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## ERASMUS STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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*The promotion of students' mobility in the EU has had a huge impact in recent years in Lithuania, which has now become one of the countries with more students going abroad on an ERASMUS programme. Apart from being a means of studies and communication, languages offer access to cultural knowledge, diverse social and cultural identities and also contribute to cross-cultural communication both within Europe and with the rest of the world. The experiences gained while studying and living in another country give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen. The paper presents an analysis of the survey findings into MRU Erasmus Exchange students' (20 respondents) reflections and communication experience through different languages in multicultural environment in host countries. The survey focuses both on students' benefits and challenges they have encountered while applying their knowledge and language skills in the study process and everyday communication.*

*KEY WORDS: multicultural environment, multilingualism, Erasmus exchange programme, cultural diversity, international education.*

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**Introduction**

The Erasmus student mobility is a good example of how the co-operation of higher education institutions of the EU Member States can benefit students “educationally, linguistically and culturally from the experience of learning in other European countries” (EC. Erasmus Student Mobility for Studies). The Erasmus exchange programmes, apart from stimulating professional studies, offer access to different languages, cultural knowledge, intercultural communication and improve understand-

ing within Europe and with the rest of the world. Students from different nationalities or cultures come together to study bringing with them their different cultures and levels of language skills as well as expectations and beliefs. The experiences gained while studying and living in another country “enrich students' lives in the academic and professional fields, but can also improve language learning, intercultural skills, self-reliance and self-awareness. Their experiences give students a better sense of what it means to be a European citizen” (EC. The

Erasmus Programme–studying in Europe and more).

In addition, many employers highly value such a period abroad, which increases students' employability and job prospects. Those students who have successfully completed a study period abroad are likely to possess cross-cultural communication skills, an understanding of and familiarity with local customs and cultural contexts, flexibility, resilience, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and deal with cultural differences.

This article illustrates a positive impact of changes in education policies in relation to international education and linguistic diversity both at European and national levels by presenting an analysis of MRU current Erasmus Exchange students' experience. Mykolas Romeris University, being a member of the Association of International Universities and the Association of European Universities participates in Erasmus students' mobility schemes and, in this way, contributes to the development of cross-cultural interest and language use.

**The aim** of the paper is to present the 2010/11 Erasmus Exchange students' experiences of studying and living in multilingual and culturally diverse environment. A qualitative analysis of the survey findings on students' reflections focusing on self-evaluation of encountered benefits and challenges is presented. To achieve this aim, the following **research objectives** are identified:

1. to determine languages of mobility:
  - (a) study languages,
  - (b) languages of daily communication,
2. to research challenges and problems encountered during studies in host countries.

## 1. Theoretical background and research methodology

Cultural interaction through mobility has been widely recognized as a significant field of research. While the physical opportunities for students to study abroad have diversified, the impact of global student mobility on research has increased. Literature on internationalisation and exchanges in higher education refers to the important educational and social benefits of increasing student mobility, such as acquiring new and cross-cultural knowledge, sensitivity and competencies among home students and the wider community, improving foreign language proficiency (especially in English), establishing international personal and professional networks, familiarisation with other countries and cultures (Van Damme 2001).

There has been much discussion about student mobility in terms of educational experience from different research perspectives. However, there are not so many studies about students' adjustment to new environments and changes in their thinking and life habits that explore how students adjust and what happens to their minds when they encounter a new environment during their study abroad. Practitioners and researchers (Crawshaw, Tarp, Ayano, Byram, Feng, Alfred, Burnett, Gardner, Ming-Hun, Lam, Pearson-Evans in Byram and Feng, 2006) involved in educational mobility research issues highlight the importance of attitudinal changes and pragmatic communication problems, besides practical study problems, confronted by students. Byram and Feng (2006) explore qualitative research techniques based on personal narration of sojourners, either recorded in writing or derived from oral accounts obtained through

personal diaries, interviews or questionnaires that aim at evaluating different groups and types of students who have experienced residence abroad. Ayano (2006), having researched exchange students' intercultural psychological adjustment levels to different environments, concludes that Japanese international students' wishes and expectations of a new life in a foreign country are not always realized. Furthermore, Pearson-Evans' (2006) findings on Irish university students who studied in Japan for one year highlight three themes (social networks, food and language) affecting their adjustment process and reveal in each a dynamic tension between home culture, host culture and other foreigners. Crawshaw (2006) gives a particular emphasis to student mobility in terms of linguistic experiences. The researcher believes that, even though students might never attain native speakers' proficiency in the foreign languages to which they were exposed, they could at least come to appreciate and respect difference and, thus, use foreign language learning as a means of developing qualities of tolerance and humanity.

Since the year Erasmus programme was launched, the number of students has been dramatically increasing: 3244 students in 1987, and 20 years later nearly 3 million students have been abroad for study or training (Erasmus-Facts, Figures and Trends....., 2012). Apart from other advantages of the mobility programme, Erasmus promotes internationalisation of the European Higher Education system, contributes to modernisation and improvement of quality. Lithuania is among the countries that have the highest number of outgoing Erasmus students as a proportion of the national student population in 2010-2011.

Therefore, understanding what students experience during their study period abroad is important as regards their psychological and linguistic readiness.

The conducted research on Lithuanian students' experiences in linguistically diverse multicultural environment is an attempt to evaluate intercultural experience within educational context and to prove the argument that languages, apart from being a means of studies and communication, offer access to cultural knowledge, diverse social and cultural identities and contribute to cross-cultural communication.

## 2. The research sample and method

The paper continues the analysis of the Erasmus exchange programme students' cultural and language experience in host countries. The qualitative research paradigm (Golafshani, 2003; Agostinho, 2005) was employed in respect of the questions under discussion. The term *qualitative research* is used as an umbrella term to depict research conducted in a natural setting to investigate a social or human issue (Creswell 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Neuman 2004, Agostinho 2005). Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 17). The conducted research approach is both social and cultural investigation which seeks to understand "phenomena in context-specific settings" (Golafshani 2003). The first part of the research focused on self-evaluation of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) competence acquired at MRU and the interrelation between the respondents' language competence and study requirements in host countries (Užpaliėnė

and Vaičiūnienė 2012). This paper discusses languages as a means of communication and cultural issues. Based on the assumption that all participants and their relationships within a specific physical environment are unique and important (Lemke 1998), all interviewees' answers were consistently and systematically studied. The analysis of interviews was conducted by grouping the participants' responses according to the following categories:

1. Language competence in multicultural environment, and
2. Benefits and challenges encountered in Erasmus Exchange studies.

In the later stage, these categories were analysed in-depth seeking to identify similar/differing patterns of students' experiences.

The research instrument was an interview composed of 20 open-ended questions delivered and collected online. The small research sample (20 interviewees) and the use of the qualitative method were validated in the previous article (Užpalienė and Vaičiūnienė, 2012). The study participants

were Erasmus Exchange students of different Bachelor study programmes (MRU) who studied in 13 exchange countries (see Table 1.). The participants were coded by letters, therefore their names are not revealed in the paper.

### 3. Language competence in multicultural environment

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has become a key reference document and a tool for educational and professional mobility. The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels and "provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility". (Council of Europe. CEFR).

#### 3.1. Language competence requirements for Erasmus students

According to *Erasmus Language* requirements, Erasmus exchange students should have at least one of the following:

1. qualification demonstrating a minimum of level B1- experience of formal study in that language;
2. a minimum of one year university level study (as a non-beginner).

In the absence of at least one of the above requirements, participants are required to take a language test and to achieve at least level B1 according to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework Reference for Languages before taking up their exchange place.

The research findings presented by Užpalienė and Vaičiūnienė (2012) illustrated the ratio of foreign languages studied at MRU: the majority of Erasmus programme students (16) studied English. University

Table 1. Erasmus Exchange countries

	Exchange country	Number of students
1	Spain	4
2	Germany	2
3	France	2
4	Italy	2
5	Poland	2
6	Austria	1
7	Hungary	1
8	Czech Republic	1
9	Holland	1
10	Slovenia	1
11	Belgium	1
12	Bulgaria	1
13	Turkey	1

teachers refer to the European Indicator of Language Competence and the internal language knowledge assessment requirements and evaluate the outgoing students' skills by 10-point grading scale where the lowest is between 80 and 89 percent.

As not all partner universities offered programmes in English, the surveyed students had to learn languages of host countries. Specialized Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) for the less taught languages were organised where these languages were used as languages of instruction. Educational institutions *do* encourage Erasmus students to take advantage of any opportunity, academic or extra-curricular, to gain language skills.

### 3.2. Languages of studies in exchange countries

The next interview question dealt with the study language(s) in the exchange country. The survey participants indicated seven languages they used in the study process; among them the most usable languages were *English, German, Russian and French* (see Fig. 1). As compared to other languages, *English* was the main language of instruction (11 responses).

The results demonstrate the apparent advantage of English over other languages of studies. Going on the Erasmus Exchange programme to different countries was *a good opportunity for students to learn more than one language or to advance skills of other languages*, consequently some of the students indicated two study languages or even three languages. The interviewed students also applied not so popular languages, including *Italian, Spanish, Bulgarian*.

Some respondents pointed out specific language-related problems at the beginning of their studies (*insufficient level of language knowledge, lack of vocabulary for specific purposes, native accent, dialect, spoken language very different from which was studied at school or university, errors of style and grammar, etc.*). However, the overall picture of positive language evaluation evidences a fairly high level of language competence acquired at MRU pertinent to specific, professional language needs applied in the field of study abroad.

### 3.3. Living in a foreign language

Learning the native language of counterparts is the first step to successful communication among culturally different people. However,

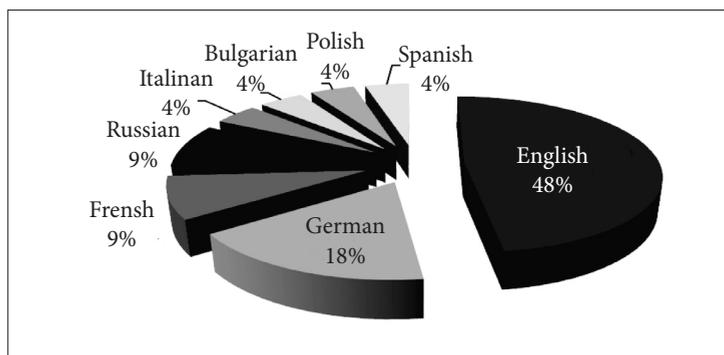


Fig. 1. Study language/s in the exchange country

language awareness is only one of the factors that make communication possible. For example, Pembek *et al.* (2009) in their study regarding the components of international communicative competence indicate that beside the verbal and nonverbal factors of communication, cultural awareness, personal attributes, psychological adaptation, education, social skills, and adjustment to new environment become vital for mutual understanding. Lázár (2003) describes the foreign language as a living language which students must live not learn. Such factors, namely, knowledge, attitude, skills and awareness affecting the ability of individuals to be “intercultural competent communicators” are also stressed (Federation of the Experiment in International Living, 2005-2006) as the means of stepping inside a culture. In their research on languages and intercultural education, Lenz and Berthele (2010) highlight plural, transversal and integrative approaches to languages.

According to Trimnell (2005), the attitude that English alone is enough in fact creates self-imposed limitations. To remain monolingual means to stunt your educational development and restrict your

communication and thinking abilities denying understanding about the world you live in. For most of the respondents the study period abroad was an exciting experience, where abundant opportunities to hear the language and practice it within and beyond the classroom extended learning and enriched them personally and professionally. The respondents (A, E, B, G, H, I, etc.) described exchange study period as a good possibility to gain in-depth knowledge of another language, cultures and people.

### 3.4. Diversity of languages

The analysis of students’ reflections on linguistic and cultural diversity highlighted the common patterns. Ten languages were used in daily communication (body language included). The majority of the respondents used *English* as the main instrument for their communication. *Spanish* was their second priority, whereas *German and Russian* both occupy the same, third position (see Fig. 2).

The most common difficulties encountered by the respondents in cross-cultural communication were:

- 1) *embarrassing routine situations,*
- 2) *everyday funny misunderstandings,*

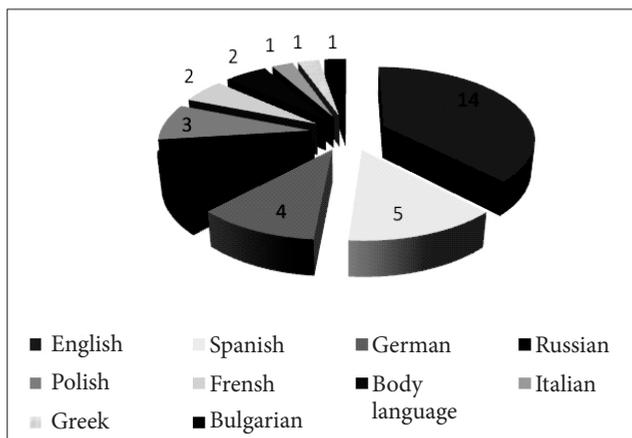


Fig. 2. Languages in daily communication

- 3) *different cultural and social treatment of things,*
- 4) *different levels of language competence,*
- 5) *native accents, dialects,*
- 6) *attitudes, values and thinking.*

Nevertheless, thanks to the opportunities to hear a foreign language and practice it made studying much easier.

#### 4. Is English the most popular students' mobility language?

The responses on *English as a lingua franca in mobility programmes* highlighted the respondents' attitude to English in relation to other languages. 14 respondents assumed English as the most important mobility language (see Fig. 3).

English has increasingly assumed the role of lingua franca for international communication in the European and global arena (Extra and Yagmu 2002). The research findings support this view (*a global lingua franca, European English, the main international language, the most frequent among Erasmus students, etc.*). However, *French vs. the leading position of English* was pointed out unanimously by the respondents who

studied in France. *French has the status of home language and a big advantage over other languages in France, therefore the French do not speak, or evade speaking, other languages* (respondents R and M).

German was defined as *the universal or unique language in Germany, in German speaking countries, a communication tool among Hungarian, Austrian, Swiss, German students*. Knowledge of *other languages is also important*, especially in non-English speaking countries (Italy, Spain, Bulgaria).

The Erasmus Exchange programme is a good example of the significant steps taken to realize changes in international education policies in relation to the diversity of languages in studies. Nowadays, due to the international education policy of the EU, the interest in other languages has increased and HE institutions, with the exception of France, make no differentiation any longer between the status of languages.

#### 5. Benefits and challenges while studying abroad

The European Commission sees a close correlation between studies in another country and success on the labour market (ELAN,

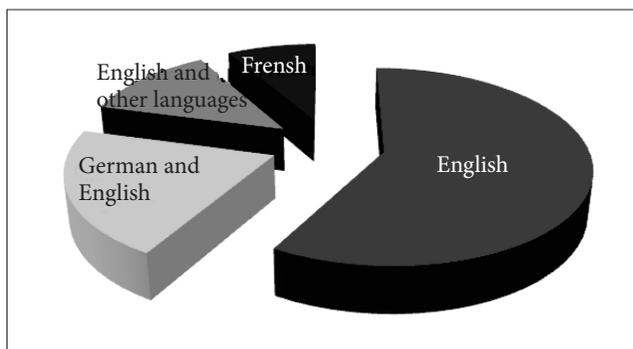


Fig. 3. Importance of languages

2006). Since the start of Erasmus, more than one million students have seized the opportunity to study abroad (EC, Multilingualism policy). The EC Communication on the “Agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s higher education systems” (2011) states that the „EU mobility programmes such as Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus have achieved far-reaching positive effects for individuals and institutions. Three million students will have benefited from the current Erasmus programme by 2013... “.

### 5.1. Identified benefits of mobility programmes

The research focused on benefits as seen by the surveyed students. The students’ comments on likes and dislikes were grouped according to the identified categories:

- academic knowledge
- awareness of another culture
- development of foreign language
- development of interpersonal skills
- new experience (see Fig. 4).

*Benefits of studies abroad for education purpose* were unanimously admitted by almost all students: 15 respondents out of 20 named *academic knowledge and exciting academe* as their priorities. They were fond of *teaching methods, the mode of lectures, the high quality and requirements of studies, teachers’ professionalism, types of tasks and assignments, the life of academic community that varied in forms, sports and different social activities*.

The opportunity to improve foreign language skills, to advance skills of professional languages or start learning new languages were named by almost half of the respondents as one of the most important advantages.

Roughly the same number of the respondents (8 in 20, 7 in 20) indicated a *greater awareness of another culture, multicultural academic environment and better interpersonal skills* as the second or third most important benefit.

*New experiences, challenges, emotions, new approach to life* were pointed as impor-

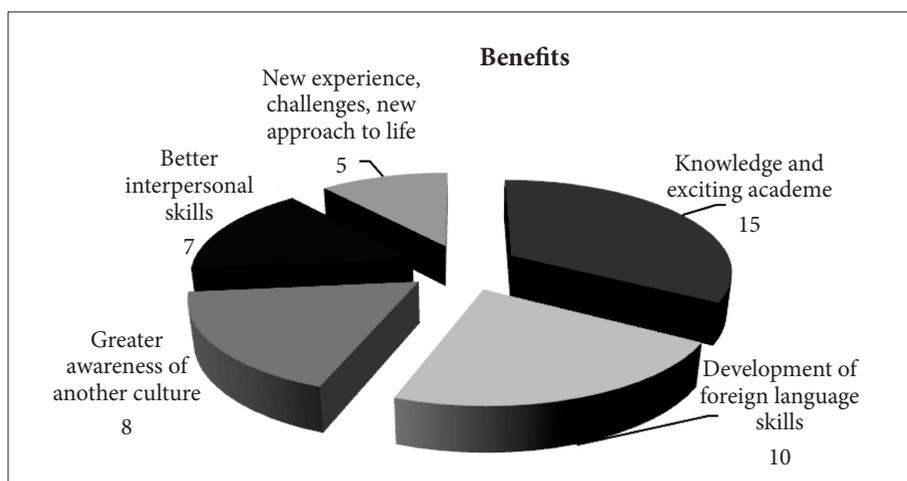


Fig. 4. Benefits of living and studying abroad

tant benefits. Students see their study abroad as an experience for personal growth. They appreciate being exposed to new ways of thinking and living.

When considering benefits, students indicate similar reasons: *personal measures of success, the opportunity to meet different people, to cope with new study circumstances, environments and social situations, the possibility to diversify their studies and prepare for graduation, to learn a new language and improve their language skills that is their major or minor, enhance intercultural skills, to learn about food.*

The respondents' feedback evidences the overall positive attitude to studies abroad.

## 5.2. Difficulties experienced in Erasmus studies

Conversely, certain patterns of problems encountered by the students were also identified and grouped into four main categories according to their nature:

1. Problems related to language competence (*specific vocabulary, new phrases, unknown definitions, insufficient vocabulary, professional language, insufficient level of language knowledge*).
2. The complexity of subject(s) (*mismatch between language competence and complexity of lectures, studying together with students from other exchange countries, complexity due to teaching methods*).
3. Academic regulations and requirements-related problems; (*study programmes, regulations and requirements, credit and grading systems, new inefficient teachers, a format of tasks and assignments, lack of subject-related knowledge, traditional, boring lectures*

*and outdated methods, courses offered in languages of host countries*).

4. Unfamiliar and unknown environment (*adaptation to a new or unfamiliar learning environment*) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Difficulties experienced during exchange programme studies

Problems related to language competence	The complexity of subject(s)	Study regulations and requirements	Unfamiliar and unknown environment
8 responses	8 responses	4 responses	2 responses

The research reveals *language competence-related problems* and *the complexity of subject(s)-related problems* as the biggest challenges respondents experienced. The category *Study regulations and requirements* was rated as the third greatest hardship, whereas only a few respondents indicated the category *Unfamiliar and new environment*. Certain shortcomings related to efficiency of studies were also noted (*quality of training and improper assessment system, lack of tutors and innovative study tools, students and teachers on strike, too little time for learning*).

However, the results confirm that benefits of studies abroad substantially outweigh dislikes.

## Conclusions

European universities participating in ERASMUS programmes are a good example of how the co-operation of HE institutions of the EU Member States can benefit students in their professional studies and help

students get to know different cultures and languages. Lithuania is among the countries with the biggest number of outgoing students in recent years.

The conducted research into Erasmus Exchange programme participants' experiences revealed an overall positive picture. Being in a multicultural academic community in different countries is a good opportunity for students to:

- advance language competence and practice languages other than English
- enhance intercultural communication
- enrich themselves both personally and professionally
- develop values and thinking as well as a new approach to life and studies.

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However, certain patterns of problems were also identified:

- problems related to language competence
- the complexity of subject(s)
- academic regulations and requirements
- unfamiliar and unknown environment.

The conducted research highlighted specific, language-related problems which can hinder study process (*insufficient level of language knowledge, lack of vocabulary for specific purposes, local accent, dialect, etc.*).

The obtained findings suggest the demand and use of different languages in study process and everyday communication which are closely related and complementary.

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## **ERASMUS STUDENTŲ PATIRTIS KALBŲ ĮVAIROVĖS IR TARPKULTŪRINĖS KOMUNIKACIJOS ASPEKTU**

**Santrauka**

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami *Erasmus* mainų programos studentų kultūrinės ir kalbinės patirties priimančių šalių universitetuose tyrimo rezultatai. Pirmoji tyrimo dalis, kurioje nagrinėjami užsienio kalbos kompetencijos, įgytos MRU, ir įsivertinimo bei kalbinės kompetencijos svarba studijų sėkmei klausimai yra pristatyti ankstesniame Daivos Užpalienės ir Vilhelminos Vaičiūnienės (2012) straipsnyje. Tyrimui atlikti naudota 20 atvirojo pobūdžio klausimų anketa, pateikta elektroniniu būdu. Tikslinė respondentų grupė – 20 *Erasmus* mainų programos studentų iš skirtingų bakalauro studijų programų (MRU), kurie 2010/2011 metais studijavo 13 šalių. Tyrimo duomenys analizuoti taikant kokybinį tyrimo metodą (aprašomoji analizė). Tyrimo etikos sumetimais dalyviai buvo koduojami raidėmis, todėl jų pavardės nebuvo atskleistos pristatant tyrimo rezultatus, apibendrinant studentų savęs vertinimą studijuojant ir gyvenant kitoje šalyje.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra pateikti *Erasmus* mainų programos dalyvių patirties mokyti ir gyventi daugiakalbėje ir kultūriškai įvairioje aplinkoje tyrimo rezultatus, kuriais remiantis būtų nustatytos mobilumo metu vartotos kalbos, jų poreikis, iššūkiai ir problemos, su kuriais studentai susiduria studijų metu priimančiose šalyse dėl nepakankamos užsienio kalbos kompetencijos,

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## **ERASMUS STUDENTS EXPERIENCES IN LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

**Summary**

The article presents the results of a survey carried out by teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages of the Institute of Humanities at Mykolas Romeris University.

The paper continues an analysis of the Erasmus exchange programme students' cultural and language experience at universities in host countries. The first part of the research is presented in an article by Užpalienė and Vaičiūnienė (2012). The instrument of the conducted research was an interview composed of 20 open-ended questions delivered and collected online. For the analysis of the data, a qualitative research method (descriptive analysis) was applied. The target group of respondents were 20 Erasmus Exchange students of different Bachelor study programmes at MRU who studied in 13 exchange countries in 2010/2011. The study participants were coded by letters, therefore their names are not revealed in the paper.

The aim of the paper is to present the results of a survey of 2010/11 Erasmus Exchange students' experiences to study and live in multilingual and culturally diverse environment, on the basis of which to identify the languages of mobility, challenges and problems encountered during their studies in host countries due to the lack of language proficiency, subject requirements, unfamiliar or new environment, etc..

The results of the survey imply that the European universities taking part in ERASMUS

studijų dalyko reikalavimų, nepažįstamos ar naujos aplinkos ir kt.

Tyrimo rezultatai leidžia daryti išvadą, kad Europos universitetai, dalyvaujantys *Erasmus* programose, yra geras aukštojo mokslo institucijų bendradarbiavimo Europos Sąjungoje pavyzdys, kuris gali būti naudingas studentams jų profesinėse studijose. Kelių kalbų mokėjimas, profesinės užsienio kalbos įgūdžiai, įgyti MRU, lemia profesinių žinių lygį apskritai, geresnius įvertinimus studijuojant, taip pat padeda susipažinti su įvairiomis kultūromis ir praturtina asmeniškai, tai daro įtaką studentų požiūriui į gyvenimą ir studijas, gerina tarpkultūrinį supratimą tiek apie Europą, tiek apie likusį pasaulį. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia įvairių kalbų mokėjimo ir vartojimo poreikį mokantis ir kasdieniame gyvenime, suprantama, šie poreikiai glaudžiai susiję ir dažnai vienas kitą papildo. Respondentų atsakymų analizė leidžia pagrįstai teigti, kad anglų kalba buvo ir yra laikoma pasaulio *lingua franca*.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: daugiakultūre aplinka, daugiakalbystė, *Erasmus* mainų programa, kultūrinė įvairovė, tarptautinis ugdymas.

programmes are a good example of how the cooperation of higher education institutions of the EU Member States can benefit students in their professional studies. Multilingualism, skills of languages for specific purposes acquired at MRU lead to a higher level of professional competence, better assessments in study subjects, also help to learn about different cultures, enrich them personally, which influence students' attitude to life and studies, improve cross-cultural understanding both in Europe and in the rest in the world.

The obtained findings also suggest the demand and use of different languages both in study process and everyday communication which are closely related and complementary. In addition, the study shows that English was and is considered a global *lingua franca*.

KEY WORDS: multicultural environment, multilingualism, Erasmus exchange programme, cultural diversity, international education.

Įteikta 2012 m. liepos 15 d.