

Transcending the Culturalist Impasse in Stays Abroad: Helping Mobile Students to Appreciate Diverse Diversities

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People draw on a wide range of local, national, and global resources in the ways they make and remake their culture. (So culture is not bounded). There are always internal contestations over the values, practices, and meanings that characterize any culture. (So cultures are not homogeneous). There is often some political agenda (...) when people make their claims about the authoritative interpretation of their culture. (So cultures are produced by people, rather than being things that explain why they behave the way they do).

Philipps, 2007, p. 45.

Introduction

Study abroad is often referred to, first and foremost, as an intercultural experience during which ‘cultures’ are encountered and for which mobile students should be prepared. This article rejects the idea of encountering cultures meeting which is based on a culturalist approach that has been increasingly criticized for reducing individuals to mere “robots programmed with ‘cultural’ rules” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 158). As Philipps asserts above, culture is not delimited, it is not homogeneous and it is continually being produced by individuals. She adds that: “Characterizing a culture is itself a political act, and the notion of cultures as preexisting things, waiting to be explained, has become increasingly implausible” (Philipps, 2007, p. 45). This article considers that, in fact, meeting occurs between complex and liquid individuals (Bauman, 2001).

There has been an overemphasis on the role of fixed cultures in intercultural communication in stays abroad. This aspect has been the focus of courses and training sessions for mobile students, overshadowing other important elements that also impact on interculturality in stays abroad: strangeness, perceptions of one’s personal and social self, social relationships, how one relates to different languages, etc. Most importantly, myths about study abroad (Dervin, 2008)

are being ignored, leading to a situation where notions relating to mobility systematically opening up the mind and/or mobility as a means of finding one's own self, remain unchallenged.

This article, which is based on research carried out on various aspects of student mobility in Europe, and more precisely in Finland, aims to go beyond the 'myths' related to study abroad and examine how mobile students can develop competences that can aid them when dealing with various aspects of the experience. This article also calls for a change in the manner in which we consider intercultural communication, by adopting an approach which concentrates solely on the analysis of identity (co-)construction—a key element in the development of noticing strategies used by interlocutors to “dramatize themselves.” Based on a model of intercultural competences called proteophilic competences (Dervin, 2007c), this article will demonstrate how the model can be applied and used by students to go from the “commodification of intercultural understanding” (Dahlén, 1997, p. 176) to the appreciation of one's own diversity and that of others. The article is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to contextualize student mobility in Europe, and more specifically Finland by presenting analogies between the students' experiences and experiences in our contemporary world. The second section is devoted to the definition and justification of proteophilic competences that can help students go beyond misconceptions about their time in Finland. The final section looks at the outcome of a course on intercultural communication with exchange students in Finland, which was developed using this method. The overall objective of the article is to show the potential impact of the model on the manner in which exchange students see and talk about themselves and otherness.

1. Exchange students in liquid times

1.1 Liquidity/solidity and the exchange experience

Several distinguishing qualities have emerged from research carried out on our times (which can be referred to, among other terms, as hyper-modernity or postmodernity), which seem essential to understand the experiences of European exchange students. The accepted notions of *culture* and the related concept of identity are becoming less and less valid and have been highly criticized in research literature, as we have reached a time when there is a greater understanding that every individual has multiple identities (they continuously change identities and live through a *permanent* odyssey, Albrow, 1999).¹

Both culture and identity are therefore misnomers as they suggest singularity and unicity. The hypermodern individual borrows from numerous “cultures” (Hannerz, 1996; Amselle, 2001) and belongs to an uncountable number of (sometimes short-lived) communities or peg-/cloakroom communities: “Cloakroom communities are patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hooks in the cloakroom” (Bauman, 2004, p. 31). As every individual “pegs” diverse communities and interlocutors (be they in physical encounters or virtual encounters through the Internet), they learn to adopt various identification strategies. Zygmund Bauman (2000) has elaborated the revelatory image of *liquidity* in an attempt to sketch these aspects. This is one reason why these notions should be seen in terms of *identification* and *culturality*, processes rather than objects, since they are mutable.

On the other hand, in response to this very confusing phenomenon and its resulting heterogeneity, individuals resort to *solid identities* (delimited identities, e.g. stereotypes based on a national identity) in order to adapt, to seduce, to manipulate, to distance themselves, etc. Amartya Sen (2006) writes about this phenomenon: “despite our diverse diversities, the world is suddenly seen not as a collection of people, but as a federation of religions and civilizations” (p. 13). In other words, in intercultural encounters, national cultures and identities may be used, chosen (implicitly or not) to provide trouble-free explanations and serve as discursive ploys (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006; Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 98). An illustration of this is the myth of “the unicity of the self” (a person has one solid identity) which is still very much present in the media but also, in the discourse of European students², even though it is increasingly overruled (Flahaut, 2006).

Looking at the results of my own research (Dervin, 2007ab, 2008), it is clear that European students fully live through this solid/liquid world but that they realize—up to a point—that people are both solid and liquid (i.e. people from a particular country do not always correspond to stereotypes regarding this country). Yet, in most cases, research shows that *solidity* seems to dominate students’ discourse, especially when students talk about the local people, who they refer to using a very restrictive vocabulary. European students also confirm creating *peg-communities*³ to which they seem to belong solely for the duration of the stay abroad (and sometimes beyond, but no research has shown this, as of yet). This explains why European exchange student communities could be labeled the largest *être-ensemble* (“cohabiting groups”) that European countries are “producing” at the moment.

1.2 Exchange students and heterotopia

European students have an unusual position in host countries because, in most countries, accommodation is provided in specially designated areas of campuses and residential areas (this is generally the case in Finland, for instance), which has a significant impact on the social insertion of the students (Murphy-Lejeune, 2000, p. 22 ; Papatsiba, 2003, p. 173). Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* (1967) delineates this aspect (Dervin, 2007b). Heterotopias are spaces that are *kept out of sight*, either to control them (in the case of refugee camps, for instance) or to conceal them (cemeteries, hospitals...). The students often see this situation as a sign of segregation. If we look at fieldwork which I carried out at the University of Turku (Finland), for example, students are accommodated in halls of residence (12 students per floor) reserved for exchange/international students or in shared flats (with other exchange/international students), which, reduces opportunities to meet local students. A similar situation applies with regard to languages, since the students do not know Finnish or Swedish, they take courses either through English (mostly English as a *lingua franca*) or through another language. This means that contact with locals is once again restricted, as courses are often created especially for them.⁴

A direct consequence of heterotopia (the fact that European students are *absent-present* in the local country) is the multiplication of representations (stereotypes) which the students develop regarding both the locals (a phenomenon related to both ethnocentrism and exoticism, cf. Murphy-Lejeune, 2003, p. 89) and the students' national and European *tribes*. I found, for instance, that students develop extremely negative stereotypes about their own countries (for example, the foreign language skills of their compatriots are either limited or better than others, they are too arrogant...) and that the locals are generally seen as nice but cold, and distant (and sometimes even xenophobic); though, once again, research results show that they rarely get to "*meet*" locals apart from tutors, teaching staff and shop assistants.

1.3 Myths related to strangeness

Unlike other kinds of strangers (refugees, workers, etc.), European students seem to benefit from a positive image in the host countries. They are neither tourists nor migrants (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003, p. 200) and, though they are not very visible in the host society (do we often hear about them in the media for instance?), attitudes towards them are usually positive (Papatsiba, 2003, chap. XIII).

With regard to the manner in which students perceive their own strangeness, students begin to become aware of it during their stays abroad (Dervin, 2007b; Dervin & Dirba, 2008., cf. also Murphy-Lejeune *ibid.*: chapter 5), and this probably promotes the biggest misunderstanding and myth regarding the exchange experience. My triple categorization of strangeness helps to clarify this point (cf. Dervin, 2007b; Dervin & Dirba, 2008.):

— **Solid strangers** are people who have moved to a different country and plan to stay there. They usually manage to get a job and get involved with ‘locals’, learn the local language(s), etc. In other words, they become ‘attached’ to the host country and fit in (but of course, they are free to ‘leave’ any time).

— **Liquid strangers** are just passing and they usually have a scheduled return home. Their presence as strangers in the host country is therefore just temporary (though some liquid strangers might stay in the host country for a longer time).

— **Effervescent strangers** may be just passing or staying longer. This figure could be illustrated, in higher education, by international students who take an entire degree at a foreign university. They may or may not wish to stay in the host country after their studies, but at least their stay is long-term. They may or may not learn the local language and be highly involved with locals.

These three idealized profiles of strangers impact upon the experiences that people have in a certain country, in terms of learning, adaptation, relationships, well-being, etc. Unfortunately, many mobile students believe that they will be *solid strangers* and that they will easily find their place in the host society. Solid strangeness is unattainable for European students as, once again, they tend to form peg-communities with other exchange students from the very first days onwards (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003, p. 174; Dervin, 2008).

Another interesting point is that exchange peg-communities tend to be precarious, even though the students seem to have strong links, for example, as is “documented” in the film *The Spanish Apartment* (Klapisch, 2001). My own studies have shown how European students are putting forward an image which is characterized by both faithful/unfaithful relations to their communities: on the one hand, European *tribes* are described as *families*, *protective cocoon* but on the other hand, because the students are always together, they feel that they are prevented from meeting local students and other people that would help fulfill their dream of *solid strangeness*. In the interviews, students oscillate between words such as *friends* and mere *acquaintances* when talking

about their relationships with other exchange students. Sometimes, when discussing other exchange students (especially in interviews carried out at the end of their stay), there appears to be a kind of “tiredness of being together” (de Singly, 2003, p. 70). Moreover, expressions of superficiality and weariness of endless encounters with many new persons are omnipresent in the students’ narratives.

Finally, we need to remember that exchange students are under a great deal of pressure from those left behind in their countries, and even from *themselves*, as far as interculturality and foreign language practice are concerned. Some students even confess to occasionally having deliberately tried to avoid people from their own country during their time abroad because they wanted to meet “different people” and speak foreign languages. It also seems that that students feel awkward, even ashamed, about the fact that they have to admit that they are not able to meet the locals and that they have not always learned the local language(s) when they return to their country. In addition, many believe that they could have become *different*, and in most cases, a *local* during their stay if they had not been in exchange student tribes. Some seem to realize, though, that this is impossible as the process of becoming a local would involve “copying” an imaginary model. Much of this could be avoided, along with the coinciding disappointment, if students were made aware of these aspects and encouraged to reflect on them.

2. Preparing European students for stays abroad

2.1 Rationale

From what we have seen, the exchange period could be a good occasion for reflecting on some of the myths related to strangeness, stays abroad, language practice and *hypermodern* relationships. For this to be the case, proper and long-term guidance needs to be provided for the students. Many researchers have demonstrated, for example, that people who travel a lot or spend extensive time abroad are not necessarily more open-minded than others (cf. for instance Phipps, 2007, p. 30) and sometimes they are even less. I have thus suggested both a theoretical and proactive approach to preparation (Dervin, 2008).

There are many examples of didactic experimentations in the literature but nothing genuinely consistent has been implemented yet, other than purely culturalist or hybrid approaches (Roberts et al., 2001). Such an approach would require official institutions, such as the EU, to set certain clear targets, for instance, in terms of intercultural competency (even though the development

of this competence is an “official objective” of the EU program, a clear definition of it is urgently needed). Nevertheless, helping students to develop *savoir-faire* seems to be the route that should be envisaged. “Knowledge” and unscientific claims about local countries and people should be avoided at all costs, as they often lead to more stereotypes and become *cultural straight jackets*.

As a result, training is necessary before (coordinated by the home institutions), during (host partner & home institutions) and after the exchange experience (possibly coordinated by both institutions). I have proposed pedagogical modules (cf. Dervin, 2006ab & 2007bcd, 2008)⁵ that recommend reading theories on the issues presented below to help students find potential explanations for what they experience abroad:

—The plurality of hypermodern individuals. One could, for instance, acquaint students with the notion of *dissociative acts* (Dervin, 2007d) and their consequences, such as *solidification* or the use of one’s national culture/identity in discourse and interaction (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2003, p. 20; for example, when somebody asserts not being able/willing to do something because *that’s not the way it works in their own country*). The construction of stereotypes should also be theorized.

—The consequences of *être-ensembles* (tiredness of being with the same people, feelings of segregation, impressions of superficiality in relationships, heterotopias...). Zygmund Bauman’s work would be of prime interest in this instance.

—The meaning of strangeness/foreignness in our times and their effects on relationships created, be it abroad or in virtual spaces.

Looking at liquidity/solidity and otherness

Theorizing these elements should be accompanied by experimentations either before departure (through documents such as texts, podcasts, autobiographies, former European students’ narratives...) or while abroad (ethnographical visits, simulations based on the metaverse *Second Life*..., Hine, 2005). The main purpose could be to observe contexts which demonstrate intercultural encounters and strangeness and deconstruct them through observations, participative observation, as used in anthropology and ethnography. The main idea would be to give students the opportunity to look at *themselves* and others, as well as to reflect on their own discourse and attitudes. This would help them to accept that they are diverse and liquid themselves. If students realize that then they will most probably accept the diversity of others more easily and refrain from drawing too many stereotypical conclusions.⁶

Being reflexive about the time spent abroad

The third component of the training program could involve guiding the students through the use of diaries that may be used by the students to reflect on their daily experiences. These diaries could be weblogs, podcasts, or simple paper diaries that the students could either share with other students, with those left behind in their home country, with a “guide” (lecturers, tutors...) or keep for themselves. The following questions could be regularly taken into consideration: what did I learn about myself? About others? About strangeness? About being abroad?, etc. This should also be an occasion to let emotions surface.

2.2 A model of proteophilic competences: learning to appreciate diversities

The previous three elements have been synthesized into a series of competencies. The following model insists upon the need to train exchange students and give them theoretical knowledge about various aspects that impact on stays abroad (many training sessions are practical and based on so-called *grammars of cultures*; cf. Abdallah-Preteuille, 2003).

This section proposes a general model that deals with the development and use of intercultural competences⁷ for mobile students, which I refer to as *proteophilic competences* (or the appreciation of diversity). I will first present the paradigms which form the basis of the model, before going on to discuss its components.

Among the various approaches to intercultural competences, I choose to highlight the “subjectivist” approach, which comes from Martine Abdallah-Preteuille’s distinction between objectivist-culturalist and subjectivist approaches (1986, p. 24), and the “hermeneutical” approach (Dahl et al., 2006). The approach is based on an examination of the co-construction of identities and cultures by means of the analysis of corpora obtained *before departure* (novels, films, blogs, podcasts, etc.⁸) and *while abroad* (corpora collected by learners during fieldwork, in their own country or abroad). Thus the approach fully identifies itself in hypermodern and postmodern analyses of our contemporary worlds and concentrates above all on the development of *savoir-faires* and *savoir-analyser* (competences of analysis), derived from linguistic discourse analysis and theories of enunciation (Marnette, 2005).

Three key elements have been used for the definition of proteophilic competences in stays abroad:

- The importance of relationships in interaction is taken into account, in the co-construction of identities and images of who one wants to be, how one presents oneself and the other in interaction. Flahault (2006) explains:

“the feeling of existing and being oneself does not emerge from one mere interior source: it emerges from a relationship, a circulation of one’s mind and what surrounds it” (p. 76, my translation).

— Emphasis is also laid on the fact that each individual constructs themselves and that “in any act of interaction, it is well known that one never communicates with the person as s/he really is, but with a representation which we have of him/her and his/her groups of belonging, just as this person brings in the interaction act her own representations” (Ogay, 2000, p. 166, my translation). The notions of representations and stereotypes are therefore at the heart of the various analyses that are proposed to students so that they learn to recognize these mechanisms of construction in their own discourse and in that of the other.

— The concept of “the fantasy of Unicity” (Maffesoli, 1995, i.e. the idea that each of us has a unique self inside of them and that belonging to one’s group makes us the “same”) as well as the concept of “dissociative acts” borrowed from psychology (“situations in which I am somebody and somebody else at the same time” Boumard, 2006, p. 30, cf. Dervin, 2007b for an adaptation of the concept in intercultural communication) will be used. These two concepts are both reflections of the contemporary relationship to self and otherness: *diversity* (dissociation) and *unicity, liquidity and solidity* (Bauman, 2001). Through these concepts, the approach requires that the students decentre and look at themselves.

The teaching methods are both proactive (before departure: the student examines, analyses and draws conclusions based on texts—TV programmes, autobiographical novels, podcasts, transcribed interviews...) and reactive (while abroad: situations of encounters in class, via the internet, videoconference, in situations of exchange...). Both contexts have their advantages and drawbacks: pre-departure methods are sometimes decontextualised (e.g. the case of an excerpt from a novel) but less risky for the learner; on-site methods, on the other hand, can place learners in embarrassing situations and necessitate risk-taking. They nonetheless allow students to put their competences directly into practice. Along the path to interculturality, students will concentrate on the following:

— acquiring theoretical tools taken from anthropology, sociology, linguistics and cultural studies, among others, and read books and articles, follow lectures, listen to and watch conferences via new technologies;

— keeping a *journal of strategies* in which they discuss the strategies that they used to face certain situations of intercultural encounters;

- self-analysis: by looking back at a diary written along the years (the person involved must be trained to self-analyse);
- discussing as much as possible with people around them about the components of proteophilic competences (weekly meetings with colleagues, teachers, guides, tutors, etc.).

The general model is composed of three components: two *savoir-faires* and one *savoir-réagir/agir* (skills of behaving in a reflexive manner), and form a whole. There is no progression (no 'levels') and it is open, flexible and should be reworked and adapted to learners' needs. Every component (1–3) is expressed in the first person so the model can be used for self-assessment.

1. Savoir-faire I: Detect identification

I am fully aware that every individual (myself included) is multiple and complex but that every (inter-)locutor can adapt their discourse to contexts and/or interlocutors by presenting a group or a national identity in order to please, confirm a representation or defend themselves. I know how to note and analyse pieces of evidence of identification in my own discourse as well as in the other's discourse (*in vitro* and *in vivo*).

As a consequence, whenever possible, I try not to present myself or my interlocutor through national images, stereotypes, generalisations and exaggerations.

2. Savoir-faire II: paying attention to discourses

I am able to listen to discourses that I come across all the time (mine as well as others') especially when they are potentially ethnocentric, xenophobic, racist but also exotic and xenophilic. I know how to ease such discourses by means of linguistic markers such as modalities and be as explicit as possible by reformulating. I also try to avoid "interculturally correct" naive or contradictory discourse on the *self* and the other such as "I have no stereotypes", "I don't believe in stereotypes but Finns are", etc.

3. Savoir-réagir/agir: controlling one's emotions/behaviours

In delicate and difficult situations, situations of misunderstanding and disagreement, I make an effort to remind myself that individuals are human beings and that they have emotions, feelings, experience bad/good moods, and have personal problems... which influence their reactions. As such, I try not to draw quick and culturalist conclusions which may harm my relationships with others.

In the following section, I will demonstrate how the *savoir-faires* can be applied to courses on intercultural communication through presenting results from an action research study (Benson, 2001) with exchange and international students in Finland. *Savoir-réagir* and *agir* will not be commented on here.

3. Impact of the model on mobile students

In this section, I look at the outcome of a course on intercultural communication that was taught to exchange and international students at the University of Turku in Autumn 2007. The course consisted of a series of lectures on the topics presented above, as well as in-depth analyses, and was assessed via an essay at the end of the course. In the essay, the students had to demonstrate that they had acquired analysis methods based on the model of proteophilic competences; in other words, they were asked to find an interesting (oral or written) corpus, based on a context demonstrating interculturality, which would allow them to analyse phenomena such as solidification, dissociation and liquidity.

In what follows, I will concentrate on six student papers. These six students received the best scores and may be seen as examples of those who applied these competences. First, let us look at the corpora that were chosen, made up of two personal written texts, a pedagogical document, song lyrics, an excerpt from a talk show and a newspaper article. The following table presents the types of documents and the topics chosen by the students.

Student	Type of document	Topic
S1	Local Finnish newspaper article in English	A foreign person explains why he has decided to move away to Finland
S2	Text from an internet discussion between the author of the essay and a friend	A binational person's perceptions of his identities
S3	Post-it notes	Communication problems between an exchange student and her Finnish flatmate, expressed in notes left for each other
S4	Song lyrics by a Norwegian group called Prima Vera	Attitudes of a Norwegian songwriter towards Swedes
S5	Finnish conversation rules (document given to the student in another course on intercultural communication)	Solidification processes in "grammars of culture"
S6	An excerpt from a Polish TV talk-show on Europe (<i>You can like Europe</i>)	(Auto-)solidification of the participants

All in all, based on these corpora, the students examined the following items: construction of auto-solidification, solidification, and identity games. These elements will form the basis of the analysis presented in the next section.

3.1 Deconstruction

3.1.1 Deconstructing solidification (what other people say about others)

We start with the process of solidifying. In most papers, the students set about deconstructing the discourse of solidification used by the “speakers” in the corpora they analysed. This process, as asserted before, is very common in intercultural communication, as it allows us to deal with “liquid” individuals. I first noticed that, even though not all the students based their analysis on linguistic elements collected in the corpora (they were introduced to the basics of linguistic discourse analysis), the category of solidification seems to have been the most prone to such analysis. S4 is probably the student who best explains the methodology that she used at the beginning of her essay: “when investigating the imaginary approach to self and other in the song by Prima Vera it is important to not summarize, but to investigate the meanings of the words instead.”⁹ The following linguistic strategies, among others, which contributed to the process of solidification, were commented upon:

The use of rhetorical devices

In order to solidify others, one can resort to various devices to convince one’s listeners or readers of one’s arguments. We begin by looking at the use of rhetorical devices. In S1’s paper, an analysis of a newspaper article written by a Brit who explains why he has decided to move away from Finland, the student discusses both the negative description of Finnish attitudes and generalisations about foreigners’ experiences in Finland. For instance, S1 tells us that “the author gives various descriptions of what he refers to as ‘Finnish attitude’: “they do not want to share “their” city with foreigners, Foreigners living in Finland are expected to ditch their culture”. When she looks at the way the author formulates his thoughts about his experiences in Finland, she writes: “he uses **very convincing sentences** in order to give a **dramatic effect** to his words: “it was impossible to be accepted here”; “racism can show itself in many forms.” This shows that the student has understood that rhetorical devices, such as the peremptory formulation of sentences, can contribute to solidification. The same student makes another similar comment about the author’s negative solidification of Finns: “the writer is **totally sure of what he**

is talking about and has no second thoughts when talking pejoratively about Finns". Finally, the student draws a much more subjective conclusion about the rhetorical devices used (cf. the use of the adjectives *offensive* and *disdainful*) in what she has read and says that the solidification process in her corpus is accompanied by "a slight offensive and disdainful tone in his discourse."

Uncertainty and contradiction

Aspects of uncertainly and contradiction in the solidification process were identified in two students' essays. These aspects had been largely examined in several corpora presented during the course. In S1, the student demonstrates clearly how critical the author of the newspaper article is about Finns, and in particular about the city where he lives. She also shows how the author tries to implicate other foreigners in his solidifying discourse and how this implication is in fact generic, vague and uncertain: "foreigners living in Oulu have a story, or two," "the feeling amongst most ex-pats", etc. Even though the student does not implicitly draw the conclusion that this is a rhetorical device to support the author's arguments (authority), it is clear from her discourse that this is what she means. On the other hand, the phenomenon of contradiction in solidification is also identified by the students. S5, who examines Finnish conversation rules that she was given in another course on intercultural communication, systematically tries to find contradictions in the rules by pinpointing the use of various linguistic items. For example, in the rule "one should not discuss the obvious," the student emphasises the fact that *obvious* is a very subjective adjective and that its understanding and use may depend on the interlocutors, concluding that it therefore cannot be used as a rule defining a whole 'culture.' The same applies for another rule:

Rule 1: "when in public, one should not be contentious, i.e. it is inappropriate to mention a topic that will arouse conflict unless it is very important one has very arguments and they are impersonal"

Here is what the student has to say about this rule:

"There is a contradiction between the meanings of the words and the meanings of the sentences and the rules themselves. That is, for instance the relation of the meaning of the verb mention to the meaning of the sentence—if mentioning means that the subject is touched off incidentally, it is practically impossible to predict whether this topic is capable of creating any tension before the communicators have expressed their views towards it unless it is a deliberate act meant to provoke certain reaction"

The various elements presented in this section on deconstructing solidification correspond best to *savoir-faire II* (paying attention to discourses). Now let us turn to the second section, looking at auto-solidification, or when the person solidifies him/herself and what is similar (i.e. people from their own country).

3.1.2 Auto-solidification (a person's discourse on the self and what is similar)

Auto-solidification is analysed by the students through looking at how a speaker or writer talks about his/her own country and resorts to generalisations and generic rules about who they think they are. The analysis of this phenomenon allows the students to make a note of the strategies hidden by these elements. While all the students base their analysis of auto-solidification on the discourse of various individuals' self-solidification, in S5's case, auto-solidification is partly based on data that the lecturers had compiled from Finnish students and given to her. In a way, it is thus a summary of how others see themselves; in her essay, S5 reintroduces the voices of the lecturers to explain: "These Finnish conversation rules are based on analysis carried out by [...] and as it is stated by the authors "over a thousand Finns who have discussed and modified the previous version of the rules."

Auto-solidification and the culture-alibi

The culture-alibi strategy has been put forward by French scholars M. Abdallah-Preceille and L. Porcher (1996) to show how identification with national cultures can serve as devices for misrepresenting and manipulating reality or as ready-made excuses. In her essay, S3 describes an incident with her Finnish flatmate, caused by her removing the common table from the kitchen to use it for a party on another floor. When the Finnish flatmate noticed that the table had disappeared, she left a note which read: "have you lost your mind? Where the hell is our table?" To this note, the student answered in a very ironic tone, impersonating the table: "It was enough for me that you eat and learn on me. I went to have party to the 6th floor. Z and B, who also lives here said, that it was not problem. See you tomorrow! The table!" The Finnish flatmate wrote in return: "Don't be ridiculous!". The student analyses the incident by saying that the Finnish flatmate often claimed that these were not Finnish habits. She wrote: "She often blames the personal problems on cultural differences, wrongly." The use of *wrongly* at the end of the sentence shows that the student realizes that this is a strategy to manipulate and offer ready-made explanations. In the same vein, regarding another incident of this type, the student asserts

that “She [the flatmate] referred something that she was Finnish and Finnish people didn’t use to use each other’s things—this is her own opinion.” So the strategy of culture as an alibi is clearly identified by S3.

Deconstruction through dialogue-like criticism

In one paper, a dialogic approach to the chosen corpus was adopted. Having examined and criticised every single Finnish conversation rule, S5 examines an e-mail comment that she received from a Finnish student about the rules. She explicitly refers to the dissociation and auto-solidification paradigms in her analysis of his discourse. Let us concentrate on two of the comments that she makes in the dialogical approach which she adopts (she first inserts the excerpt to be commented upon before her own comments). In the first example, the Finnish student tells S5 that his sister is “un-Finnish” and explains why. He wrote: “my sister doesn’t behave according to the normal Finnish conversation rules”. S5 proposes the following analysis of this excerpt:

since the sister of N., being Finnish does not behave according to the rules that he considers a norm, he implicitly labels her behaviour as “Un-Finnish” which is not really possible since they belong to the same country.

S5 appears slightly confused as her line of argumentation seems to adopt a culturalist approach (they belong to the same country so they are the same). The next example, however, shows that the student is not using a culturalist analysis and that she was probably not explicit enough in her understanding of Finnishness. She comments on the following excerpt from the Finnish student:

eye contact can be a little annoying. Isn’t it funny how we (Finns) don’t look at each other’s eyes when we are talking? (...) I have tried this several times (i.e. to look at people in the eyes) and it is really a funny thing to realize that when asking to each others we maybe really look into the other ones face for just 5–10% of the time.

S5 reacts to this comment by emphasising the use of authority in the auto-solidification process as a manipulative strategy. She mentions that the Finnish student “is trying to present it as an argument based on facts (percentage, mentioning own experience).” Her criticism is orientated towards the idea that, even though statistics are used, the experience described by the Finnish student is very personal. She concludes the analysis of this excerpt with a proteophilic comment: “because not all Finnish people would react exactly or even the same way.”

The following two categories differ from the previous ones as they introduce auto-solidification from two different angles.

Imposed auto-solidification

In S6's corpus, which is based on a Polish talk-show about Europe, the student says that auto-solidification is present in many different ways, as most of the guest-presenters are binational (Polish and Finnish, Polish and German, etc.). One interesting auto-solidification that she discovered in the show is the fact that all of the presenters are expected to represent the country they symbolise in the show. She writes: "to my mind every person taking part in the programme is limited in what they say to stereotypical frames and images of their countries." This is explained by listing the stereotypical positions that they adopt: for instance, the student says that the French person was a cook, the Italian participant a restaurant owner, the Spanish man's grandfather a toreador... The student sees all these elements as imposed, especially when she writes: "the participants are asked to wear their traditional clothes, talk about popular customs of their country". The passive voice in "are asked to" does not allow us to determine who the imposer might be—though one can guess that the student means that the media involved (TV producers) may play this role.

Shifted Auto-solidification

The final category of auto-solidification goes beyond national frontiers. As such, S1, in her study of the rhetorical devices used by the British person who explains why he has decided to move away from Finland, demonstrates how he places himself behind his local imagined community, foreigners, in order to support his arguments: "The fact that he uses the word "foreigner" to talk about the community of ex-pats who live in O. can be interpreted as a sign of solidification, he wants to portray his belonging to this certain group and that they are different from the 'locals.' When he speaks about experiences his fellow ex-pats have been through, it seems as if he doesn't bear in mind that they all have different backgrounds, reactions ways of interaction..." The conclusion the student draws corresponds to the proteophilic paradigm and shows that she can apply it to contexts of categorization other than nationality—i.e. foreignness in this case. It would thus seem that *savoir-faire* I (detecting identification) is being demonstrated in this section.

3.2 Unearthing identity games

Part of *Savoir-faire* I deals with being able to discern identification strategies and more specifically identity games. This strategy was identified by many students in their corpora.

Dissociative strategies

Dissociation, which was presented earlier, is used as an analysis tool in this section. S2 chose a personal corpus for his analysis: an internet discussion with somebody he had never physically met, but whom he refers to as a friend. This friend is binational (Finnish/Russian) and claims that he belongs everywhere. In other words, the friend places himself in constant in-betweenness. Being very good at languages, he has many friends in the world and, according to the student, “he feels that he is taken as a Latvian in Latvia, and he is Norwegian because he speaks Norwegian.” S2 also explains that his friend was learning S2’s language to be able to talk to him in it. The general feeling that the internet pal inspires is that he is fond of neither Finns nor Russians (S2 says that he keeps criticizing them). Though S2 is not actually explicitly critical about the identity games that his friend plays, he notes that: “he dissociated himself from the Finns and the Russians when he said that he “can’t say I am a Russian either”. Moreover, the student notes that his friend uses the pronoun “they” when he talked about these two peoples, suggesting that he is not fond of his countries but that he wants to put forward an image of cosmopolitanism.

Strategic use of identities

In S6’s corpus (as in S2), the game of identities is the main emphasis of the analysis. As mentioned earlier, in S6’s corpus, various guest presenters of a Polish TVshow on Europe are binational. The student clearly identifies how they play with and shift identities during the show. She writes: “I noticed that every person who has two (or maybe more?) homelands tends to change the way he/she speaks about Polish people depending on what he/she says. If he /she wants to say something positive about Poles he/she starts the sentence with “we.” If the person wants to praise people from the other country he/she says I or “we the Spanish” we the Finns.” Thus, by analysing the use of linguistic elements such as pronouns (we/the), the student shows how she identifies strategic uses of identities. Let us examine another example, in which she comments on how the Spanish “representative” expresses his in-betweenness: “When I am in Poland I miss Spain and when I am in Spain I feel like coming back to Warsaw.” The conclusion that the student draws appears to be less founded than before as her deconstruction of this in-betweenness is rather subjective and based on a mere hypothesis: “However I am sure that he chooses to be Spanish or Polish in certain situations and knows what is beneficial for him.”

Impersonating in order to improve solidification

The identity games are also analysed through the different types of dramatization that seem to take place in some corpora. One student shows how dramatization takes place through impersonalisation and allows solidification and auto-solidification strategies to be conveyed. S4, who clearly adopts a discourse analysis perspective, explains how the Norwegian singer of the song about Swedes pretends to be or “tries on” the identity of an imaginary Norwegian immigrant who lives in Sweden. She claims that this trick allows the singer to be more convincing when underlining the differences between both peoples. She writes: “Where the person sings “I am having a good time with TV1 and TV2, I will never move back, I want to live there, so happy in Sweden (...)” one can see that the singer sees himself as a Norwegian who immigrated to Sweden and became Swedish”. Of course, the student notes that this is all ironic, as the above-mentioned TV channels are not considered to be of good quality in Norway. She writes: “the singer uses depersonalization and irony to show his point that Sweden is not the first place he would like to move to”. All in all, S4 spotlights the links between the strategic use of identity games in solidifying others.

Conclusion and implications

The analysis presented in this article has attempted to show how a model of intercultural competencies (proteophilic competences), which moves beyond culturalism, could be applied during a course on intercultural communication with exchange students. The article has also attempted to provide evidence of use of the model from a selection of essays written by students who took such a course. The six essays that were used are convincing: the students understood the approach and most of them chose a number of well-founded arguments and excerpts. The approach seems to have impacted the students, as shown by the following quote from S6: “the theory of intercultural communication is concurrent with my ‘live’ experiences and with the perception of culture that I had before. I felt like I had to make transformation in my concept of culture or at least to detect multiplicity in it”. S5, on the other hand, concludes her paper by comparing the approach to the culturalist one, stating that: “the culturalist approach offered by the given conversation rules is of course the seemingly easier way to “grasp” the liquid reality and cultures by means of stereotyping but it appears to be inefficient in recognizing the individual complexity of the person and thus failing to constitute to the intercultural competence.” It is clear that the students understood and appreciated the changes that the model triggered in them.

There were, however, as one might expect, some inconsistencies and paradoxes in the students' essays. For example, S1, who set about deconstructing the discourse of the British person who had decided to move away from Finland, uses somebody else's discourse, i.e. a comment left by a visitor on a website that reproduces the article, to conclude her paper, thus conducting a kind of dialogue with the author of the article. The comment reveals that its commentator is surprised that the author of the article loves multiculturalism and leaves Finland for "its lack of it," but then is moving back to Guildford, England, which is, according to the commentator, the whitest and most homogeneous place in England. By using this comment to conclude her essay, the student contradicts herself in a way, as she had been deconstructing solidity in the rest of her paper. Guildford, or any other place in the world, cannot be homogeneous as homogeneity is but an illusion (cf. the myth of imagined communities by Anderson, 1991). In a similar vein, a colleague and I had noticed similar contradictions in students' papers in the context of language learning and teaching (Dervin & Suomela, 2008), where students had lauded the same approach and repeated messages of openness, while at the same time resorting to many representations of themselves and others. Of course, one needs to remember that the aim of the exercise is not to rid students of all their stereotypes or representations, as this is impossible and idealistic. Teaching staff can, however, expect consistency or stable lines of argumentation in a scientific paper.

The main message of this experiment is that self-reflexivity (which is in vogue in most pedagogical approaches to the teaching and learning of modern languages and intercultural communication) is not enough in itself. It definitely needs to be complemented by theoretical knowledge and analyses of authentic corpora. Moreover, discourse collected in students' essays must be treated with caution as one never has evidence of the relationships between discourse and action. As such, just because someone is able to notice identification, this does not mean that in other 'live' situations (closer to their own experiences) they will act proteophilically. As socio-constructivism and dialogical studies have shown (e.g. Marková et al, 2007), there are too many elements that intervene during interaction for an individual to be able to act as they wish (hierarchy, language skills, polyphony...).

The situation described in this paper is very safe for the students, as they do not require a significant emotional investment on their behalf, having worked on *in vitro* corpora. Other approaches are therefore needed to render this method more interactive and closer to the students' experiences as described in this paper. Anthropological methods that I have explored through work on non-places (Augé, 1992; cf. Dervin, 2006a) would allow students to collect and analyse their own

data ‘out there’ through interviewing and observing people. Exploring Computer Mediated Communication could also be another way of creating more concrete experiences. As such, one could establish links between exchange students and locals, exchange students and students from their own country with similar experiences abroad, or exchange students with other exchange students in different countries; this could be done in their mother tongue, using a lingua franca or through a foreign language. The graduation from pre-departure to on-site could be achieved through these methods, leading the students to deeper reflection and impacting on how they analyse, explain and describe their experiences of mobility, intercultural communication but also être-ensemble and strangeness. The whole process is undoubtedly a way of leading the students out of the culturalist impasse and “the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity” (Sen, 2006, p. 1), an approach which can affect their stays abroad.

Notes

¹ Though they are still used as variables in research on student mobility, cf. Lam, 2006.

² My study on the messages left by students on the Erasmus 20 years-website in which most students assert that they found their “real selves”... without any single explanation of what it means (Dervin 2007a).

³ During my data collection for all the above-mentioned research projects, I have only met a small number of students who were able to step outside their exchange student ‘tribes’ and find their way into Finnish tribes. A study focusing on this population should be envisaged in order to reveal the strategies that they adopted.

⁴ Some institutions have tried to impose “meetings” with local students (through awarding credits to both types of students) in order to create links between them. Though this initiative is potentially positive, no systematic research has been carried out on its real impacts on the encounters and relationships among the students. Let me ask two somewhat provocative questions here: is it really necessary to force them to encounter? Can “juggled” and credit-motivated encounters work?

⁵ Anquetil (2006) provides an interesting literature review on various initiatives worldwide.

⁶ An *interculturally correct* approach to stereotypes, which would involve trying to get rid of all the students’ stereotypes, would be counterproductive, as stereotypes cannot but be resorted to. An emphasis on how they are constructed should be one of the pedagogical orientations.

⁷I prefer to talk about the development of the competences as they are fundamental “human” and “societal” competences which every one of us makes use of on a daily basis—successfully or not.

⁸Dervin, 2007ab & 2008.

⁹All excerpts are (sic).

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