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Direction of mobility and its implications for the U-curve theory

Inmaculada Soriano García

Abstract

The increase in student mobility exchanges over the last decades has been accompanied by a growing interest in understanding the factors within which mobility exchanges take place. In this sense, student mobility is closely related to existing studies that intend to define and explain the concept of culture shock. This paper seeks to determine factors that affect students' exchange experiences as well as to promote discussion regarding the U-curve theory.

The U-curve theory has been used to describe the cross-cultural adjustment process of employers, sojourners or students within a host culture showing the different stages experienced by people moving from a home to a host country. Starting from the U-curve theory, this paper is based on a study including both directions within the same mobility programme framework undertaken by future translators. That is, both Spanish Translation students who study part of their degree in Russia and Russian Translation students who study in Spain.

The results show strong differences in the students' experiences depending on the direction of mobility. Thus, the level of adaptation of Russian students to Spain is quite high and the subjects usually respond to a U-curve scheme, while Spanish students have a lower level of adaptation and the exchange stages experienced by these students do not necessarily respond to the above mentioned theory, so that the resulting curve does not appear like a U but more like a J.

This paper illustrates that prior orientation is an essential aspect in order to facilitate effective cultural adaptation. Also, this paper indicates that the implementation of strategies that help students to cope with culture shock is a crucial aspect to be taken into account.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, student mobility has experienced an exponential development in Europe. During this time, this topic has attracted the interest of researchers and several studies have approached this phenomenon (Baumgratz 1993; Blumenthal 1996; De la Porte 1997; Davis 2004; Tsokaktsidou 2005; Kelly *et al.* 2006; Coleman 2006). Nevertheless, these studies did not pay any special attention to a key element in mobility - the study of culture shock. On this matter, we are convinced that it is not possible to approach the subject of mobility (in any one of its varieties) without taking into account the issue of culture shock. Taking part in a mobility program involves more than packing one's suitcase and taking a plane. It involves a series of changes and adjustments, both cultural and personal, that acquire a special significance and that should be, consequently, thoroughly studied.

In Spain, at least currently, there are few studies that relate to the topics of student mobility and culture shock, which is a paradox if we take into account that Spain is one of the most popular destinations for European students and sends a large number of students abroad.

Regarding this issue, unlike the situation in the USA or UK[1], where students are offered special seminars to develop a knowledge of culture shock and receive specific information about the programmes they will participate in abroad, Spanish students do not receive any information on the matter.

The study we will present in this paper is based on previous research carried out in the context of a PhD thesis entitled *Student mobility in the context of translation training. Expectations, experiences and satisfaction degree of participants in two mobility programmes MGLU-UGR/MGLU-ULPGC[2]*.

The main aim of the thesis was to evaluate the contribution of these student mobility programmes to the training of future translators as intercultural mediators from the specific perspective of the participants in those programmes: students, teachers and coordinators. Hence the study focused mainly on their motivation, expectations and perceptions.

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1   See, for example, the Learning and Residence Abroad (LARA), Interculture Project and the Residence Abroad Project developed in the UK.
2   MGLU: Moscow State Linguistic University.
    UGR: Universidad de Granada.
    ULPGC: Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

Therefore, this study was based on the area of translator training, student mobility and culture shock.

In this paper, oriented specifically to the topic of culture shock and adjustment, we will consequently only focus on the students' experiences. Thus, we will start by defining the context of our study and subsequently we will show the results obtained concerning the factors that affect students' exchange experiences as well as their adjustment to the new culture.

2. **The U-curve framework**

The U-curve theory

The term "culture shock" was coined by Cora duBois in 1951 and conceptualized in 1954 by Oberg, who defined it as the strain and anxiety resulting from losing all familiar signs in the context of a new culture.

The cultural adjustment period is the length of time it takes a person to learn and acquire the behaviour necessary to adjust to living in another culture. The U-curve theory was first developed in 1955 by Lysgaard when he carried out a study of Norwegian Scholars staying in the US in the frame of a Fullbright program. One of Lysgaard's foci was the adjustment process over time. As a result of the experiences of the participants, Lysgaard defined three stages of adjustment within this experience of mobility. Firstly, students showed a range of initial adjustments, ranging from optimism to fascination for the new environment. Then, they started to feel anxiety and they experienced confusion, loneliness and disorientation. Finally, after a period of time, students learned to cope with the adjustment problems and they achieved the final stage of adjustment.

Thus, the initial feeling of euphoria, the subsequent crisis and the final adjustment, all expressed in graph form, gave a U-pattern. This pattern became known as the U-curve hypothesis.

Subsequently, in 1960, Oberg completed the first model proposed by Lysgaard - in the frame this time of a study of adjustment of immigrants in the US - and he established four stages of adjustment from their arrival to the country to their final adjustment. Oberg's stages of cross-cultural adaptation, like Lysgaard's, can be also graphically represented by a U-curve:

1. Honeymoon Stage. Depending on the circumstances, it covers the first few days after their arrival in the new country, the initial weeks or, even in many cases, the first six months. This stage is characterized by the establishment of superficial relations and the feeling of euphoria and curiosity towards the new culture.

2. Crisis Stage. It starts when differences between own culture and the host culture become conflictive. Then, the sojourner develops hostile or stereotypical feelings toward the host culture. At this moment, the sojourners fraternize more with other compatriots and experience the feelings of rage, stress and anxiety.

3. Recovery Stage. If the sojourner is capable of coping with these adjustment difficulties, s/he achieves more communicative competence in the host language and is able to get around better in the new culture. This is the beginning of the Recovery Stage, where difficulties will still exist but the sojourners think they have overcome them. At this point, this person will be reaching the stage of Recovery: s/he will feel more comfortable, more confident, will show empathy towards others, and even will be able to make jokes about their own difficulties.

4. Adaptation Stage. In this last stage, difficulties have already been overcome and the sojourner finally accepts the new culture. The environment continues to be the same but the sojourner's attitude has changed. At this point, this person has already adapted to the new culture.

The W-curve theory[3]

As regards the U-curve theory and the first proposals on this subject, it might be appropriate to point out that neither the Lysgaard model, nor Oberg's takes into account the return to the home country of the sojourners.

Aware of that, Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1962) incorporated the re-entry phenomenon and proposed the W-pattern arguing that difficulties resulting from returning home would produce a reflection of the initial U-curve. Moreover, these authors stated that, more than a reflection, the W-curve was a result of the primary U-curve, so, if the sojourners did not describe the first U-curve, then, it would not be possible to reflect the second one. Thus, this was referred to as the W-curve theory.

Among other academics who developed these issues of culture shock, and both the U-curve and the W-curve theories, we should mention:

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[3]   The W-curve theory should not to be confused with, for example, Levine and Adelman's (1993) W-pattern of the Cultural Adjustment Process.

Adler (1972), Hofstede (1991), Bennett (1993), Levine & Adelman (1993), Winkelman (1994), Kim (2001), Winkelman (1994) and White (2007).

Criticism of the U-curve theory

For more than forty years the U-curve theory assumed a pre-eminent position in developing the theory on adjustment as well as in carrying out research on this subject. Nevertheless, several reviews of research in this field have concluded that the basis for this hypothesis is limited.

One of the more complete reviews of the U-curve theory was the one carried out by Church (1982). He reviewed 11 empirical studies that provided at least minimal support for the U-curve hypothesis. In addition, he reviewed 5 other studies that did not confirm this theory. According to these results, Church concluded that support for the U-curve theory was limited and that evidence for the U-curve was weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized. (Church 1982: 542).

From a more recent point of view, Black & Mendenhall (1991) also reviewed 18 curve studies. Of these, 12 were supportive of the U-curve theory. Black & Mendenhall's review of the U-curve literature showed significant differences between the U-pattern and others patterns obtained. Thus, for example, Davis (1963, in Black & Mendenhall 1991: 228) found a J-curve pattern of adjustment (i.e. no honeymoon). Also, despite Deutsh & Won's support of the U-curve hypothesis, in Black & Mendenhall's (1991: 228) opinion, their results resembled more of a J-curve. In the same line, Klineberg & Hull (1979, quoted in Black & Mendenhall 1991: 230) noted that some students exhibited a "flat line" pattern of adjustment (inverted commas in the original). Moreover, the study provided support, not for a U-curve pattern but more for a J-curve pattern of adjustment.

Black & Mendenhall (1991) concluded that these studies did not have a valid theoretical perspective and that they showed a lack of consistent methodological rigour which made it impossible to generalize the results. They pointed out the need for further testing and proposed "a new beginning that starts from a theoretical discussion of the cross-cultural adjustment process" (Black & Mendenhall 1991: 232).

Since Black & Mendenhall's review, Berardo (2006) reports the following empirical studies and their implication regarding the U-curve hypothesis:

Authors	Year	Sample	Findings
Zheng & Berry	1991	Students & Scholars	Support
Nicholson & Imaizumi	1993	Managers	Partial support
Zapf	1993	Social Workers	Partial support
Tanaka *et al*	1994	Students	Partial support (no U-curve in 3 of 4 factors)
Ward & Kennedy	1996	Students	Did not support; inverted U-curve reported instead
Ward *et al*	1998	Students	Did not support; Supported more of a J- curve
Forman & Zachar	2001	Military officers	Did not support
Arthur	2001	Students	Did not support; Supported more of a J- curve
Ito	2004	Students	Partial support
Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al*	2005	Meta-Analysis	Support
Burnapp	2006	Students	Partial support

Figure 1: Empirical studies since Black & Mendenhall's Review - Source: Berardo, 2006.

As can be noticed, these more recent studies show that it is not possible to provide complete support for the U-curve hypothesis. And, following these results, we agree with scholars such as Ward (1998: 290) who claims: "The U-curve has been on-trial now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected".

In conclusion, we can summarise the main objections to the U-Curve Theory as follows:

• Empirical studies are applied to a large variety of sojourners (e.g. immigrants, students, expatriates,…) who plainly showed different profiles and characteristics;
• In the case of student mobility, empirical studies are not 'complete' in that they did not report the case of students leaving the country who had returned home *early*;
• The studies carried out show a lack of theoretical basis as well as a lack of methodological rigour;
• Different stages experienced by the sojourners show a high degree of variability. Thus, not all of the studies report the initial period of

euphoria. Those that do not report the euphoria stage produce a J-curve pattern instead of the U-curve one.
• There is no statistical support for the U-Curve Theory.

3. Context of our study

As mentioned earlier, the main objective of our study was to evaluate the contribution of the student mobility programmes to the training of future translators as intercultural mediators. Also, our specific targets were oriented towards the motivations, expectations and perceptions of all the participants as well as towards the study of culture shock. In this sense, we set out to understand if the subjects in our study suffered it and if so, how it affected them.

The subjects were 14 Spanish students (7 women and 7 men) and 13 Russian students (9 women and 4 men) and all of them were students at the faculty of Translation of their respective cities: Moscow, Granada and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Thus, the total number of subjects of our research was 27.

Seventeen of these students had already participated in a mobility programme and 10 were taking part during the academic year 2004-2005, when we carried out our study. Our research included students from previous editions of those mobility programmes to contextualize our study. It must be also pointed out that 4 Spanish students in this group had already participated twice in those programmes. This situation offered us an excellent opportunity to analyze the cultural adjustment of individuals to a new culture in two different periods of their life.

The age of the subjects, at the moment of their participation in mobility programmes was between 20 and 26, depending on the institution. The length of the mobility programmes, depending on the institutions involved, was 3, 4 or 9 months. In this respect, it must be pointed out that the Russian students always participated in 3 or 4 month programmes.

Our study adopted a qualitative paradigm since the goal was not to measure or quantify data, but to analyze and interpret the reality from the perspective of those experiencing it, as explained in Soriano (2007: 155). Following this qualitative approach, this study centred on few subjects but considered many variables in the form of a case study (Creswell 1998).

We opted for semi-structured in-depth interviews which focussed principally on the following topics: previous preparation, motivations, expectations, development of the sojourn and final perceptions of the students, giving us data from which we were able to proceed to offer a graphic representation of the overall experience.

It is important to point out that the application of our data collection instruments followed the same schedule of a mobility programme. Hence, in each case, we carried out three interviews: the first, before the beginning of the sojourn; the second, in the first two weeks abroad and finally, the third at the end of the stays abroad. It should also be pointed out that those students from previous mobility programmes were interviewed just once and at the end of their stay abroad.

Regarding the analysis of qualitative interviews, our method mixed inductive and deductive procedures. We first pre-established a series of issues, as follows, and proceeded to categorise the data accordingly.

For the preliminary phase:

> Preparation
> Motivation
> Expectations
> Perceptions
> Possible adopted stereotypes

For the initial phase:

> First perceptions
> Possible difficulties
> Experiences regarding this new context
> Reactions

For the final phase:

> Possible difficulties
> Experiences
> Level of adaptation to the new context
> Final perceptions
> Final evaluation

Once we began the analysis, some of these points were further subdivided. For example, within the initial phase, first perceptions could be subclassified into academic (timetables, methodology, etc.), personal (friendship networks, etc.) and environmental (meals, schedules, etc.).

This system allowed us to summarize and to group the information around each issue, identifying indicators of euphoria, crisis, recovery and adaptation at each stage of the sojourn. These indicators allowed us,

then, to produce a graph – with approximate values – to reflect the development of the sojourn of each student.

The graphs obtained fell, on the whole, into one of four main patterns, confirming that in our case study the U- curve reflects only one possible experience; that the J-curve is just as frequent, and that other more mitigated patterns also exist.
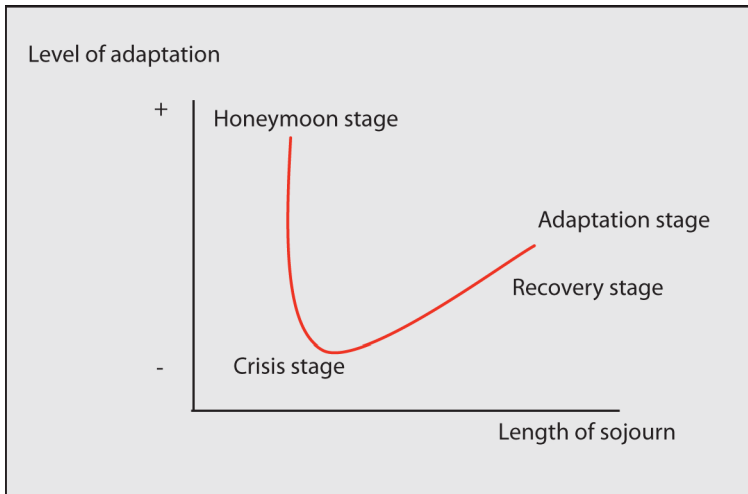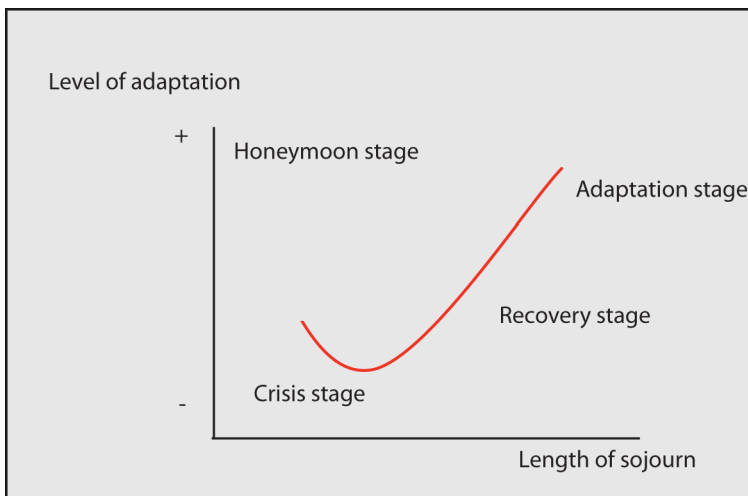

Figure 2: U-pattern.

Figure 3: J-pattern

Figure 4: "Tick" pattern.

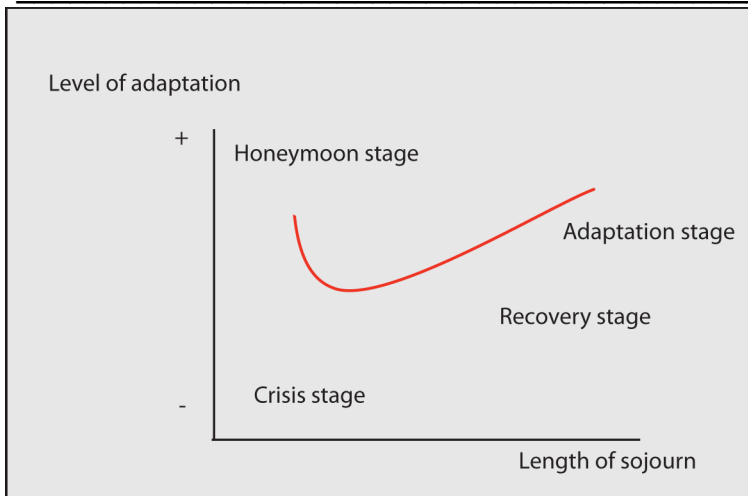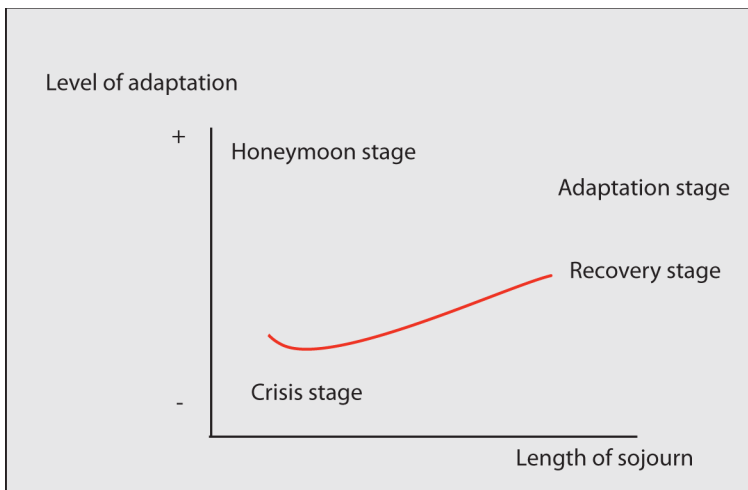*Figure 5: "Linear" pattern.*

The U-curve pattern (figure 2) reflects that students had experienced all the stages of the cultural adjustment process. On the other hand, the J-curve pattern (figure 3) shows all the stages except for the first one.

In our study, the "tick" pattern (figure 4) refers to these cases where, although some initial signs of the Crisis stage were present, the stage

itself was not experienced. As can be seen, the pattern obtained is similar to a "tick".

Finally, the "linear" pattern (figure 5) reflects those cases where the Crisis stage shown at the beginning was overcome some time later by the Recovery Stage.

The next table summarizes all the patterns referred to in our study. As reported above, the U and J-curve patterns are used in the literature. The "tick" and "linear" patterns, on the other hand, we have coined for this study.

Patterns	Stages of the Cultural Adjustment Process experienced
U- curve pattern	1. Honeymoon Stage 2. Crisis Stage 3. Recovery Stage 4. Adaptation Stage
J-curve pattern	2. Crisis Stage 3. Recovery Stage 4. Adaptation Stage
"Tick" pattern	1. Honeymoon Stage 4. Adaptation
"Linear" pattern	2. Crisis Stage 3. Recovery Stage

Figure 6: Patterns obtained

4. Results

Following these results, the main factors influencing students through their sojourn were:

Language barrier

Spanish students made reference to this factor more than Russian students. Moreover, whereas the Spanish students referred to this issue as affecting their understanding as well as their production, the Russian students just made reference to the specific difficulty of initially understanding the regional accents of Granada and Las Palmas.

So, while Russian students surmounted the language barrier at the beginning of their sojourn, Spanish students could not, and the language barrier was present during the rest of their sojourn broad.

Based on these results, it should be pointed out that the Russian students received exhaustive language training in Spanish during their first two years at university. Spanish students did not receive such a complete language training in Russian.

So, we could hypothesise that the greater the previous level of language, the less severe the culture shock, leading us perhaps to suggest a minimum threshold requirement for language.

Adjustment to a new environment

Students found themselves in a new environment where accommodation, meals, schedules, attitudes, among other aspects, were different. Moreover the different academic systems and approaches also affected them.

The Russian students tended to easily adapt to this new environment, while the Spanish students had more difficulty relating, above all, to accommodation, integration with other students and group distribution. In fact, the Russian university system tends to 'exclude' foreign students (grouping and accommodating them with other foreign students only), while the Spanish system always 'includes' foreign students in the classrooms and in the university residences.

The results show that greater pre-departure knowledge about host culture, conditions of the sojourn abroad and greater exposure to hosting students produced less severe culture shock stage of adjustment.

Friendship networks

At the beginning, Russian as well as Spanish students tended to establish ties with their compatriots. The first few days they even always stayed together. A few weeks later, Russian students started to gradually establish other friendship networks including mostly Spanish students.

In the case of the Spanish students, and as a consequence of the 'excluding' system mentioned above, they had significant difficulties coming into contact with Russian students or Russians in general. This, together with the language barrier, was the reason they tended to establish friendships amongst themselves or with other foreign students.

The results demonstrate that the more time spent in actual interaction with hosting students seems to correlate directly to a less severe culture shock.

Climate conditions

This factor acquired a special significance for both groups. However, while Russian students tended to consider the climate of their host cities positively, Spanish students commented on the negative aspects of the

new climate such as the extreme temperatures suffered in winter and the continued lack of daylight.

These results show that climate had an influence on the sojourners and affected their cultural adjustment period.

Culture shock

The entire cultural adaptation process was clearly an important issue. Regarding the U-curve theory:

- Our study reported the existence of the U-curve pattern as well as the J-pattern. Moreover, in most cases, we found a "tick" or "linear" pattern showing no improvement or deterioration in adjustment over the sojourn.

In the following figures, we offer the results of Russian and Spanish students for each of the 4 patterns referred to above.
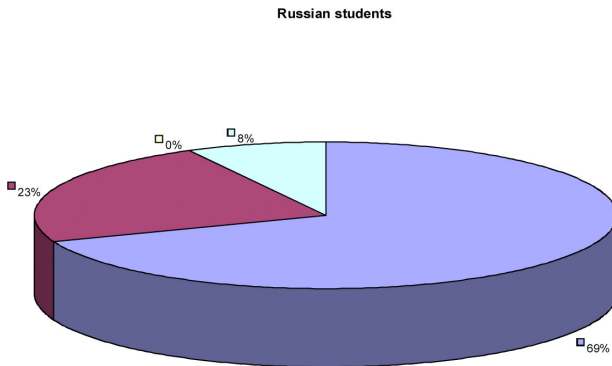
Russian students

Figure 6: Proportion of patterns obtained in Russian students
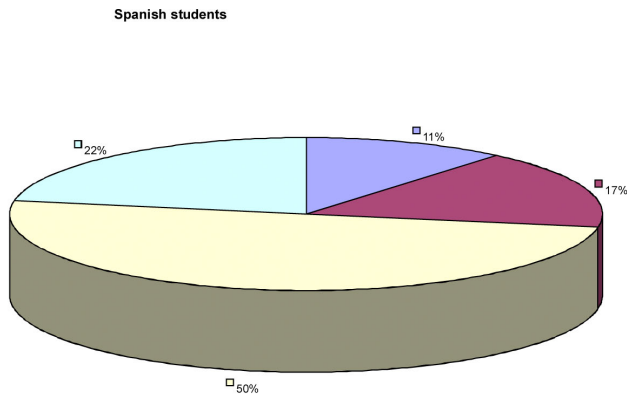
Spanish students

Figure 7: Proportion of patterns obtained in Spanish students

Figure 8: Key to patterns

- Our study did not report all the stages of the entire cultural adaptation process.
- Not all the stages of the cultural adaptation process were reported in the same order. Thus, Russian students usually started their sojourn with the initial period of euphoria (92.3%) whereas Spanish students tended to begin at the stage of crisis (66.6%). Also, Russian students coped easily with initial difficulties (language barrier, adjustment to the new educational system…) while Spanish students found more difficulties and did not overcome them so easily.

- Very few students (23% of the Russian and 11% of the Spanish students) reached the final stage of adaptation confirming the findings of other studies, which all point to the need for longer time periods[4]. At

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[4]   There is however very little agreement on what the minimum periods of stay should be.

this point, it is necessary to indicate that those students who did reach this stage had previously been in the host country as tourists or students.

We should also point out that in the case of the 4 students taking part for a second time in the same mobility programme, none started the second sojourn at the same stage they were at when leaving their first sojourn. Some had advanced one, or more, stages, whilst others had regressed. Indeed, two of them experienced their second sojourn while immersed in the Crisis Stage.

All the subjects of our study, regardless of the difficulties they had to cope with, described this experience as positive or highly positive. None of the students returned home before the end of the sojourn even though many of them admitted they had been considering this option at some point of the sojourn.

Finally, it is important to note the importance that the direction of mobility acquires in our study. Our results were quite different for Russian and Spanish students, suggesting that the host culture and degree of preparation remain the critical factors. Further elements affecting this are: age, general conditions of the study abroad and academic profile of students.

5. Conclusions

Concerning the cultural adjustment period, according to our study we cannot offer support for the U-curve theory. In our research, following previous studies, a variety of patterns was found, thus confirming that this theory is not universally applicable.

Our results, point to the crucial importance of prior orientation to facilitate effective cultural adaptation. Hence, the implementation of strategies that help students to cope with culture shock is a crucial aspect to be taken into account. Without a doubt, to organize preparatory seminars about what culture shock is, and to give students strategies for overcoming it would help them to cope with it once abroad.

The language barrier is a crucial aspect that should be addressed in a preparatory stage. Home institutions should promote language training programmes to foster successful experiences abroad.

In our study, we did not find a direct relation between the length of the sojourn and the final level of adjustment achieved, but we did between

prior language level, prior knowledge of the host culture and final level of adjustment.

Concerning the length of the sojourns, it is obvious that 3-4 month programmes are not enough - at least for Spanish students - to successfully achieve a minimum level of adaptation in Russia.

Finally, as already mentioned, the direction of mobility plays an essential role in mobility experiences, and it is therefore an important factor that should be taken into consideration in future research.

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