THE EFFECT OF SHORT TERM ERASMUS+ TEACHER TRAINING COURSES ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES – THE CASE OF FOUR TEACHERS[1]

Ildikó Furka and Borbála Johnsen
Óbudai Secondary School, Budapest
ildifurka@hotmail.com   borbala.johnsen@gmail.com

Abstract

The present research is an investigation into how, if at all, the personal development and professional competences of secondary education foreign language teachers are affected by a complex input abroad such as a short term Erasmus+ Mobility program. It was assumed that spending time abroad in a different cultural and professional environment may serve as a certain kind of input, more precisely a stressor (Bennet, 1986; Selye, 1966) for anyone. How they cope with it inadvertently influences the outcome of their professional development. While the effect of long-term input abroad has been widely researched (within expat literature, ESL and culture shock studies, etc.), the impact of short-term mobilities has not been explored. The aim of the present research is therefore to explore if such an input has any effect, and if yes, what kind of effect it exerts in personal and professional life. The research approach is explorative (Creswell, 2007) and participatory action research (MacDonald, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2015). The participants were foreign language teachers with a minimum teaching experience of 15 years. Each participant took part in a two-week course. Three instruments were used: the psychological immune system was measured by the Psychological Immune System Inventory (PISI) used in a pre- and post-test format (Oláh, 2004); an emotional intelligence (EI) self-evaluation inventory (Neale, Spencer-Arnell, & Wilson, 2009); and finally open-ended (Dörnyei, 2007; Kvale, 1996) reflective interviews (Roulston, 2011) were carried out to supplement the numerical data of the first two inventories (Turner, 2010; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). The results show changes in the coping preferences and EI tendencies of the participants, in which the course experiences were reflected. These changes are expected to appear in the participants' professional competences after having reintegrated into their home culture.

Keywords: psychological immunity, emotional intelligence, cultural experiences, teacher competence development, coping

1 Introduction

Travelling abroad and getting to know the world is important these days for any European or global citizen but for a language teacher, it is vital from time to time. Continuous professional development, refreshing teaching skills and staying up-to-date in a multi-cultural environment are essential to prevent burn-out and compassion fatigue, especially for teachers with long years of experience, otherwise leaving the profession might occur (Koenig, 2014). The rationale for this research project stemmed from personal experience. One of the authors lived abroad for a substantial period, and has been a practicing teacher for more than 15 years. The other has been living in a multicultural professional and personal environment, and has

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been a practicing psychologist for years having worked in a compulsory educational environment. Both have experienced all the vicissitudes of multicultural situations. Therefore, when participation in an Erasmus+ teacher-training course abroad arose, the occasion provided the opportunity to investigate how studying abroad (SA) during a short period of time affects the stimulation and professional development of the participants. The premise of the research project was that spending time abroad in a different cultural and professional environment serves as a stressor for any participant (Bennett, 1986). How this stress is coped with will inadvertently influence the outcome of the professional development by the means of psychological changes. Therefore, the aim was to explore the occurring psychological changes in the participants during a short SA program in terms of psychological immunity and emotional intelligence.

2 Theoretical background

The research project aimed at investigating personal changes as a result of spending time abroad, so we first created an analytical structure of the examined process which functioned as an operational framework. The elements of the analytical structure were labelled as the *setting* of the expected change, which was the SA trip; the *input* that triggered it, which was the stress of being abroad in an unknown environment; the *reaction* of the participants to the input, i.e., the coping strategies the participants employed; and the *outcome* of the whole process, which was reflected in how they viewed their experiences after coming home. The elements of the analytical structure are thoroughly explored in the literature review below.

2.1 The setting

Study abroad (SA) programs have been investigated from many angles. Some of them include the impact of SA on university students' and teachers' careers (Janson, Schomburg, & Teichler, 2009). Others concern themselves with primary school teacher trainees going abroad before starting their professional lives, and how this experience helps them acquire the necessary skills to become a teacher (Driscoll, Rowe, & Thomae, 2014). Yet others focus on how a teacher's self-perception might change after having experienced studying abroad (Wang, 2014).The present research project focused on the European Erasmus+ Mobility program which has provided opportunity for students, teachers and other partakers of the educational field to travel, learn, and grow professionally and personally. The professional value of Erasmus mobilities has been examined closely in several investigations concerning the participants' marketability and skills acquired (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Bracht, Engel, Janson, Over, Schomburg, & Teichler, 2006; or Engel, 2010). The focus of this paper, as opposed to these earlier investigations, was on psychological changes in secondary school teachers as a result of SA.

2.2 The input

It has been widely researched that spending time abroad or moving to another country for a substantial period of time induces the process of acculturation. For Brown (1986) this is the process of learning a second language, but Young and Gardner (1990), Gardner and Lambert (1959), and Schumann (1986) use the term *acculturation* "in a broader sense to refer

to social and psychological contact with speakers of the target language" (p.386). Second language acquisition research identified the stages of acculturation as euphoria, culture shock and adaptation (Brown, 1986). Schumann (1986) identifies culture shock as

> the anxiety resulting from the disorientation encountered upon entering a new culture. When moving into a new culture, the learner finds himself in a dependent state. The coping and problem solving mechanisms that he has at his disposal often do not work. (p.383)

Spradley and Phillips (1972), Bennett (1986) and Chen (1999) also consider acculturation as a process that is a type of stressor that pushes the individual to choose a path of reaction. In Schumann's acculturation model (1986), the second language learner may react in three ways to being in an unfamiliar culture as a means of coping with stress: he/she may adapt to the target culture, reject it or assimilate into it. Spradley and Phillips (1972) categorize adaptive responses as 'nativistic', 'accultured' and 'bicultural'. Furthermore, process theory development based on Piaget's ideas claims that being outside one's comfort zone, being in disequilibrium or dissonance provides an opportunity for growth and change (Boyle, 2003). It was postulated that participating in an Erasmus+ course SA program only lasting for two weeks may also induce disequilibrium in the participants, since the SA may serve as an analogous stressor to that of the experience of the acculturation process during a longer stay (Bennett, 1986).

2.3 The reaction

Research focusing on coping (Oláh, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Krohne, 2002) investigates individuals' reaction to different stressful situations. It is highly relevant in our investigation as our premise was that spending time abroad in a different cultural and professional environment serves as a stressor for the participants. Reaction to this stress may vary, it is either eustress or distress (Selye, 1966), but it is stress nonetheless. Preferences for coping in an individual are defined by his/her psychological immune system (Oláh, 2004) which is a complex cognitive resource pool of personality traits used to cope with demanding situations without damaging the person's developmental potentials. The construct of the psychological immune system denotes personality resources that help the individual cope with long term stress or manage threats successfully in a way that the personality's integrity, its functional efficacy and developmental potentials do not become damaged. Rather they become richer from the interiorization of the knowledge and experience accumulated by dealing with stress actively. In other words, one faces the problems and comes out feeling victorious, having achieved something.

In addition, the field of emotional intelligence (EI) research (Goleman, 1996) also deals with what kind of reactions individuals show when in demanding situations. As Bibi, Kazmi, Chaudhry and Khan (2015) put it: "Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, control and evaluate emotions and the ability to understand one's own emotions and the emotions of others" (p.81). EI may be divided into four major domains: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management (Goleman, 2001). It seems that people who have lower EI scores tend to have poor physical and mental health as well, and cannot cope with stressors (Batool, 2011). It has also been shown that different levels of emotional intelligence induce different styles of coping strategies, and there seems to be a significant relationship between problem solving abilities and the preferences for seeking

social support (Brink, 2009). Furthermore, higher EI is associated with higher satisfaction with life, and better perceived problem-solving coping abilities (Bastian, Burnsand, & Nettelbeck, 2005). For that reason, EI theory cannot be ignored when one is concerned with how an individual manages situations and life events when outside their comfort zones, as in the case of study abroad programs.

2.4 The outcome

As part of the *outcome* of SA, certain psychological states, namely, well-being and satisfaction come into play. Subjective well-being (SWB) is a general area of scientific interest, and it has been established that SWB is mostly a cognitive judgment and is connected to comfortable/uncomfortable experiences in life (Diener, 1984). However, what counts as happiness is a very complex issue. SWB research has been helpful in many fields from health care statistics (Kobau, Sniezek, Zack, Lucas & Burns, 2010) to helping adolescents avoid suicide (Garcia, 2010). Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith (1999) look at three decades of well-being research and claim that the original ideas that youth and modest aspirations contribute to the feeling of well-being should be considered obsolete because there are certain psychological factors such as coping strategies, life satisfaction and pleasant or unpleasant affects that determine more clearly how much people think they are well. Diener et al. (1999, p.274) define subjective well-being as "a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction". As such, the framework of SWB can be used to investigate life events that have an affective influence on one's state of mind at a given point in time. Being in another culture is considered a stressor (Spradley & Phillips, 1972) that causes the participant to experience a state of disequilibrium (Nadler, 2011). The appearance of stress evokes coping strategies in a person's behavioural repertoire which play a part in determining a person's well-being and satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1999). Therefore, a research design examining the effects of SA programs has to include satisfaction with life as part of SWB in its investigative focus.

3 Research design

The research design was explorative in nature since it was intended to identify any changes, factors, or key elements of the developmental process during the SA; so the design intended to cater for finding factors, changes and key elements as suggested by Creswell (2007). It was also participatory, as one of the researchers was also one of the participants (MacDonald, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, in order to be able to measure the *reaction* resulting from the *input*, a pre-test – post-test format was decided on in the case of the questionnaires applied (Bell, 2010). In addition, after the SA, which essentially formed the *input* between the two tests, psychological coaching sessions with the help of the reflective interview method defined by Roulston (2011) were employed with open-ended questions (Dörnyei, 2007) with the participants to highlight the *reaction* section of the analytical process. This allowed us to combine qualitative and quantitative type of research methods as deemed essential by Seliger and Shohamy (1989). The sessions served not only to provide thick description of the process in the sense Geertz (1973) used the term in as much as any information arising during the sessions added to the data, but also provided the possibility to analyse and to develop the participants' psychological state and processes. Finally, the design followed that of action learning process (Gifford, 2005), which is learning by doing (Revans, 1998, 2011): "Action learning aims to help participants learn from and resolve existing

issues" (Gifford, 2005, p.1). Gifford (2005) establishes seven key points that action learning is: (1) a way of learning by doing (2) based around the 'set', that is the situation to learn from, (3) it is as much a philosophy as a practice, (4) it focuses on problems not puzzles, i.e., it does not intend to find a single solution, (5) it is a developing field, (6) a loosely applied term, and (7) a high risk high gain situation, meaning if the learning process is ineffective, much time has been wasted with no results. But if it is effective, however, the gain is immense.

It is postulated that the SA program, the *setting* in our case, is very much learning by doing – one cannot grow or change in an SA situation if not experiencing it fully. This type of involvement is one of the basic descriptors of action learning theory. Another parallel between an SA and an action learning set is that both are unique and are provided by circumstances, forming the *input*, without the possibility of repetition. Another similarity with action learning processes is that there is no facilitator who would take control over the arising situations of the SA, just as an action learning facilitator does not intervene in the action learning process. Rather the participants have to find a solution on their own (Gifford, 2005), the *reaction* in our investigation. Finally, the high risk – high gain principle of action learning also seems to be a parallel trait with SA programs, because in both processes participants have to take individual responsibility of their decisions, the *outcome* of the process, and if those decisions turn out to be ineffective, the time, money and effort are all wasted.

4 Methods of data collection and analysis

Collecting the data and their analysis were carried out during the educational year of 2016/2017. To obtain ample data on the *reaction* section of our analytical structure, the psychological changes were measured with both quantitative and qualitative instruments. The quantitative instruments in the form of various psychological tests were all administered before and after the mobilities to reflect any changes. The first round of numerical data collection was carried out in June 2016, whereas the second was conducted in February 2017 after all four mobilities had been completed by October 2016. Data analysis of these tests took place after all the data had been collected. A psychological coaching session – in the form of a reflective interview – was carried out after the data analysis to have a more comprehensive *outcome* in the participants' psychological changes.

4.1 Participants and the input

The participants were four female teachers of English, Italian and Russian, aged 39 to 48, who had been sharing a common organizational culture for four years at the time of the SA. The minimum teaching experience of the participants was 15 years. Each participant took part in a two-week Erasmus+ teacher training course in the target countries of their expertise that aimed to refresh their language skills and their professional teaching repertoires. The participants had not had opportunity to partake in similar professional development as the Erasmus+ program is fairly new.

The four mobilities, i.e., the trips to another country and the experiences there, were considered the *input* part of the process. The actual course content and delivery was left out of the scope of the investigation, as the common variable was being abroad and some disequilibrium arising during the experience. It was the affective characteristic (Boyle, 2003) of the *input* that was focused on.

4.2 Instruments and research process

The *reaction* section of our analytical structure was measured by several inventories. Firstly, the psychological immune system inventory (PISI) (Oláh, 2004) is an 80-item Likert-scale instrument. Its 16 graduations were created to measure the constructs of (1) positive thinking, (2) the feeling of being in control, (3) the feeling of coherence, (4) self-respect, (5) the feeling of growing, (6) managing resources (flexibility, taking up challenges), (7) ability to monitor social resources (empathy, social monitoring), (8) ability to create resources (creativity), (9) ability to mobilize resources (self-efficacy), (10)ability to mobilize social resources (ability for social mobilization), (11) ability to create social resources (social creativity), (12) ability to synchronize, (13) steadfastness/resolution, (14) ability to control impulses, (15) emotional control, and (16) the ability to block irritability. The participants had to choose how much they felt the statements were true for them. Answers to each item were added up to form clusters based on which statement measured which construct. For instance, for positive thinking, items 1, 17, 33, 49, 65 had to be added up, and for the ability to control oneself items 2, 18, 34, 50, 66 had to be calculated. In this way, differences on each construct were possible to detect, and also the aggregate of the 16 constructs showed an overall psychological immunity index. The difference in the scores showed where changes occurred in the participants' psychological immune system. A standard average is available for each of the 16 constructs and for the aggregate sum as well. This can be used to compare the individual results.

The *Life Satisfaction Scale* (LSS) created by Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976) measures life satisfaction on a five grade Likert-scale. Items form a two-ended pole of opposing qualities. The poles were (1) boring – interesting, (2) unhappy – happy, (3) difficult – easy, (4) useless – valuable, (5) lonely – social, (6) empty – full, (7) full of joy – hopeless, (8) bound – free, (9) unsuccessful – successful, and (10) full of opportunities – lacking opportunities. The respondents had to mark the scales based on their own opinion of their life experience. In addition, the *Satisfaction With Life Scale* questionnaire was used (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985; Diener, 2006) which is also a short, five-item questionnaire where the respondents had to choose a number on a seven grade Likert-scale for each item. The items were the following: (1) In most ways my life is close to my ideal; (2) The conditions of my life are excellent; (3) I am satisfied with my life; (4) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life; and (5) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. As it takes very little time to fill in, this instrument has been hugely popular, and it is proven that it has high internal consistency and validity, and it has proven reliable over time as well (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976 as cited in "75 papír-ceruza teszt" [75 paper-pen test booklet], p.7). The scores of the items were simply totalled.

Furthermore, any possible change in the EI abilities of the participants was measured with a self-evaluating inventory of EI (Neale, Spencer-Arnell, & Wilson, 2009) in the four components as put forward by Goleman (2001). The inventory had four sections of self-respect, respecting others, self-awareness and being aware of others, with eight items investigating each section. The respondents had to choose how much they agreed with the statements on a five-grade Likert-scale. Scores for the four parts were added up separately to show the pre-state and the post-state EI index. The difference in these subcategories showed where the change occurred.

Finally, the last element of the analytical structure, the *outcome* phase was embodied in the psychological coaching sessions. Psychological coaching aims to increase the well-

being and satisfaction of the client both in their professional and personal lives through "helping to move the client into a meta-cognitive position, i.e., thinking about their thought processes in a more detached way" (Dunkley, 2017, p.2). Thus, the participants had the benefit of seeing the highlights of the *outcome* of the SAs, and were provided with any assistance they might have needed. The session was only carried out after the two rounds of data collection with the numerical instruments had been administered and the data had been analysed. The framework of the psychological coaching was a reflective interview (Roulston, 2011) of an open-ended type (Dörnyei, 2007). Therefore, the questions were designed based on the scores of the quantitative data. The interviews required the participants to be reflective. In this way, the sessions gave the opportunity for the participants to understand, elaborate and focus on the changes in their psychological and emotional disposition (see the theory on motivational interviewing in Hettema, Steele, & Miller, 2005). The core questions focused on four areas: (1) past experience (2) present professional circumstances and motivation for participation, (3) the scores of the inventories, and (4) summary questions and forward pointing questions to the future based on the experience of the SA.

5 Results

In the following sections, the scores of the inventories and the results of the reflective interview sessions are detailed separately one after the other. To ensure anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms (Emőke, Petra, Gizella and Ibolya) in the description below and in the discussion (section 6).

5.1 The *Psychological Immune System Inventory* results

Figure 1 shows the aggregate sums of PISI for each participant before and after the SA. The red columns indicate the pre-trip and the blue ones the post-trip state. As evident for each participant, there was an overall positive change that was reflected in the sum scores. The change for Emőke was 16 points in the aggregate, the change for Petra was 38 points, for Gizella it was 26, and for Ibolya it was a massive positive 82 difference.
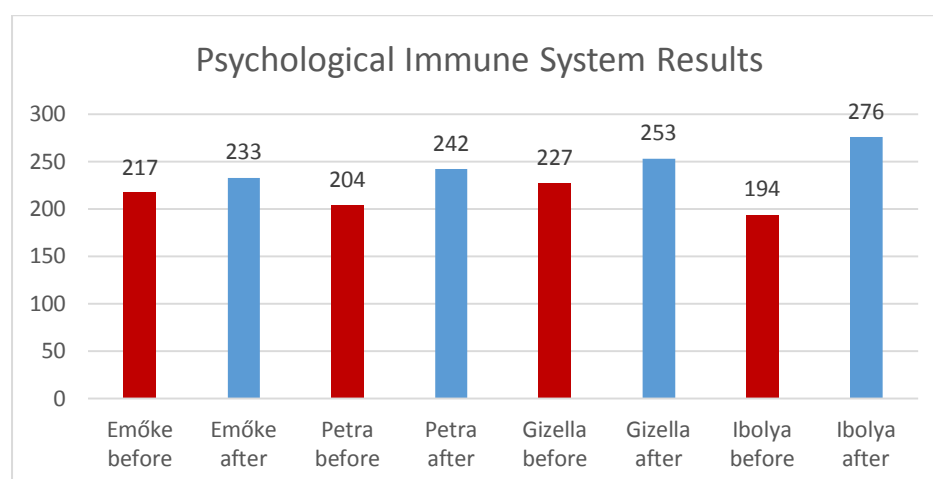

Figure 1. The Psychological Immune System Inventory (PISI) scores for the four participants before and after the SA

To illustrate this analysis, presented below in Figure 2 are Petra's PISI scores, followed by the description of how the PISI can be interpreted.
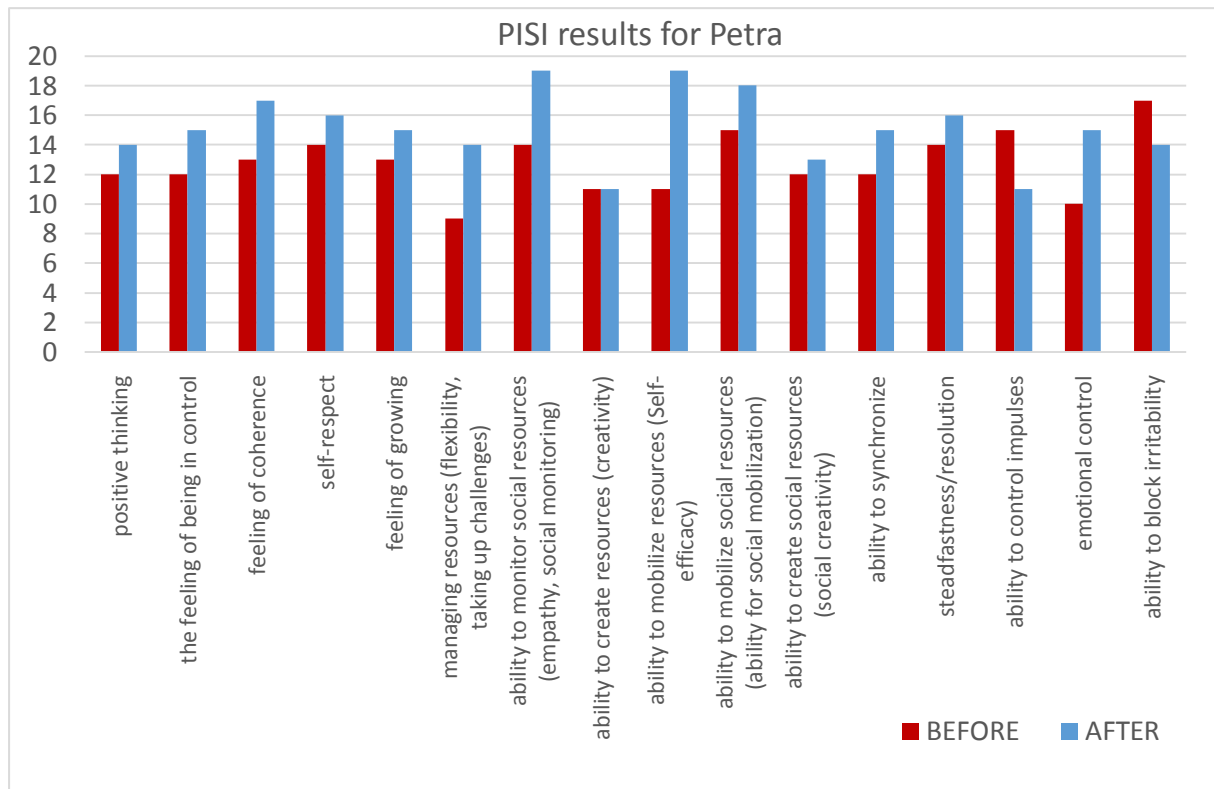
Figure 2. Individual changes in the 16 constructs of the PISI for Petra

In the case of Petra, except for the ability to block irritability and the ability to control impulses, all other PISI aspects changed positively. Major changes were shown in the ability to control her emotions (from score 10 to 15, standard: 13.8), in her ability to monitor social resources (empathy) (from score 14 to 19, standard: 13.8) and managing resources (flexibility and taking up challenges) (from score 9 to 14, standard: 14). In addition, her feeling of coherence changed from score 13 to 17 (standard: 16, the feeling of being in control from score 12 to 15 (standard: 13.9), steadfastness/resolution (from score 14 to 16, standard: 17.6), and her ability to synchronize with her surroundings (from score 12 to 15, standard: 14.8). Her biggest change was reflected in self-efficacy with a change from score 11 to 19 (standard: 14.7). The two negative changes on the ability to control impulses and to block irritability should be considered as positive ones because for the given participant the decrease in ability to control impulses turned out to be a liberating experience reflected in an increased score of self-efficacy. The analyses of the PISI in such a multifaceted and complex manner were supplemented by the methodology of psychological coaching. The analysis of the numerical data and the psychological coaching session made it feasible to consider the main possible consequences of the changes with the participant. The participants' reflection of the complex view of their PISI scores and the psychological coaching session's results helped deepen the developmental change induced by the SA. This was evident by the self-evaluation of the participants at the end of the sessions.

5.2 Results on the *Life Satisfaction Scale*

Figure 3 shows the *Life Satisfaction Scale* (LSS) (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976) scores. The score for each item was added up to form an aggregate sum and was compared before and after the trip.
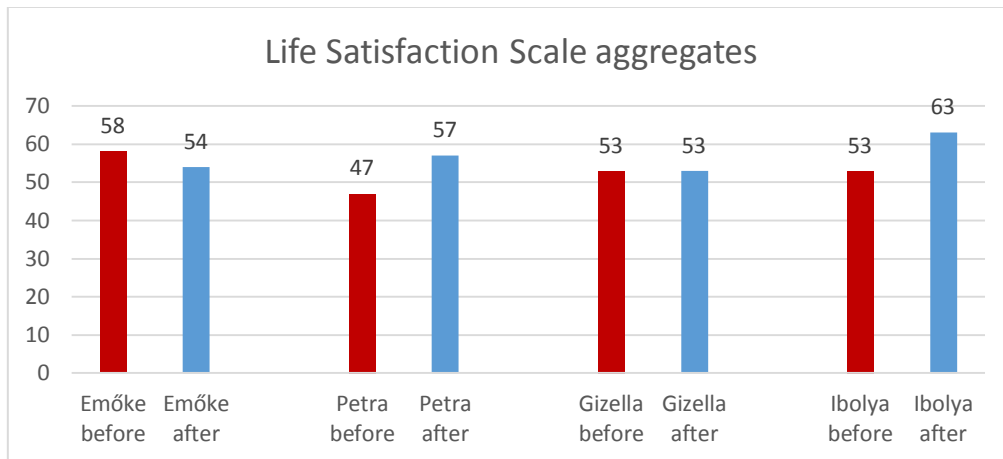
Figure 3. Life Satisfaction Scale scores (aggregates)

The aggregates are used to show the tendency in subjective well-being and life satisfaction. There were two cases of positive change for Gizella (from score 47 to 57) and Ibolya (from 53 to 63). Gizella showed no change, whereas Emőke showed a slight negative change on LSS. Again, the details in tendencies were discussed during the psychological coaching with the participants. Overall, even the negative or no change scores had significance in the developmental process of the participants just as in the case of the PISI scores, since the psychological coaching sessions provided an opportunity to discuss why the scores turned out to be as they did. Making the participants reflect on the scores and what could have caused them provided insight into the psychological state and process of the participants, thereby presenting the possibility for the participant to formulate their own conclusions on the processes. Such a reflective, retrospective and inclusive psychological coaching procedure enhanced the *outcome* of the input.

5.3 Results of the *Satisfaction With Life Scale*

For the *Satisfaction With Life Scale* (Diener, et al., 1985) Figure 4 shows the individual participants' aggregate scores of the five items of the inventory. All four participants showed a slight increase in satisfaction.
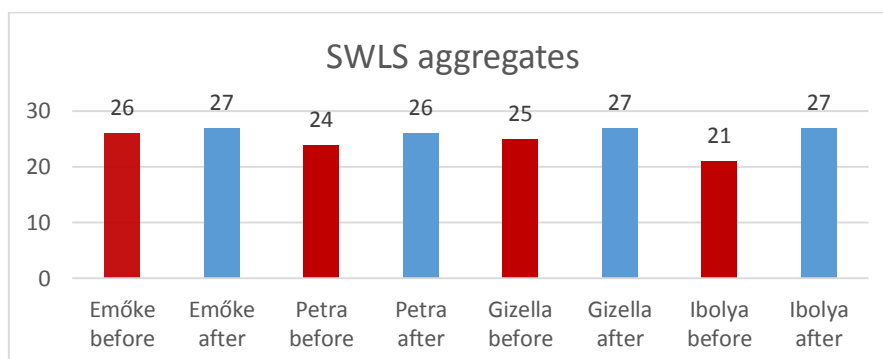

Figure 4. Satisfaction With Life Scale aggregates

Overall, as it is shown in sections 5.2 and 5.3, the inventories included were well-being scales focusing on different aspects of subjective well-being (SWB). Whereas scores of

the first do not reflect clear satisfaction, the other does represent overall satisfaction. So here, as well as with the scores of the PISI, the need for an interdisciplinary complex interpretation of the scores was evident. This was attempted during the psychological coaching sessions, the result of which are presented in section 5.5.

5.4 The results of the *Emotional Intelligence Inventory*

Figure 5 shows the scores for the *Emotional Intelligence Inventory* taken from Neale, Spencer-Arnell, and Wilson (2009).
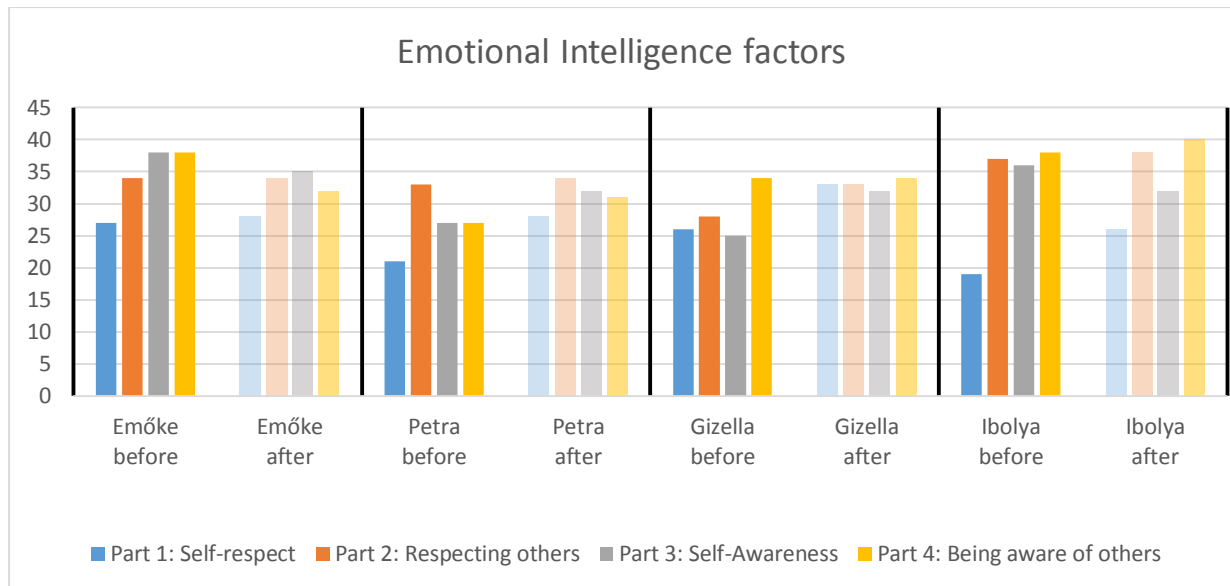

Figure 5. Emotional Intelligence Inventory scores in the four sections

It is possible to detect an overall increase in EI scores in all four areas of self-respect, respecting others, self-awareness and being aware of others for Petra, Gizella, and Ibolya. Emőke showed a decrease in the sections of self-awareness and being aware of others but an increase in self-respect and respecting others. For Ibolya self-awareness decreased. The need for a multifaceted view of managing changes was also obvious in the analysis of this inventory, which happened with the psychological coaching.

5.5 The results of the reflective interview sessions

All the participants embarked on the SA mobility firstly with the assumption that being abroad is highly important for language teachers, secondly, with the goal to update their language use, and finally, with the aim to refresh their array of teaching methods. Their expectations were all fulfilled in these areas, so all the participants experienced the SA as a successful enterprise. They highlighted, among other things, (1) how good it was to be able to work with a community in the host culture, and (2) how relieving it was that the other participants' level of knowledge was minimum at the same level with theirs, but they mostly felt higher qualified than the other participants. These two factors helped them feel comfortable. In addition, they also mentioned how refreshing it was to be in a different cultural environment and to experience how one culture integrated another. As Gizella noted in her interview: "*It was good to see how accepting the Latvians were. It suggested that I can*

dare to be myself". Furthermore, all the participants expressed that they came home with at least one new technique of methodology, and said they would want to use or had already used this new technique in their regular teaching, even though their current professional environment was restricted by regulations and limitations of physical conditions compared to what the participants would find useful and effective with their students. What is more, all the participants revealed how good it was to have a generously funded educational trip, which gave them a sense of complete freedom to participate in costlier extracurricular activities otherwise out of their monetary reach.

As a further point, two out of the four participants said they would need to learn more about using multimedia in their classes as there are an increasing number of students with different learner attitudes and learning abilities. Based on the knowledge they acquired at the courses, they felt that making use of digital devices and materials in their teaching practice would help fit the material and learning process to their needs more easily. Additionally, all the participants reported forging professional relationships, friendships, or other types of social contacts that they could use in their pedagogical work in the future. Two out the four participants mentioned how good it would be for their students to have pen pals in the future from the countries of the SAs they attended.

Most importantly, all the participants expressed how their motivation to keep teaching was strengthened by the fact that participants from other countries reported encountering similar difficulties in their compulsory education environment, for instance, the general tendency for demotivation of secondary school students or the lack of professionally motivated colleagues, and through meeting professionals motivated and involved in their professional lives. For example, one of the teachers teaching a generally less favoured foreign language even felt especially valued by experiencing that her taught language had a high level of professional recognition by the SA participants. Furthermore, all the participants voiced that adapting to the target culture was indeed an issue, albeit a positive one for these participants. In one case it was exceptionally liberating. Ibolya said that "*it was natural and comforting to be there as opposed to being in a constant cultural conflict at home in the classroom*", with which she expressed her frustration over the cultural differences of her home culture (Hungarian) and the culture she teaches through her subject (English). Nevertheless, in all four cases adapting to the host culture was reported as a successful experience. Adaptation is considered to require effort (Krohne, 2002), but the stress of adaptation can work as eustress, as it was the case with these participants.

Overall, all the participants expressed their wish to take part in an Erasmus SA again, but not every year. They felt that every two or three years would be enough to cope with the preparation for the SA and going through the experience. This seems to reveal the fact that the SA did indeed function as a stressor, and even though the participants found it highly beneficial altogether, they also experienced it as a psychologically, emotionally and professionally demanding challenge.

6 Discussion

It may be stated with considerable confidence that all the data collected with the instruments show the same tendency, namely, that the SA did, in fact, have a positive and forward propelling effect on the participants' personal and professional development. The PISI aggregate scores increased, which reflects a stronger psychological immune system for

each participant, supposedly because of the SA. The LSS and SWLS scores increased in general, which reflects a general increase in the subjective well-being of the participants. The EI scores also highlight a positive difference in the level of emotional intelligence after the SA. The tendency of positive change in all the scores suggests a connection between the strengthening of the coping preferences (PISI), the subjective well-being (LSS and SWLS), the enhanced EI qualities of the participants, and how they experienced the SA.

The psychological coaching sessions were a great asset, as they provided an opportunity to further explore the numerical data. With the participants' reflection on the areas where the changes in the quantitative scores occurred, a fuller picture of the psychological processes emerged. What is more, it was possible to give the participants tangible feedback on what the changes in the numerical data reflected. The numerical changes indeed turned out to parallel the participants' emotional experiences during the SA. By carrying out the psychological coaching, the experiences the participants were subjected to during the SA were raised from the emotional to the cognitive level (Dunkley, 2017), so the experience became integrated into the resources of the personality in order to be effectively reachable in the future. Thus, the coaching feedback made the change in coping strategies more complex and in the psychological status of the person more substantial.

For each participant, the focus of the psychological coaching and the analyses of their numerical inventories were different. As Emőke explained, she experienced some degree of self-centeredness during the SA, which she felt was greatly needed after concentrating on her students and family for a long period of time. The SA for her served as a recharging process, which was clearly reflected in her scores. What she had to face in her teaching was a change from an environment full of motivated students (language school, mostly adults as students) to the less motivated group of high school students. For her, the SA and the psychological coaching served as prevention of leaving her current work environment. She realized that it was not only her fault if she felt unsuccessful but that her students also brought a certain attitude to the learning process.

For Gizella both the SA and the focus of the coaching were about mental health care. Being a more experienced teacher, it was positive for her to experience that she had been doing her job at a more than acceptable level so far. She received positive feedback on her work through meeting colleagues from around the world who also teach the same subject. It was essential for her to see her professionalism as grounded enough, as she had been developing doubts about her fading knowledge of the target language. As a result, her self-evaluation increased by the end of the coaching session.

For Petra the SA experience and the interview focused around actual burn out treatment. With the help of the different instruments and their analysis, she became open to realizing her maladaptive coping strategies that had been sending her down the path of burn out. By conducting the psychological coaching with her, it was possible to start to change her coping strategies and pull her back from the feeling of complete burn out. Her case highlighted in the most effective way why psychological coaching should be necessary and beneficial after such SA trips.

For the last participant (Ibolya) the focus was a change in awareness of her self-awareness level. She needed to understand that her impressive changes in scores on the instruments as a benefit of going through the SA experience stemmed from the fact that she seemed to be able to be authentically herself in an unknown environment. Her need to live up

to expectations lessened, she was able to go with the flow more when out of her comfort zone. As a result, she felt less caged in by rules – which she often sets for herself. This resulted for her in a personal experience of freedom, of letting it all go, making the SA a liberating experience. The realization of having had an invigorating experience came for her when she returned to her home environment where she was faced with her 'home' self of self-imposed restrictions. According to her, the psychological coaching session helped her manage her self-development better than if she had not had such an analysis of the inventories' scores and the processes behind them.

7 Limitations and future prospects

The first and foremost limitation of the present study was its scope. Four participants with the same organizational and cultural background is not a wide sample. The research design did not intend to come up with generalizable results and conclusions, but rather to gain an understanding of the effects of two weeks of SA experienced by these four participants, as described by case study methodology (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). It was revealing to see the changes in the participants' minds as they verbalized their experiences and feelings, and how with the help of the verbalization those became an essential part of their professional developmental processes.

A second limitation of the project was the lack of validating some of the instruments in other languages, which might decrease the overall validity of research projects according to Szokolszky (2004). Whereas the SWLS in Hungarian has been properly tested (Maros, Sallay, Désfalvi, Szabó, and Ittzés, 2014), and the PISI is a Hungarian construct originally (Oláh, 2005), the Neale, Spencer-Arnell, and Wilson (2009) EI inventory has not been validated, and the validation of the Hungarian version of the LSS could not be directly found. We took the latter test from the "75 papír és ceruza teszt" [75 paper-pen test booklet] which is considered among Hungarian psychology scholars as the go-to for major instruments in Hungarian (personal communication with members of the School Psychology Care of the Pedagogical Service of the Educational Ministry of Hungary), and many of the tests therein do have Hungarian validation processes listed in an online document (http://www.ttk.mta.hu/wp-content/uploads/tesztek.htm). However, the only reference to the LSS validation we could find was in Demetrovics (2007) who states that the Hungarian translation was prepared by the Department of Personal and Health Psychology of ELTE (p.35).

Another point of criticism might be that the lapse of time between the first and second round of data collection was too long, thus the scores might reflect changes connected to some other factors, not the SA. However, with the help of the psychological coaching sessions, the *outcome* of the change was evoked. The psychological coaching took the participants back to their psychological state experienced during the SA, and by the end of the coaching helped them to become aware and process the changes, as the theory on mentalization/mindfulness (Davies & Hayes, 2011) describes it. However, as the focus of the study was whether there was a change in connection with SA programs and how that change manifested itself in professional and personal development, the lapse of time between data collection rounds was not considered as detrimental to the overall results.

Concerning the future, it became evident that conducting assessment interviews as defined by Burke and Demers (1979) could be useful prior to the whole process of the mobilities, as these could reveal the default state of the participants' psychological condition,

almost at the time of applying for the grant. Furthermore, with the interdisciplinary approach of including the Burke and Demers (1979) assessment interviews, we could administer a three-session psychological coaching after the SA so that a complex psychological coaching process could be built around the *input,* which would give a wider frame and more depth for the processes of the participants. It would also be important to do future research on how effectively short SA change remains apparent in secondary school teachers' psychological repertoire. Six months later, another follow-up psychological coaching session could be carried out.

Future investigations could focus on how burn out can be avoided with the help of the psychological coaching of an SA experience for secondary teachers. Such studies could examine how – by observing their experience – the participants could realize their own personality boundaries more clearly. It should highlight how having their personality boundaries more clearly defined would help secondary teachers in realizing their competences more noticeably. This in turn would aid them in choosing appropriate teaching methods. As a result of knowing their competences and applying techniques more effectively, teachers would feel more successful; therefore the chances of burn out could be reduced.

Finally, it would also be important to investigate how SA participants' experience and the changes in their personal and professional development could effectively influence their students' attitude, motivation and performance of language and cultural learning. The pedagogical implications of such research would aid secondary school teachers in motivating future generations to learn as many foreign languages as possible while still in compulsory education. Convincing students of the significance of acquiring a number of foreign languages could influence positively the integration of non-university graduates into the job market, and thus the marketability and the worth of secondary school graduates might highly increase.

8 Conclusion

The present study aimed at revealing any personal and/or professional effects of a short study abroad program, such as the two-week Erasmus+ teacher training trips. It set out to investigate if and how psychological developments were at play. Along the lines of our analytical structure explained in section 2, the case study followed the experiences of four participants. Firstly, they dived into the *setting* of a SA trip. Secondly, they experienced the *input*, which was being outside their own comfort zone. Then they had a certain *reaction* to the *input* that we measured with the PISI, LSS, SWLS and EI instruments. Finally, they verbalized their experiences in a psychological coaching session that made them realize the *outcome* of the experience, namely, how the whole process had shaped their personal and professional development.

Changes in the psychological immune system and the emotional intelligence level of the participants after the SA indicated adjustment in personal development and professional competences as a result of the SA program. Therefore, it could be claimed that PISI, SWLS, LSS and EI scores may be used as valid indicators of how people deal with stressful situations and influences while abroad and their newly acquired personal skills of self-management. These coping strategies could presumably come into play in their professional competence and practice.

Apart from the numerical changes in the indices for the psychological immune system, the emotional intelligence level, and the subjective well-being of the participants, another

major finding was that psychological coaching was highly beneficial after the SA, as it could make even overwhelming emotional input sensible for the participants at a cognitive level. As a result of the psychological coaching sessions, the participants realized new things about themselves and in addition to the expansion of their professional and factual knowledge; their psychological status was brought into the centre of attention. The overall feeling of accomplishment during the SA was given a satisfactory round-up and/or follow-up with psychological coaching, which increased the participants' sense of achievement.

The psychological coaching also helped establish a positive washback effect (Pan, 2009) of the research project in as much as the participants felt by the end of the sessions that the instruments did measure what they were told they would measure. All those numbers made sense by the end of the project because they could connect their experiences to the phenomena described by the scores of the inventories. With the help of psychological coaching the participants thought through their experience, analysed their home culture patterns of behaviour and attitude so that they could turn a potential distress situation into eustress resulting in profession development and personal growth.

Overall, it seems from the present investigation that psychological coaching after SA programs could greatly help provide a frame for the *outcome* phase of SA trips. In the present study, all the participants were from the same high power distance culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Furka, 2013). For people from such a cultural background experiencing difficulties or full-blown culture shock could mean feeling incompetent, giving them a sense of failure. Proper psychological coaching sessions could help them process the experience and turn distress into eustress in their personal development, as it was indeed the case for the participants included in this research enterprise with their SA experience.

The SA can become a real developmental process for secondary school teachers where first three and then a fourth follow-up session of psychological coaching can provide a fully supported developmental course. This would clearly define personality boundaries at play in teaching situations. With the follow-up session half a year later, the teaching methods at play in real time teaching situations may help secondary school teachers to see the already incorporated *outcome* of the SA experience in their everyday teacher identity in the long run.

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