students' portfolios and in the class journal.

When the project started, the use of social media among students was not envisaged. Yet, while analysing the data, it was established that most students (5 out of 6) became friends on Facebook (FB). They perceived this platform as a better and more natural way to communicate. As a result, most of the students shared pictures on FB. These had a cultural impact to such an extent that we may

consider FB as an important tool to raise intercultural awareness among participants.

Role of Social Media	Students quotes
Social media as a way to share culture using images	<p><i>"The last one has been a very interesting tool of communication. For instance, thanks to Faceook I saw her Halloween's photos and I could realize how it is celebrated in Ireland"</i></p> <p>Spanish student B</p> <p><i>"My VIP put a pic of tapas on her Facebook and explained what they were. Then she commented in FB in Spanish. We keep posting things on FB"</i></p> <p>Irish student C</p>
Social media as a way to share and talk about their culture and life	<p><i>"We talk about funny articles or pictures which make reference to language learning, Ireland, Spain, etc."</i></p> <p>Irish student A1</p>

*Table 3: Quotes showing the role of social media in the project*

### **5.3. Impact on preparation for the mobility period**

The development of intercultural awareness is considered to be one of the crucial elements before, during and after students' mobility programme (Borghetti et al., 2015). From this point of view, the exchanges that occurred during the project were very successful and they can be considered as one aspect of the mobility preparation. A discussion on practical and logistical issues is crucial to prepare students going abroad. The students who participated in the I-Tell project received this type of information when interacting with their international partners. The information and guidance gained during the exchanges focused mainly on university systems, timetables, facilities, prices, student life and eating habits. When analysing the portfolios and the open questions in the surveys, we can find many illustrations of these points:

*"It has helped prepare me for my Erasmus as [student name] told what to expect as well as what to do so I now have a much better idea of the students way of life over there and I'm not heading over to a Spanish university completely blind or without knowing of what to expect in the various aspects of life"*

Irish student A2

	Excerpts
Fear of going to a foreign country	<i>"I've been talking with her about this and we both feel frightened about how it will be to leave our countries, our homes, our families and friends..."</i> Spanish student B
Reference to culture shock	<i>"We talked about living abroad and said we were both nervous about the culture shock. I was worried about missing my family and friends"</i> Irish student A1
Difficulty living in a different culture	<i>"I think that it would be hard for me to live in her country due to its differences with Spain."</i> Spanish student P
Emotional support and encouragement given	<i>"I wasn't sure at all to submit my application form for the Erasmus exchange, but my international student from "Programa Padrino" and [A] encouraged me to do it."</i> Spanish student D
Sharing emotions as a result of being in a similar position	<i>"It has made me feel better telling her how I feel about living abroad as she is in the same situation as me. And I definitely feel more prepared for my Erasmus than before I started this project."</i> Spanish student B

Table 4: Quotes illustrating the psychological impact of the project

Apart from the exchange of factual information, students' conversations and e-mails reached a level of trustful communication. A study of the portfolios reveals a high occurrence of words such as "fear", "frightened" and "scared". The relationship established between the pairs gave them an outlet to discuss the emotional aspects of moving away from home as they felt that they were in a similar situation. Encouragement and emotional support seemed to be given to some of the students by their partners (Table 4).

The data tend to show that emotional preparation was as important as practical preparation for our participants. This aspect of the project had not been anticipated, but it is, without any doubt, a crucial element. The linguistic and logistical preparations can be easily provided and do not necessarily require personalisation, but the psychological preparation is paramount to the success of the experience and it seems fit that students in similar situations discuss their apprehension and

work together to lower it. It would appear that talking about their fears allowed students to get more motivated to go abroad or to perceive the experience of living away from home in a more positive way.

Finally, social media played a part in the preparation for the stay abroad. Students used it to be more connected with each other in an informal way and to see pictures of their partners and their environment. Moreover, 4 out of 6 students stated that they intended on staying in contact with their partners via FB at the end of the project. From the mobility preparation point of view, this is crucial as it means that when students are about to commence their period abroad, they will still have the possibility to receive support. The students will be connected with somebody who is from the country they are travelling to and somebody with a similar profile to them.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

The I-Tell project has been a very interesting and worthwhile experience for both the coordinating team and the students involved. During the online interactions among participants, information and emotions were exchanged. It is necessary to point out that, as Holmes and O'Neill (2012) maintain, the process of exchanging information, feelings and emotions and the accompanying self-reflection is important in developing an understanding of the self and other identities. From this perspective, the I-Tell project helped the students in their intercultural learning.

We identified three elements which were key to the success of this initiative: i) the two sets of participants have to have a similar profile, with comparable needs and expectations; ii) the tasks have to be carefully designed to encourage interactions and allow for intercultural learning to take place, iii) while guidance and support have to be available at all times throughout the running of the project, students have to feel free to use the tools they are the most familiar with and to conduct the exchanges when it suits them (within the task framework). Students highlighted the value of images and video clips (exchanged via social media) for the development of their (inter)cultural competences, so in future iterations of this initiative, a stronger emphasis will be placed on multi-modality. The dynamics of the exchanges were not affected by the fact that the Irish students participated in the project on voluntary basis and their Spanish partners received 2 ECTS credits for it. However,

some of the Irish students just mentioned in their questionnaires that having no reward for their participation on the project might have slightly impacted on their motivation.

Overall, we were very satisfied with the results from this project and are now planning to extend it to other languages (namely French, German and Japanese). In the future, we will also be willing to involve second year advanced students in the project as this will allow us to compare the impact that the project has on experienced learners of Spanish. We will be able to establish if the project impacts differently on students who started learning Spanish *ab initio* in first year and students who have been studying Spanish at secondary school and have continued their studies at third level. It will also be interesting to analyse whether the preliminary findings from this pilot phase are confirmed in subsequent iterations of this initiative.

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