Applying Digital Learning to Facilitate Student Transitions within Higher Education Mobility Programmes: Implementing the 'Digilanguages.ie' portal.

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Abstract

This article discusses the topic of digital learning, the period abroad (PA) (in study or employment) and the potential exploitation of the *Digilanguages.ie* online portal. We will present some of the latest initiatives in higher education that offer a digital platform for students preparing for their mobility, undergoing their mobility or returning to their home university. We will report on some of the trialled activities that *Digilanguages.ie* offers to students and teachers to carry out, again during the three phases of the mobility programme. Data gathered during the implementation of these activities will be shown to evidence the relevance of offering (digital) support to students who are involved in their PA. We will discuss issues related to intercultural learning, practical preparation and reflective practice that directly impact upon learners' development (socio-pragmatic, linguistic and intercultural) in their PA. Finally, some recommendations on the use of relevant portal activities will be discussed.
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1. Introduction.

Periods abroad and mobility programme experiences have been significant in Higher Education student life for more than 30 years. During this time, many research studies of the period abroad programmes, and their inherent benefits have touched upon a number of major issues, chief among them being: the linguistic development (Freed, 1998; Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008; DeKeyser, 2014) and socio-pragmatic (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Alcón-Soler, 2015) abilities of students; the development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 2009); and the importance of preparing students adequately before their PA (Coleman & Parker, 2001; Jeanneau & Giralt, 2016).

Moreover, following a series of European Council recommendations, learning mobility, that is transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills, is one of the fundamental ways through which individuals, particularly young people, can strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development (European Council, 2011). As Savicki and Selby (2008, p. 349) point out, as educators we have a responsibility to ensure that students benefit as much as possible from their experience abroad. In this respect, *Digilanguages.ie,* a multilingual cu-rated portal for language students and teachers, has one designed pathways - *Transitions and Contexts* – that addresses mobility programme issues and activities.

The aim of this article is to explore how an open educational resource platform can enhance the student learning experience before, during and after a PA. To achieve this, we will analyse the data from the *Digilanguages.ie* activities that were followed during the aforementioned three stages. This paper will therefore focus on the results of digital activities related to the PA that Second Year Business students of Spanish at the University of Limerick carried out during one semester. Before presenting and discussing the data, we will show different initiatives devel-oped in recent years that deal with diverse aspects of the PA in order to situate the context in which the *Digilanguages* project belongs.

Finally, we will end with conclusions and a discussion regarding the use of pertinent *Digi-langauges.ie* resources which are aimed at developing student intercultural learning, practical preparation and reflective practice, as part of the PA experience.

2. Background.

In this section, we offer an overview of different projects and actions that are designed to deal with the PA through digital or blended learning.

2.1. Digital learning and the period abroad.

The first challenge in giving an overview of the significance and common practices of digital learning arises from the multiple definitions we encounter in this domain: digital learning as blended learning, e-learning; online learning; combination of face-to-face learning and e-learning (Thorne, 2003). When discussing digital learning we would propose Oliver and Trigwell's definition of blended learning as "…*the combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment…*" (2005, p. 17). At the same time, it is worth noting the two forms that Felix (2003, p. 8) identifies for online learning: "…*stand-alone online courses that strive to operate as virtual classrooms…*" and "…*add-on activities to classrooms teaching or distance education courses in which technology is used primarily as a tool and a communication device…*". Under those parameters, in our review, we include OER (Open Educational Resources), MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) practices, as being (re-)designed with the purpose of dealing with PA issues, which provide many opportunities to students through digital learning.

2.2. The period abroad: Current trends and initiatives.

The Erasmus programme, launched in 1987 with first exchanges involving over 3000 students between 11 member states, is now the most widely known mobility option for students, teachers and society in general. The programme offers students and teachers the possibility to enhance their mobility while promoting intercultural understanding through co-operation with different countries. Currently, 33 countries take part in the programme and almost all higher education institutions in Europe are involved (Cairns, Krzaklewska, Cuzzocrea & Allaste, 2018). An alternative within the Erasmus, which might be considered as more convenient by many students in terms of costs and time commitments, is the Erasmus Intensive programme (IP). This allows a more intensive exposure to employment practices in multicultural environments (Fernández, Medina, Villalba de Benito & Misra, 2017).

In recent years, the Erasmus programme has been upgraded to Erasmus+. This programme, focused on education, training, youth and sport, runs from 2014 to 2020 and combines previous programmes including the Lifelong Learning Programme (Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig and Transversal Programmes), Youth in Action, Jean Monnet, etc. (Cairns et al., 2018). As part of the Erasmus+, the Virtual Exchange (telecollaboration) programme seeks to enable youth in Europe to engage in intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal or non-formal education (O'Dowd, 2018).

Being that the period abroad represents such an important part of high-level education, many initiatives have been developed and put into practice in the last few years. Some of them deal with the pre-mobility stages while others focus more on providing support during the time the students spend living and studying in another country (see for example, International Exchange Erasmus Student Network https://esn.org/students or Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support https://erasmusplusols.eu/). Furthermore, these initiatives can be offered in a digital or face-to-face format. Promoting the students' integration in academic mobility has been a declared important aim by the European Council (2011). To achieve such academic integration, which would impact positively on the gain of linguistic and intercultural competence development (Kinginger, 2009), students need to be able to function effectively in the academic and specialised contexts of the host universities. In this regard, the MOVE-ME-MOOCs for university students on the Move in Europe- project (http://www.movemeproject.eu) offers a learning path specifically designed for students on mobility programmes, supporting them in the acquisition of the competences and skills necessary for understanding academic texts, written and oral, relating to specific disciplines, developing the ability to understand and produce academic writing of various genres. This project is delivered via a MOOC and was chosen in order to make it accessible to the largest number of students on the move and designed for self-study. Each MOOC consists of 6 modules, focused on communication and academic skills as well as language structures. Learners engage with interactive, collaborative and peer teaching activities via the forum and other communication tools.

Besides the language acquisition in academic contexts, during the time abroad students participate in an intercultural experience that, as research studies have shown, may lead to the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 2009). Initiatives like CONNECT 2.0-Intercultural Learning Network for Europe

(https://weconnecteurope.eu/) promote intercultural learning through a combination of online learning and face-to-face training to develop positive and enriching intercultural experiences before/during/after the PA. The rationale behind this project states that despite the positive effects that Erasmus and study abroad programs usually have on students, they often lack pedagogical support, intercultural mentoring and intercultural seminars so that participants can systematically reflect on their experiences in their host cultures and improve the learning outcomes of their exchange.

The Intermove project (http://inter-move.eu/en/home/) and Plurimobil (https://plurimobil.ecml.at/) initiatives combine two domains in online platforms: language acquisition and intercultural learning. The Intermove project simultaneously tackles two of the barriers related to European mobility: cross-cultural issues and foreign language knowledge. The novelty lies in combining the intercultural training with the use of language intercomprehension tools to prepare participants for mobility projects. The INTERMOVE Model, as their website informs us, encompasses a course programme, the development of learning contents and the creation of an LMS (Learning Management System) Platform. The second project aims at developing students' ability to discover other languages, cultures and people, and new areas of knowledge. To this end, PluriMobil's pedagogical tools in the form of practical resources for teachers and teacher trainers are intended to improve students' communicative and plurilingual skills, enhance their intercultural competence and expand their language awareness and language learning strategies.

Equally, a brief example of preparing for the period abroad using CMC is the I-TELL project (Jeanneau & Giralt, 2016), which is a programme that has been running since 2014 at the University of Limerick and aims to ensure that students are sufficiently primed for their mobility period using telecollaborative virtual exchanges. It also explores the impact that this pre-departure intervention has on students. As part of the project work, students are required 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 and video

conferencing are used by the students to conduct their virtual exchanges. Within this trend of initiatives based on digital learning and the PA, we may easily situate the *Digilanguages.ie* OER portal, which will be presented and described in the following section.
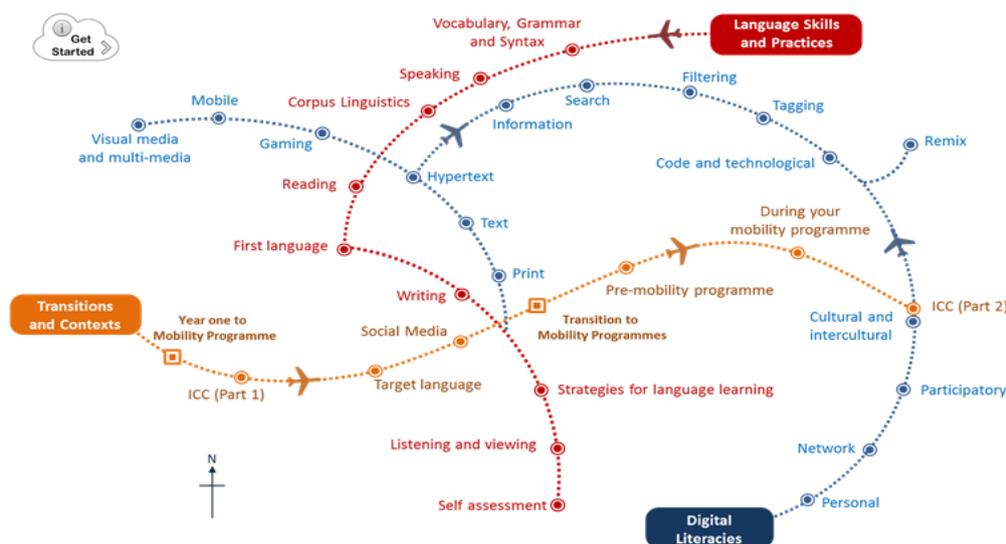
3. The *Digilanguages* Portal.

The Digilanguages portal (*Digilanguages.ie*) was funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and offers OER and activities targeting, *inter alia*, third level institutions, first year students, students studying abroad, and in-service language teachers. The project initially began in April 2016 with the launch and completion of a large student survey (n=344) and staff survey (n=75) by lecturers from six Irish higher education institutions. The survey identified a gap between the perceived importance of digital literacies that should be taught in the classroom, and the actual level of digital literacies incorporated into teaching practices. The portal, where more than 600 hours of activities are available, serves as a support, personal development platform, and pedagogical repository for both learning and teaching languages. The site has a holistic design configured around cognitive, metacognitive and practical concepts.

Figure 1: The Digilanguages homepage.
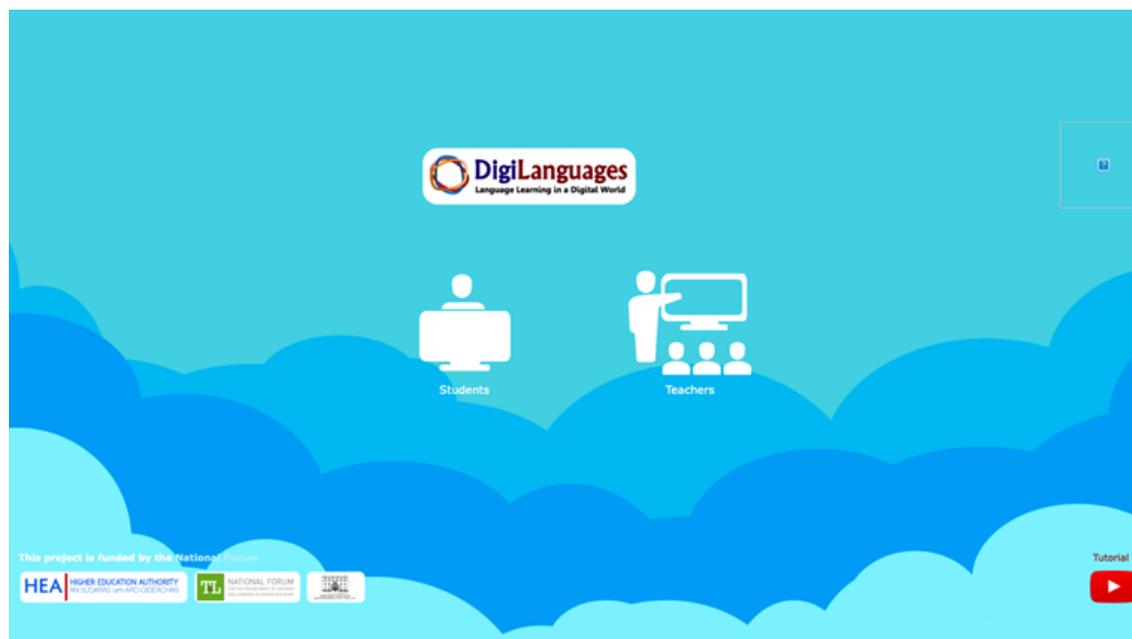
Research carried out by project partners prior to the beginning of the project also identified a number of key areas where online flexible support is best focused. Based on these findings, the *Digilanguage* project has developed online resources and activities in three thematic areas: Language Skills and Practices; Transitions and Contexts and Digital Literacies - the latter works in line with the National Framework for Digital Skills developed by the All Aboard Project - (see Figure 1 below). The resources and activities offered span six languages: Irish, English as a Second Language, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The thematic area of *Transitions and Contexts* focuses on the transition to and journey through third level language environments, including digital learning and the PA, which is the aim of this present article. As Farr and Murray (2016) point out: "…*there are difficulties in the transition from face-to-face to online environments, from teacher-led pedagogies (for example at secondary school) to self-directed learning (in HE), from digital vernaculars to formal learning settings, from virtual learning environment (VLE) to personal learning environment (PLE), from independent to computer supported collaborative language learning…*" (p. 396). Therefore, this section provides resources and activities to overcome these difficulties while enabling language teachers and learners to create and work on their PLEs and develop appropriate strategies for successfully integrating technology into their language learning and teaching.

Figure 2: Flight map with the three thematic areas of *Digilangauges.ie*

3.1. The *Digilanguages* Portal and the mobility programme.

The mobility programme carries with it the potential to be one of the most immersive and productive language learning experiences for many students. In order to engage and integrate successfully into the academic and social life in the target countries, students are required to have a high level of language, intercultural and digital skills. For this reason, the *Digilanguages* portal offers a section completely dedicated to the mobility programme. In this section, users will find a large array of activities designed for both students and teachers. Students can use these activities autonomously and teachers can find activities they can use with their students as well as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities. The mobility programme section is located under the *Transitions and Contexts* pathway and it is divided into two sub-sections, namely: *Pre-mobility Programme* and *During your Visit*.

Preparation for the mobility programme is a critical phase where students have the opportunity to learn about the culture, landscape and digital practices of the mobility programme destination while teachers may also choose to guide their students into the process. Therefore, the *Pre mobility Programme* sub-section focuses on helping users to enhance independent thinking and learning and acquire intercultural and digital skills in the target language in order to become proactive learners in the host country.

An important aspect of the *Digilanguages* portal in general and the mobility programme section in particular is to provide support and guidance for students while they are abroad. In this regard, the *During your Visit* sub-section offers useful resources and material that can be used by the students during their time in the host country. The designed activities focus on learner autonomy, digital and intercultural skills whilst also offering language support in order to allow users to exploit their limited yet valuable time abroad and gain a greater awareness of the language and culture of the host country.

In the following table, we present some activities from the portal that belong to the *Transitions and Contexts* pathway and the aforementioned two sub-sections of PA. Each activity includes the title, link and mobility programme stage when the activity could be implemented. For a description of the selected activities, see *Digilangauges.ie.*

Table 1: Selected activities from *Digilangauges.ie* that deal with the period abroad.

TITLE OF THE ACTIVITY AND LINK	MOBILITY STAGE
"**Help students choose their Erasmus destination**"	Pre-mobility
"**Taking your students on virtual 3D field trips**"	Pre-mobility
"**University life in the target language country**"	Pre-mobility
"**Create your Erasmus presentation with pictures and voice-over narration**"	During your PA
"**Networking during your Erasmus Programme**"	During your PA
"**Target culture on the Web...Anything new?**"	Pre-mobility or After your PA
"**Learning about regional differences in your target language country**"	Pre-mobility or After your PA
"**Identify regional stereotypes of the target language using CL**"	Pre-mobility or After your PA
"**A Corpus Linguistics analysis and reflection: Respect vs Tolerance. Disrespectful vs Intolerant**"	Pre-mobility or After your PA

From those activities presented in Table 1, we selected several and applied them in one of our modules from the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics at our institution in order to gather some feedback and test the pedagogical application of them in our face-to-face courses. In the next section, we present the findings.

3. Data gathered during the implementation of selected *Digilanguages.ie* activities.

As the aim of the pilot study was to implement some activities from the *Digilanguages.ie* portal, to obtain some feedback regarding the usefulness and benefits of them for students, a group of suitable students (pre-mobility PA cohort) was identified. The implementation of the activities was carried out with second year students who were taking a module in International Business

Spanish. This module requires a total of four contact hours per week, one of which is allocated in a PC lab where the students carry out activities using language resources from the web to assist them in their language and intercultural learning. Most of the students were due to start their mobility programmes the following semester in a Spanish speaking country, thus one of the aims of the module was pre-mobility preparation. Their level was ostensibly B1 (CEFR) although it was a mixed-abilities group with regards to their actual CEFR level, due to their past language learning experiences and their own native languages.

The classes took place in a computer lab, as we just mentioned, which allowed the option to combine some digital activities with face-to-face discussions. After completing the digital tasks from the *Digilanguages.ie* platform, the students responded to an anonymous online questionnaire (the number of responses are indicated in the results gathered for each of the activities implemented, which will be presented later) with questions about how useful they found the activities, which aspects they enjoyed the most and what they would change. In the following subsections, we present the results of the surveys and summarise the most important points.

3.1 Feedback from the implementation of the activity *Comparing cultures and discovering if we are intercultural speakers*.

The selected activity was introduced in the PC Lab with Second Year International Business students who were taking Spanish as part of their programme. The number of students that participated in the piloting of the activity (n = 20) was higher than the number of responses for the questionnaire (n=13) that the students had to complete by the end of the session where the activity was implemented. The following student comments represent a sample of the typical responses to questions about the activity.

All the students found the activity useful. Some of the comments about the reason why they perceive it as a useful activity are shown in Table 2, along with other comments regarding motivation issues and possible improvement of the activity.

In summary:
✔   The activity develops intercultural awareness according to some the reflections made by students and helps to highlight the importance of becoming an intercultural mediator.

✔   Students appreciate the sharing aspect of the activity, especially because of the direct contact among different cultures.

✔   Students adopted a greater understanding of the value of the Erasmus experience as well as the awareness and practice of digital literacies.

Table 2: Results from *Comparing cultures* survey.

Q1. Did you find this activity useful? Why?	Q2. What did you enjoy the most? Why?	Q3. What would you change?
R.1 *Yes, I found really useful this activity because I understood the importance of the Erasmus experience.*	R.1 *The part about Digital Literacy, because it deals with a very actual, important subject that concerns a lot of young people.*	R.1 *I would not change anything.*
R.2 *Yes, it helps me realize the importance to develop my ICC. I mean before, I know that, but I did not realize this is that important.*	R.2 *Seeing different opinions of similar topics.*	R.2 *Include audiovisual aids.*
R.3 *Yes, I did. This activity has helped me sharing my thoughts about the Irish culture with Irish students, but I have also learned their opinion about my country.*	R.3 *Sharing funny experiences (like confusions when it comes to greeting someone from a different country...).*	
R.4 *Yes, I think it is very interesting to be able to link other cultures and have an understanding of how each culture varies.*	R.4 *To realize the shortcomings when I deal with the intercultural things.*	
R.5 *Yes, because it makes one more aware of all the other elements (besides language) that are important to work as an interpreter / language teacher / intercultural mediator.*		

3.2 Feedback from the implementation of the activity University life in the target country.

This activity was introduced in the PC Lab with Second Year International Business students who were taking Spanish as part of their programme. The total number of students that participated in the piloting of the activity was 19 (4 during the first piloting phase during the academic year 2016-2017 and 15 during the second phase 2017-2018). Most of the following student comments represent a sample of the typical responses to questions about the activity. We present them in thematic categories.in Table 3 overleaf.

In summary, the majority of students found the activity very useful as it allowed them to understand and reflect upon the differences between Irish and Spanish universities. Many students enjoyed the target language videos used in the activity as they were an authentic representation of student life in a Spanish university. In addition, some students felt that the activity helped them with their pre-mobility preparation. Overall, the activity was perceived by most students as suitably comprehensive. Students engaged successfully with it, proving that the proposed videos matched their current proficiency level with the related reflection and blog writing enhancing their language, digital and intercultural skills.

Table 3: Results from *University Life in the target country* survey

Q.1 Did you find this activity useful? Why?	Q.2 What did you enjoy the most? Why?	Q.3 Would you have any suggestions for additional resources in relation to this activity?
Comments about university life.	**Visuals and university life.**	**No suggestions.**
Yes, because I understood the difference between the Irish University and the Spanish University *Yes - I found that it was insightful for learning about the college that I am going to for Erasmus.*	*I really enjoyed the video on Youtube, where it was shown the university of Barcelona* *Getting to see the campus and getting a feel for college life in Spain*	*No, I do not have any suggestions.*

Language skills learning references.	Comments about university life.	Examples of more universities.
Yes, I found it challenging at first but then when I began to understand some phrases I realized it would help me improve my listening skills *yes as I was introduced to vocab that is commonly used to talk about college* *Yes, it got me to learn every day university vocabulary.* *yes it provides an insight into Spanish university and with that new phrases and vocabulary in relation to this topic.*	*Hearing about university structure. Learning about how their college is different to ours and also seeing the similarities* *Seeing the day in the life of a Spanish university student.*	*To look at other colleges in South America.*
Learning about university life in Spain and preparing for Erasmus.		
It comforted me to see the similarities between university in Spain and Ireland as this will be helpful when I go on Erasmus to Barcelona next year. The young woman seemed to enjoy university life in Barcelona *Learning about how the university is run, and what normal timetables and assessments are like.* *Yes. Learnt about university life in Spain including assessment method* *Yes. because I learned more about what university life is like in Spain* *Yes. It explained what it's like to study in Spain and it made me feel more relaxed about going there on Erasmus.*		

3.3 Feedback from the implementation of the activity *Student accommodation.*

The selected activity was introduced again in the PC Lab with Second Year International Business students who were taking Spanish as part of their programme. The number of students that participated in the piloting of the activity was 16 (5 during the first piloting phase during the academic year 2016-2017 and 11 during the second phase 2017-2018).

Table 4: Results from the *Student accommodation* survey.

Q.1 If you have been preparing, what resources have you used?	Q. 2 Did you find this activity useful? Why?	Q.3 What did you enjoy the most? Why?	Q.4 Would you have any suggestions for additional resources in relation to this activity?
R.1 *Sources online and people who have been to the destination.*	**R.1** *yes it was because its a way to exchange with others*	**R.1** *Speak with others*	**R.1** *More videos about other cities to compare*
R.2 *The university website and practicing my written Spanish through the blog*	**R.2** *I did find this activity useful as I now realise how much more work I have to do for my Erasmus, preparing-wise.*	**R.2** *Writing in the blog*	**R.2** *Maybe a list of useful phrases/words*
R.3 *I have mainly used the university website but also I have been paying attention to the student reports*	**R.3** *yes as it is a different and more interesting way to approach topics that may be beneficial for Erasmus*	**R.3** *Speaking with people from Spanish speaking countries*	**R.3** No
R.4 *alumni.net*	**R.4** *Yes. It's very interactive*	**R.4** *Talking with people who have been the destination and people that are living there. Because they shared different opinions that I could see the destination in more perspectives in advance.*	

In summary, all the students confirmed the importance of the Erasmus experience for their studies. Going one step further, one respondent said that Erasmus should be mandatory. The majority of respondents confirmed they have been preparing for their Erasmus experience by using mainly online resources and paying attention to the reports completed by students who had been on Erasmus already. The activity was perceived by all respondents as very useful as it presents appropriate topics while allowing users to interact effectively with peers and practise their language, digital and intercultural skills. The aspect of the activity which was most enjoyable for students, was the speaking part as it allowed them to interact effectively with people in their target country, sharing thoughts and engaging in critical discussions. Some of the participants suggested that more videos and a list of useful phrases may be a useful addition to the activity.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations.

Through the implementation of three of the *Digilanguages* activities as described above, we may conclude that many students are aware of the need to develop their ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) as well as their language skills and readily engage in the proposed activities in the PC classroom. Some reflection upon the Erasmus experience arose during the sessions when the students were carrying out the activities. This is a very relevant point as it shows how the preparatory activities could be very beneficial not just from the practical point of view - which was also reiterated by some of the students - but from a formative preparation (see also, Gutiérrez; Durán & Beltrán, 2015) that includes intercultural awareness, sociopragmatic and linguistic preparation.

It should be especially noted that one of the activities was based on producing reflection and bringing out individual opinions on sensitive and important intercultural issues. This is a necessity and a cornerstone of the pedagogical approach that was adapted by the researchers/teachers. Moreover, the other activities required the exchange of ideas and opinions in relation to practical issues that the students were going to encounter when they experience their time abroad.

The main recommendation is that *Digilanguages.ie* be integrated in face-to-face courses or used as a part of autonomous digital learning by students before they go abroad, as it is one of their top priorities and necessities in attempting to increase the benefits of their time spent abroad. The same could equally be true for those activities that can assist the students during their PA and when they return.

The importance of the PA has been recognised for over 30 years (European Council, 2011), however, the next 30 years will bring with them their own challenges. From our extensive and longstanding experience as Erasmus coordinators, one of the main challenges is the high student anxiety prior to departure and lack of preparation. Other researchers have reported similar findings, see for example Savicki (2013). Additionally, it has been reported that students are not yet fully exploiting the Erasmus experience, in that they find it very difficult to establish social networks with the local community (Kinginger, 2013; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura & McManus, 2015). The huge language and intercultural learning potential offered by Erasmus must be realised through careful and focussed planning before the event, by strong and effective engagement during the event and considered reflection after the event. Our detailed activities mentioned here (see table 1 and section 4) have attempted to illustrate examples of good practice in each of these areas.

The rich transitions of Erasmus may be personal, culturally and linguistically immersive and potentially highly rewarding. Going beyond preparation and offering support while abroad, the application of digital learning to the development of digital skills and ICC should not only be a necessity, but a standard feature and inherent characteristic of our own communicative voices with students. This would go some way to ensuring that the socio-pragmatic, linguistic and intercultural opportunities of Erasmus are effectively and appropriately exploited.

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