

# Cultural Noticing, Language Learning, and Sources of Tension During a Study Abroad Experience

## Activity Systems Analysis

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### Abstract

The study reported below traces the developing intercultural competence and foreign language communicative competence of a Polish sophomore student of chemical technology as she becomes a border crosser in Portugal. The theoretical perspective taken up in the present paper rests on Activity Theory (Leontiev 1976, Vygotsky 1984) and the research methodology is based on its outgrowth, namely the Activity Systems Analysis (Engeström 1987, 2001). The analysis of the accrued ethnographic data uncovered how the emerging tensions and contradictions experienced by the research participant helped her work towards minimising them, overcoming the disequilibrium and becoming a better, although still imperfect, intercultural speaker.

**Keywords:** *activity systems analysis, study abroad, foreign language education, intercultural competence*

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## 1. Introduction

Despite a general consensus among SLA scholars that international field experience affects the development of both foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence, there is a considerable disagreement as to the nature and extent of this influence. The precise impact of study abroad (SA) remains unclear. For one thing, the reported linguistic gains for SA participants seem to be quite modest, yet they encompass all aspects of communicative competence. Secondly, researchers systematically documented the gains in learners' interactional skills, particularly in terms of speech acts repertoire, register- and style-awareness and incorporation of more formulaic language than would have otherwise been difficult to achieve in classroom settings. Thirdly, increases in learners' intercultural competence have been widely reported, however with the proviso that individual characteristics play a major role in this respect (for a detailed overview see Kinginger 2009).

It is this proviso that initially inspired the present research. Treating SA participants as, perhaps not a homogeneous, but still a fairly consistent group of individuals with comparable cognitive, behavioural and affective profiles might often blur research results, particularly the quantitative ones. The problem has been addressed, among others, by Dörnyei (2005:2), according to whom the issue of individual variation poses certain difficulties to social sciences, not excluding educational studies. In fact, individual differences are the core of current SA research as, according to Coleman (2013: 25), a shift can be seen from product to process and from what is generalizable to what is complex and marked by personal variation. Despite different theoretical perspectives, present-day SA research (e.g. Jackson 2008, DeKeyser 2010, Allen 2013, Smolcic 2013) recognises the need to consider in-depth qualitative analysis of individual variation.

In this vein, the present article traces the development of intercultural competence of a Polish sophomore student of chemical technology, Joanna, taking her one-term-long SA programme in Portugal. Joanna came to the programme with very little intercultural experience and spent 5 months at Instituto Superior Técnico in Lisbon. The research began a month before her sojourn abroad and continued for two more months after her return to the homestay context. The data gathered in the course of semi-structured interviews conducted on-line and face-to-face, as well as obtained from Joanna's diary entries, offer insights into the complexities of living and studying abroad: both the linguistic and the intercultural ones. It is worth remarking at this point, that much of Polish SA research, however scant, concentrates predominantly on English philology students. These participants seem at a slight advantage over other SA participants as they are able to communicate in a *lingua franca*. For this reason, the case study presented below, may be of particular interest, considering that Joanna's expertise in Portuguese had been near-zero.

For the purposes of the study reported below, the present author chose to draw on activity systems analysis, which is a method for analysing data developed as an outgrowth of Vygotsky's Cultural Historical Activity Theory. In the course of the study, the interview and diary data has been analysed with recourse to tensions and contradictions emerging as a result of the subjects' interaction with the study abroad environments. These, in turn offered insight into the development of her intercultural competence and linguistics skills.

## 2. Literature review

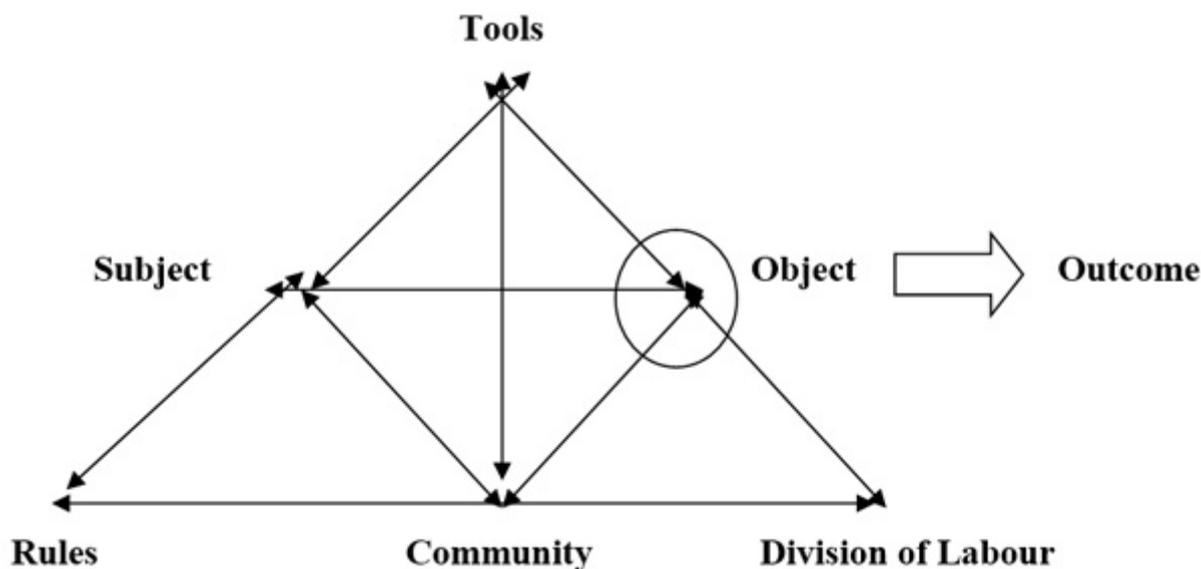
In this study, Activity Systems Analysis (ASA) is taken to evaluate the impact of international field experience on the development of a learner's intercultural competence and her foreign language abilities. ASA is a method of analysing human interactions in complex learning environments, i.e. "situations in natural settings where multiple individuals are involved in shared activities within a single or multi-organisational context" (Yamagata-Lynch 2010: vii). Without doubt, study abroad programmes can be defined as complex learning environments as learners find themselves in contexts that are culturally and socially foreign, have to interact with a multitude of people, and on top of which, they have to manage not only to function abroad, but also to *study* abroad.

The theoretical underpinnings of ASA are derived from Vygotsky's (1978) Cultural Historical Activity Theory (also known as socio-cultural theory, social constructivism, or activity theory), which is a theoretical perspective originating within the field of psychology that was further developed by Leontiev (1981), Kaptelinin (2005), Lantolf and Johnson (2007), and particularly by Engeström (1987, 2001, 2009). In fact, the idea of using human activity as a unit of analysis, which gave rise to ASA, was pursued by Engeström (1987) who provided insight into how to describe and interpret data from complex learning environments and how to map human interactions in natural settings. In a nutshell, an activity system comprises of individuals who function in communities in which there are roles to be played and rules to be followed, and who are shaped by various historical and cultural experiences. These subjects, as Kozdras et al. (2015: 192) explain, are engaged in mediated activities and use tools which help them move toward an object/ goal following a strict division of labour. The activity system is in a constant flux as it is continually reorganised in response to various tensions and contradictions (Smolcic 2013: 80).

Since Engeström's original conception of 1987, various scholars applied ASA in qualitative research to capture the processes of change in organisations, to design constructivist learning environments, and to identify tensions that stimulate changes in educational contexts (Yamagata-Lynch 2010: x). The advantages of using ASA stem from its ability to provide methods for comparing one human activity with another and, at the same time, to draw systematic implications between them. Researchers can organise their analyses of complex data sets in a valid framework while building reliable interpretations and work with manageable units of analysis (see Yamagata-Lynch 2010: 5-8 for discussion). In the present study, ASA is used primarily due to its ability to extract the essence of complex data in a neatly-organised graphic model that can be easily communicated to others.

Coming to terms with data from complex learning environments is always a challenging task for researchers and practitioners alike. ASA does not solve all the complicated issues but it helps bring a systematic framework for data collection and analysis. ASA is graphically represented as a series of

triangle diagrams. In the triangle diagram (see Fig. 1), there is a *subject* denoting the individuals or groups involved in the activity. The activity is motivated by an *object*. The subjects use various *tools* (e.g. social others or artefacts) which act as resources for them. The *rules* denote regulations that affect and delimit how the activity takes place. The activity takes place in a certain *community* that the subject belongs to. The tasks in the community are shared according to the *division of labour*. Finally, the *outcome* of the activity denotes its end result.



**Figure 1:** Activity system (adapted from Engeström 1987)

By way of illustration, Leontiev (1981 in Bennett et al. 2014: 598) evokes an example of a primeval hunt. The hunt is an activity in which there is a common shared objective of hunting prey so that it can be converted to food or clothing serving the purposes of the community. Although some of the hunters frighten the prey, and others catch it and kill it, there is a common goal for the whole activity, which gives meaning to their actions. The hunters are the subject of the activity and their object is to catch the prey. The tools they use are both physical (tools for hunting) as well psychological (understanding how to conduct the hunt). There are historically and culturally derived rules for hunting to be followed, and there is a strict division of labour. Any change within the system, according to Engeström (2009: 55), may lead to tensions and conflicts between the elements of the activity system. This may not necessarily be something negative but may lead to improvements and drive growth within the system.

In the study reported below, ASA has been chosen in order to explore the complex learning environment of SA which is ever-changing and evolving. The subject, a female sophomore taking part in the Erasmus+ [1] exchange, lives in a community whose participants achieve goals in various social activities. These activities are shaped by social, cultural and historical influences. The potential tensions and contradictions may lead to learning and change; the change can then lead to other tensions and contradictions, which can again be seen as opportunities for development. Following Smolcic (2013: 80), tensions have to become visible in order to act as drivers for change. An individual subject working towards change has to become conscious of them. This important step allows for locating the conflict, and then removing or resolving it.

Thus, in order to function successfully in a foreign environment, the subject of the present study has to become aware of any emerging tensions, e.g. cultural diversities between their mother and the host culture or her inadequate foreign language proficiency. Only then can she work towards minimising these tensions. The immersion context of the study will allow for showing how contradiction leads to learning and development and how disequilibrium stimulates transformation. Yet, it has to be borne in mind that the subject is always conditioned by her past experiences (be it cultural background, be it willingness to communicate or the strength of her motivation), as well as the mediational means at her disposal (such as the teaching materials or the participants of the community present in her learning milieu).

### 3. Research methodology

The present study was based on a case study, and its primary aim was to identify the tensions and contradictions experienced by a study abroad participant, Joanna, which provided her with opportunities for expanding her intercultural competence and develop her foreign language skills. More specifically, the study involved activity systems analysis for obtaining a clearer picture of Joanna's situation in the international field experience as well as for providing the reader with key data of this complex learning environment in a neatly-organised model. Apart from these two primary aims, the objective was to obtain a better insight into the general needs of border crossers, which in the future might add to creating better pre-sojourn training programmes.

#### 3.1. Participant

Joanna (name changed to ensure anonymity) was an undergraduate chemical technology student, aged 23, taking part in a semester-long Erasmus+ student exchange programme in Lisbon, Portugal. At the onset of the study in September 2015, Joanna was a student at University of Technology (Politechnika Poznańska) in Poznań, Poland, with no work experience and very little stay abroad or cross-cultural experiences. She was of Polish origin with a relatively long history of learning English as a foreign language (about 700 hours over 6 years) and even a longer record of learning German (over 1000 hours over twelve years). Despite this record, Joanna claimed to be more fluent in English as she did not have many opportunities to use German in practice. In her secondary school, Joanna has also learnt French at a beginner level for one year. Although she claimed she was unable to speak French, the rudiments of the language helped her in learning Portuguese during her stay abroad.

The SA programme was organised by her home university, but it had not involved any pre-sojourn training. The objectives of the programme were clearly academic ones focusing on obtaining credits in chemistry-related subjects. The outgoing Polish SA group comprised of Joanna and three of her fellow-students all of whom shared Polish as their first language and who did not speak any Portuguese. In Portugal, Joanna shared a rented flat with one of her Polish fellow students and a female Erasmus student from Italy.

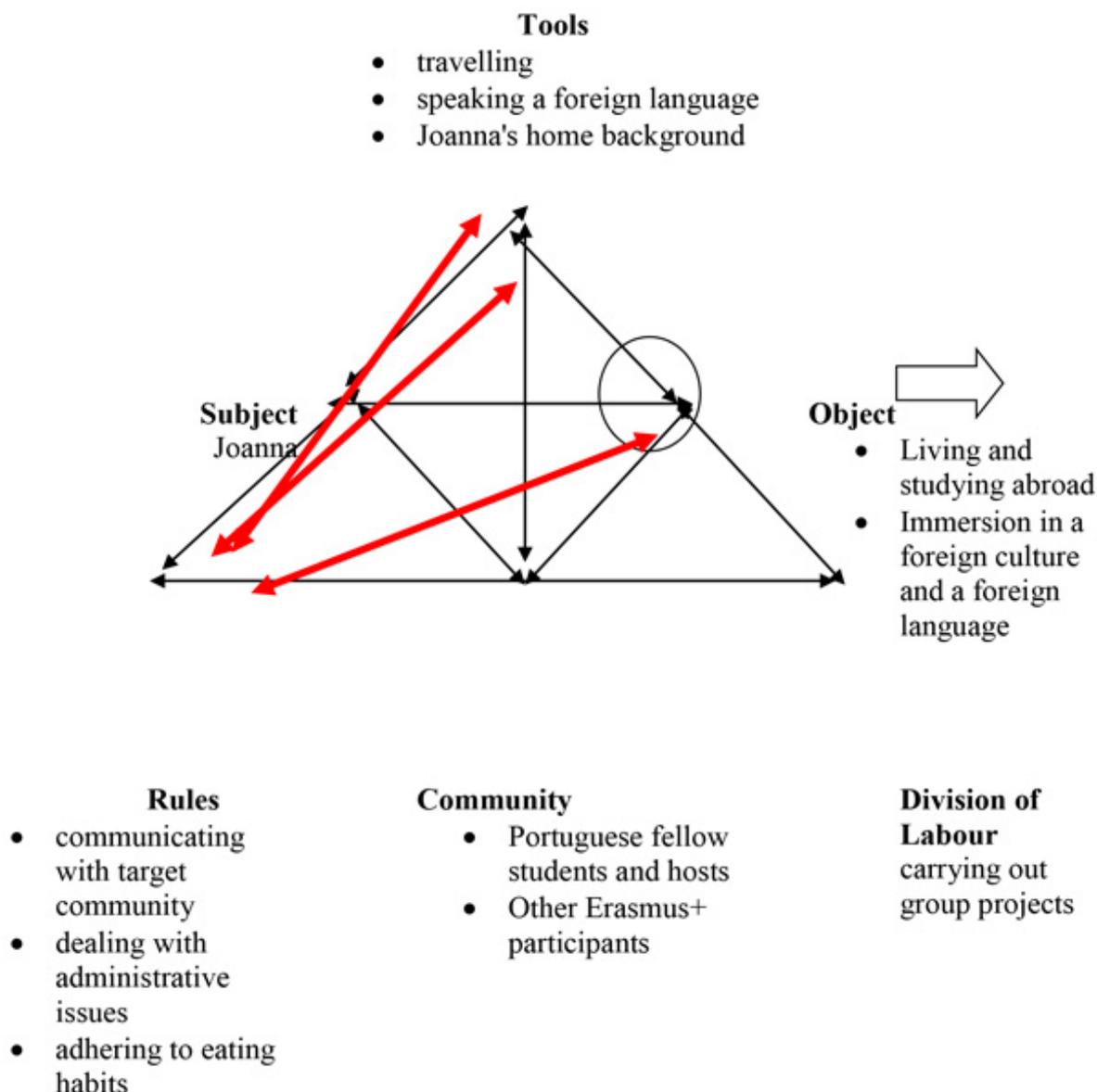
#### 3.2. Tools

The empirical data garnered in the present study were obtained through interviews and Joanna's journal entries. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with Joanna face-to-face shortly before and shortly after her sojourn and on-line during the time she was abroad. Her diary entries have been scanned and sent via e-mail to the author of the present study. Additionally, some pieces of information were acquired from informal e-mail conversations conducted with Joanna during the time of her study. The interviews, Joanna's diary and the emails had been conducted in Polish and then translated into English by the present author for the purposes of this article. The translation was double checked by the author's colleague to ensure reliability. The data were investigated using activity theoretical analysis (explicated in Hashim and Jones 2007). While it is rarely possible to understand the implicit motivations of a given participant (also for themselves), ASA can help, even if only partially, make the participant more conscious of the actions they execute. This was the main aim of conducting the interviews with Joanna.

#### 3.3. Results

##### 3.3.1. A conceptual map of Joanna's sojourn

In order to provide a clearer picture of Joanna's experience as a border crosser, a conceptual map in accordance with the tenets of ASA is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** A conceptual map of Joanna's sojourn

The subject of the study is Joanna, a 23-year-old student of chemical technology who made a very spontaneous decision to take up a SA programme. One day, as she was talking to her female classmate who was about to leave for Portugal for one term, Joanna became interested in the idea of studying in a foreign country. The classmate began to persuade Joanna to apply for the Erasmus+ programme even though it was past the application deadline. On the very same day Joanna applied at her university's coordinator office and her application turned out to be successful.

*It was not a decision I thought over, rather an impulse, but the truth is I had been thinking about studying abroad for some time before the application. I always wanted to travel and I was even more fascinated with the idea of living, working and studying in a foreign country. Not just visiting it for a couple of days, but living surrounded by a different culture and a different language, being able to truly experience all this. [Pre-sojourn interview 09/2015]*

The object of the activity systems for Joanna was to travel and immerse herself in a foreign culture. The community that offered her the possibility to realise her object comprised of her Portuguese fellow students and hosts as well as other participants of the Erasmus+ programme she met during her sojourn. There were various rules concerning her stay abroad, among which the most significant ones she remarked upon were communicating with the target community, coping with administrative duties, and adhering to foreign eating habits. The division of labour, which presents how power was distributed in Joanna's environment, required that Joanna participated in Erasmus+-related events and carried out group projects with other Portuguese students when she had to communicate in a foreign language. The main

tools that helped Joanna shape her experience and move towards her object were speaking in a foreign language, travelling and exploring the foreign culture and resorting to her past experiences (including her home background). The arrows in Figure 2 demonstrate major tensions and conflicts identified using ASA. Among these were her inability to speak Portuguese, participating in various cultural events, and her difficulties with handling administrative issues. These tensions are described in more detail in section 3.3.4.

### **3.3.2. Awareness of cross-cultural differences**

Joanna's choice of Portugal as her SA destination was based on purely pragmatic reasons. As she decided to apply at the very last minute, she only had a choice of three countries: Denmark, Finland and Portugal. She chose the last one as it was the cheapest, the warmest and the most unknown to her of all.

*I had not known much about Portugal before my departure so I let myself be surprised. Portugal appeared to be more than a right choice for me. [On-line interview 12/2015]*

Embarking on the Erasmus programme, Joanna hoped for discovering a foreign culture, learning a new language, visiting new places and making international friendships. All of her expectations were fulfilled.

Before her SA experience, Joanna had not had a lot of stay abroad experience. She had taken a few short trips abroad but she had stayed with other Poles and visited places rather than explored their customs and traditions. The use of foreign language in such situations had also been quite limited. Her first intercultural experience took place during a semester before she moved to Portugal. Three Turkish and two Spanish Erasmus students joined her university class and she became friends with them.

*It was a great experience to see that even if we come from different cultures, nothing stands in the way of building good rapport and making friends. I am still in touch with some of these people. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

During one of the online interviews Joanna described her typical day abroad. The first difference between Poland and Portugal she noticed was a different organisation of her university timetable. Her first classes began around noon, so she could sleep longer than in Poland. At the same time, the classes finished much later than in her home country, e.g. the intensive course of Portuguese as a foreign language she took up lasted until 9 p.m. every day. After that she went back home, ate dinner and went out with her flatmates to explore Lisbon.

As Joanna observed, everything starts later in Portugal than in Poland.

*In the morning they eat very quick breakfast, usually a cake and a coffee and usually in a cafeteria. Then there is lunch at about 1 or 2 p.m. And then they eat dinner called "jantar" around 8 or 9 p.m.! As time moved on I got used to this timetable and now it does not surprise me much. I live according to Portuguese standards. [On-line interview 12/2015]*

As regards her accommodation, Joanna and her Polish friend managed to rent a comfortable and relatively inexpensive flat from a Portuguese couple. They found the flat through a Portuguese website which was one of their first linguistic challenges as they spoke no Portuguese at all.

*The flat outlived our expectations. It is a three-bedroom flat with two bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room and a balcony with a view of the river Tag. It is really good as for a student accommodation. We have a really good relationship with our landlords, it began on the first day. Not only did they offer to pick us up from the airport at two a.m. and let our friends spend the night in the flat but they also gave us the keys and left us alone knowing only our names. This first meeting with the Portuguese surprised me how helpful and trusting they can be. [On-line interview 11/2015]*

When asked about the greatest benefits of her stay abroad, Joanna pointed first to travelling. She had not expected how many different places she would visit. The second benefit was making a lot of international friends with people from her university. Owing to the fact that Instituto Superior Técnico in Lisbon takes part in various SA programmes (e.g. Kic, Erasmus Mundus), Joanna had the opportunity to meet students from all over the world.

*The amount of foreign students was really impressive. At times, more than half of the students were international students. I must admit that the possibility of meeting all these people from different cultures and environments really opens one's eyes and broadens one's horizons. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

In one of the interviews Joanna claimed that there was no better way to learn about cultural mechanisms than through active participation in cultural events. Her SA programme provided her with plenty of opportunities for cultural immersion, from socialising with her university friends, to making friends during her evening outings and talking with her landlords, and to hitchhiking through Portugal.

*I think contact with other people is more important than travelling. When you see new places with a guidebook in your hand you only discover things superficially and it does not give you any chance to find out what life really looks like in a different culture. But a true contact with a foreign culture is a remarkable experience. [On-line interview 12/2015]*

It was difficult for Joanna to point to the one thing which interested her most in Portuguese culture.

*First of all, the Portuguese lifestyle and their timetables. Secondly, their extraordinary openness and straightforwardness. I know I should not generalise and that everything depends on one's personality and you can come across more and less open people in various cultures. But I have a feeling that all the Portuguese people are friendly and open in the same way. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

Joanna described her experience of dealing with administrative duties when on one particular occasion she and her Polish friend had to visit the dean's office a couple of times.

*When we went to the lady again, tired of all this running about, instead of getting angry with us, she said: "Relax! You're not in Poland. You're in Portugal! Here we have sun, here we have beach, so relax!" And then she asked us what we liked to eat and she took us to a hamburger restaurant. She just left her work and took us for a hamburger. It was a shock! [Diary entry 10/2015]*

According to Joanna, the most effective strategy for discovering a new culture was simply asking her Portuguese friends about things which were unclear for her. Meeting new people came quite naturally for her and she established greatest rapport with her classmates with whom she spent long hours working on university projects. She also met a lot of people on events organised by the Erasmus+ coordinator. Despite a few minor clashes and misunderstandings, she could not recollect any major arguments or people with whom she had bad relationships.

### **3.3.3. Learning a foreign language**

Joanna had not spoken Portuguese before she went to Portugal on her SA programme. It was for this reason that the major problems she experienced abroad were language-related. Initially, she felt a strong communicative barrier which made it difficult for her to start speaking in a foreign language and to recall the few Portuguese expressions she had learnt before her departure. Obviously, comprehending Portuguese was another difficulty.

*Their speech was just a flow of sounds. I could not make out a single word. I felt so frustrated. I tried really hard but I could not understand them and they could not understand*

*me. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

The strategy Joanna adopted in the first week was pretending to understand Portuguese. This goes to say she invented a certain scheme of answers in typical communicative situations.

*In a supermarket, for example, the first question at the checkout was about the shopping bag – "o saco". So whenever I heard "o saco" I answered "sim". The next question included the word "cartão", i.e. a customer card, and I answered "não". Sometimes, there was a third question in which I could not make out any word but I always answered "não" because it was probably about a receipt. After all this you only had to pay and say goodbye like a true Portuguese: "obrigada, boa tarde!". The situation became more complicated if there was another question and judging by the look on the cashier's face, my response was not the one she expected. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

Gradually, Joanna understood her Portuguese interlocutors better. Doing the shopping, dealing with administrative issues, and travelling helped her overcome her communicative barrier. Joanna recalled one of the hitchhiking trips that she took to Spain where she had no chance to communicate in English and had to speak with a "broken Portuguese", as she said. The experience made her realise it was more important "what" to say than "how" to say it and from then on she tried to speak Portuguese every day, although it was very basic and ungrammatical, and despite the fact that the Portuguese people tried to speak to her in English, when they realised her Portuguese was imperfect.

Having come to Portugal, Joanna and her Polish friend took up an intensive course of Portuguese as a foreign language which lasted for six weeks and took two hours every day. Despite the fact that English is quite popular in Portugal there were situations in which speaking Portuguese proved indispensable. In Joanna's words, "it would be a shame not to use the opportunity and learn Portuguese at a decent level". Simultaneously with learning the language on the course, Joanna increasingly used it in various out-of-class situations. These authentic communicative situations motivated her the most. The same was also true of situations in which the Portuguese wanted to communicate with Joanna in their mother tongue. Joanna's Polish friend additionally motivated her to learning the language and the Italian flatmate, who was a student of both Spanish and Portuguese philology, was also a person Joanna could rely on in situations of linguistics problems.

*I think that knowing a language is very important in learning culture. Culture is inextricably related to the language of a country. It is much easier to find your place in a foreign culture when you understand at least the basic words. It helps to understand the things that surround you. I think it is impossible to learn a culture without understanding its language. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

### **3.3.4. Major sources of tension and conflict**

In the course of analysis of Joanna's interviews and journal entries, the author of the present research managed to identify three areas which caused the biggest tensions for Joanna. These were, first of all, language problems, secondly, coping with some cultural customs (e.g. eating habits, observing the practice of "praxe", timetables), and thirdly, her difficulties with handling administrative issues.

Joanna's language barrier has already been discussed in the previous subsection. At the beginning of her stay, she struggled to get her messages across in a foreign language. She often resorted to English, which she speaks quite fluently, yet there were times when either her interlocutors did not speak English, or her English proficiency was not high enough to communicate easily. For example, Joanna expressed a surprise with the level of English proficiency among Portuguese students who not only took all classes in English but also performed various projects and delivered public presentations in the language.

For Joanna, the Portuguese lifestyle was the first noticeable difference between her mother and the target culture and it initially caused some tension between her previous life experience and the reality of living abroad. For instance, Joanna mentioned Portuguese eating habits which were very peculiar for her at first.

*A combination of rice and French fries or crisps was something unthinkable in the first weeks. And then there was lunch. Eaten at the same hour every day. My Polish attitude of eating when I am hungry was met with astonishment. When there is lunch time in Portugal you have to eat lunch. And this is it. You cannot arrange a meeting to complete a project at lunch time, the Portuguese objected to it. [On-line interview 12/2015]*

The time of the day when meals were eaten was also a problem at first.

*Nobody understood when I said I ate dinner at 3p.m. and then I just ate sandwiches for supper and nothing more. In Portugal dinner is eaten at 8 or 9 p.m. and then people go out, usually around midnight, sometimes at 1 or 2 a.m. And then the party lasts until morning. If you stay home you are entitled to one more meal called "ceia", around midnight. In comparison with our Polish lifestyle this was unthinkable. But then we got used to it and we also did everything much later. We lived according to Portuguese standards. [On-line interview 12/2015]*

With regards to her host university, Joanna found it surprising that so many subjects were theoretical, unlike in Poland, where her university offered a lot of hands-on experience. Also the way university teaching is organised in Portugal was something that Joanna noticed as a cultural difference. Unlike in Poland, all the subjects can be chosen by a student, so everyone can plan their own timetable. Moreover, Joanna was surprised that all of the subjects were conducted in English. This was obviously due to the high amount of international students, yet Joanna found it odd that the Portuguese students had to become accustomed to being taught in English. Additionally, Joanna considered Portuguese task-based teaching as a very good idea.

*There are many projects, presentations and group work on all the subjects. The Portuguese students are really well-prepared to making public presentations, also in English. And this is true not only of the best students. I am also surprised that all the lectures are made available to students online and the lecturers give us access to exams from previous years! In Poland, the way we are taught makes it impossible even to take notes, not to mention being given access to past exams, this is unthinkable. Still, there was too much theory and I cannot imagine studying chemical technology only theoretically. [Diary entry 12/2015]*

Dealing with administrative matters proved to be another source of tensions. Joanna described some of her negative experiences when handling the formal aspects of her SA programme often left her strained. It appears, however, that most of these problems were related, again, to her low language proficiency.

What also intrigued Joanna in the Portuguese culture, and appeared to be a source of some stress, was the practice of the so-called "praxe". Praxe is a ritual in which university freshmen undergo a series of tasks imposed upon them by older students. Luckily for Joanna as an Erasmus+ student she was excluded from this long-standing tradition.

*For the whole of the first week, the freshmen were excused from classes because they had to go through "praxe". Instead of learning, they were chased around the university square and had to do what the older students told them to do. Sometimes they had to dance, sing, jump, or crawl in mud. But "praxe" also has a darker side. There were cases when freshmen were forced to eat grass and they had to go to hospital. There were also cases when some students drowned in the ocean while performing one of the "praxe" tasks at night. [Post-sojourn interview 1/2016]*

As "praxe" took place at the beginning of Joanna's stay in Portugal, she found it as a quite stressful experience. Even though she did not have to participate, she felt the tradition was too cruel, even though a "milder" version of "praxe" can also be observed at Polish universities.

## 4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to use ASA to analyse the individual trajectory of a Polish student crossing borders in order to live and study in Portugal for one term. A considerable benefit of employing ASA framework lies primarily in allowing the researcher for clear organisation of the complex data. Each component of the activity system (i.e. subject, tools, division of labour, etc.) helped to encapsulate Joanna's experiences and communicate key ideas in the article. It is also the author's hope that ASA used in the present study will help the readers understand the complexity of Joanna's sojourn and perhaps inspire research in their field of study. Furthermore, the creation of the conceptual map (Figure 2) helped to clearly mark areas which caused the greatest tensions.

The data accrued from Joanna's diary entries and interviews conducted with her provided insights into the development of her intercultural competence. This development is obviously marked by individual variation, yet the findings of the study may serve to provide implications regarding pre- and post-sojourn intercultural training among future SA participants. What came clearly into focus in this study was the issue of the inseparability of language and culture. The participant stressed more often than not the relationship between speaking a foreign language and participating in the culture of its speakers. The sheer experience of sightseeing and visiting a foreign country is not enough to truly experience its culture. Joanna often underlined how cultural misunderstandings had been resolved by her through asking the Portuguese to explain to her the inner workings of the culture. Had it not been for her inquisitiveness and her drive to learn Portuguese, a lot of dissonance she felt would not have been cleared.

The study shed light on the importance of flexibility and ambiguity tolerance in intercultural contacts. Many of the tensions which appeared during Joanna's sojourn were resolved due to Joanna's ability to adapt to new situations. Living according to "the Portuguese standards", such as waking up late, changing her eating habits, or adapting to different educational system caused initial discomfort for Joanna. Yet, as time went by, Joanna engaged in the Portuguese "rhythm" and began to treat what first came as a surprise, as something natural.

Although Joanna's stay abroad took only one school term, she can be seen as an example of a successful border crosser. What helped her during her sojourn was the fact that she is a person eager to experience new situations and likes establishing relationships with new people. She has a very good memory and a certain flair for languages. Sometimes she managed to find analogies between Portuguese and other languages she spoke, so her increased language awareness was also beneficial. Overcoming the initial language barrier, and reaching the conclusions that it is more important "what" to say rather than "how" one says it seems to be a milestone that opened Joanna even more to the new culture and provided a window for more insight into its intricacies.

A study abroad context is a drastically different learning environment to the one already known to learners before their sojourns. First of all, it is *study*, but it is a study which lacks the typical classroom elements. The peers do not provide the sojourners with the archetypical classroom discourse norms, i.e. there may be no scaffolding, negotiation of form may be rarer or the interlocutors may simply not wish to sustain interaction. There are also no learning goals established by a teacher, so the learning hinges to a great extent on learners' own motivations. In order to learn about a foreign culture or to improve one's language skills, the learners have to constantly set themselves targets, reflect on their achievement and stimulate their willingness to learn. Yet, as numerous studies have already shown (e.g. Bernaus, Moore & Avezedo 2007 or Williams 2004 in: Allen 2013: 48) as the cognitive burden increases, a learner's motivation tends to weaken.

Furthermore, the situation described in the present article is an *abroad* context, which in itself generates substantial strains. Many sojourners may lack enough analytical abilities to get insight into the inner workings of a foreign culture. Their intercultural competence develops (or not) in intercultural encounters, thus creating a danger that any negative experience may lead to abandoning the learning goals or even to creating hostile attitudes towards the target community. Thus, paradoxically, the SA participants can autonomously become more interculturally competent only if they already evince intercultural competence. This is clearly a case with Joanna, whose successful participation in a study

abroad programme required no guidance or support on the side of a more knowledgeable/ experienced other.

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