

## Culture shock

### adaptation strategies

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### RESUMEN

Kalervo Oberg definió el choque cultural como una serie de reacciones emocionales “precipitadas por la ansiedad que provoca la pérdida de los símbolos que nos son familiares en el intercambio social” (Oberg 1954) y el ajuste al que nos vemos obligados para adaptarnos. Este choque cultural afecta a todos “los que son trasplantados a una nueva cultura” (Oberg 1954) y, aunque no se puede hacer desaparecer totalmente, sí se pueden paliar sus efectos negativos. Para ello, hemos confeccionado un test preparatorio que los alumnos habrán de realizar en los primeros días del curso. No evitaremos que se sientan mal ante situaciones nuevas y desconocidas, pero sí intentaremos que abra los ojos a otras interpretaciones diferentes a las de su cultura.

Palabras clave: choque cultural, adaptación cultural, contexto de inmersión

### ABSTRACT

*Kalervo Oberg defined culture shock as a series of emotional reactions “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg 1954) and the adjustment we are forced to make in order to adapt to this situation. This culture shock affects all those “people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad” (Oberg 1954) and, although it cannot be eliminated completely, its negative effects can be softened. In order to do this, we have elaborated a preparatory test that students will have to make in the first days of their experience abroad. We will not prevent them from feeling anxious when facing new and unknown situations, but we will help them open their eyes to new interpretations different to those of their culture.*

*Keywords: culture shock, cultural adaptation, immersion context*

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## 1. WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK?

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### 1.1 Definition of Culture Shock

Kalervo Oberg, who coined the term *culture shock* in the mid-1950s, defines *culture shock* as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg 1954). According to Oberg, a person is not born with a culture but only with the capacity to understand it and use it. As we grow up in a determined cultural environment and we learn to interact socially in this environment, this culture becomes our way of life; it becomes a safe, automatic and familiar way to get what we want.

When people abandon the social environment they know and where they feel comfortable and safe and move to a new cultural environment, as in the case of students who decide to spend a period of time abroad, they will have to adjust to the new environment and the new culture. It should not be assumed that the target culture is ruled by the same patterns the culture of origin is, as each culture (not only each country) perceives the world around it in different ways and develops different mechanisms and strategies to interpret it. For all this, those people transplanted abroad will be exposed to stimuli, which, at some point or another, they will not know how to interpret in a coherent way as they will try to apply interpretation patterns that they found useful in their culture of origin but which are not always useful in the target culture.

It has been evidenced that any person entering a new cultural environment will be exposed to suffer this *culture shock*. The only variation will be the degree to which this person will be affected. This depends on a series of factors, of which, the most common are listed and briefly commented here:

1. The intercultural experience the subjects have had in the past: travels to places with cultures that are different from their own, relationships with people from other cultures in their culture of origin, etc.
2. The previous knowledge they have about the target culture: the more we know about the place and the people hosting us (their history, their folklore, etc.) the easier it will be to understand the behaviors we observe.
3. The linguistic ability they have to manage in the target culture: the higher the level of foreign language the subjects have the less probable it will be for them to experience misunderstandings.
4. Human values previously learned and developed by subjects: tolerance, respect, etc.
5. The subjects' personality: confident, open and sociable people will find it easier to establish new relationships with local people who will help them interpret those not very familiar behaviors they will come across in the target culture.
6. Similarities between the culture of origin and the target culture: the more similar both cultures are, the fewer the occasions in which the subject will be exposed *culture shock* will be.
7. Geography and weather: certain physical contexts (excessive heights, nearness to the sea, etc.) and climatic conditions (rain, cold, excessive heat, etc.) affect people, specially those subjects that are not used to them. These physical conditions increase the subjects' discomfort and often make them project and expand all this negative feelings into the target culture.
8. The subjects' situation in the new environment: are they integrated in the target culture?, are they in a culture-of-origin bubble?, etc.

## 1.2 Stages in the Process of Adaptation to the Target Culture

Oberg (1954) described the process of adaptation to a new cultural environment as a U-shape continuum where the following stages are usually present:



*Image 1. Oberg's U-Shape Continuum*

1.Honeymoon Stage: The subject has just arrived in a new environment and is fascinated. All the senses are alert and even the foreign language is understood and spoken better than expected. The subject feels euphoric, energetic, and enthusiastic. Everything is fantastic and the differences between the culture of origin and the new culture are hardly perceived and excused as the defects in the loved person.

2.Rejection or Regression Stage: The physical tiredness resulting from the previous stage appears, issues with the physical adaptation process to the target culture are detected (insomnia, food or water problems, etc.), the subject is exposed to more situations of linguistic intercourse where the level of language may not result as good as it was thought at the beginning, family and friends are missed and a feeling of loneliness and vulnerability hovers around. The differences between the two cultures are evident now and frequently, in the comparison, the target culture comes off badly (everything is better in my country) and the target culture is blamed for all the problems the subject suffers when s/he does not know how to behave in an unfamiliar environment (nothing works well in this country, people is rude, etc.). The subject feels confused, tired, afraid, rejected, lonely, irritable, vulnerable and anxious every time one of these situations is faced.

3.Adjustment/ Negotiation Stage: The subject progressively adapts to the new environment and starts to develop routines (following the same itinerary to class, buying in the same shops, etc.), meets new people who can help interpreting situations that may not be completely understood, linguistic abilities are improved, the city is better known and the subject manages well in it. Of course, the subject is conscious of the differences between the culture of origin and the target culture but know s/he understands the target culture is not bad; it just has to be interpreted with different patterns. There will be things the subject will like or not and also, s/he will know why.

4.Mastery Stage: Not all the subjects spend enough time in the target culture to complete this stage where the subject would become an adoptive cultural native.

### 1.3 General Recommendations to Overcome Culture Shock

The recommendations we give our students aim to help them overcome *culture shock* in the better way possible. In general, it is recommended to:

- Observe, listen and learn,
- Show respect,
- Learn from mistakes and apply the knowledge acquired through them in future situations,
- Leave stereotypes and preconceived ideas aside and open the mind to the new culture,
- Understand the *culture shock* process in order to understand the feelings that will arise from it,
- Connect with target culture people who can serve as cultural informants,
- Analyze the situations that are not understood before judging or criticizing them just for being different to what the subject is used to, and
- Enjoy the experience.

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## 2. PROPOSAL TO MINIMIZE CULTURE SHOCK EFFECT

As our teaching experience confirmed all the above said about culture shock, we decided to develop a tool that would help our students manage and better understand the process of cultural adaptation they were going to go through. For that, we elaborated two different surveys, one for the students to make in the first days of their programs abroad in Madrid as a cultural introduction to Spain/Madrid, and a second survey to be completed at the end of their time abroad so that our hypothesis

could be checked.

In this paper, we will present the data compiled in the month of June 2011, the first time our survey was passed to 49 students. Afterwards, we will describe each of the surveys and we will analyze the objectives and conclusions reached through their elaboration a study.

## 2.1 Entry Survey

The entry survey is designed for the students to be completed in the first days of their study abroad programs in Madrid, which, at Antonio de Nebrija University (as in many other institutions) usually pairs the beginning of their academic programs as well as their first days in the target city. The entry survey is divided in three content sections that are described below.

### 2.1.1 Section 1: Do you adapt easily?

To begin with, the questions in this first section were aimed at knowing the demography of the students and analyzing their experiential background in other countries and cultures. Questions about age, gender or nationality are included; also about the number of times the student has moved house or city, the number of countries visited and the length of the visit, how tolerant they consider themselves or the time they believe they will need to adapt to the new cultural environment they just arrived in.

The data revealed a group mainly composed of female students, from United States, and under 25 years old.

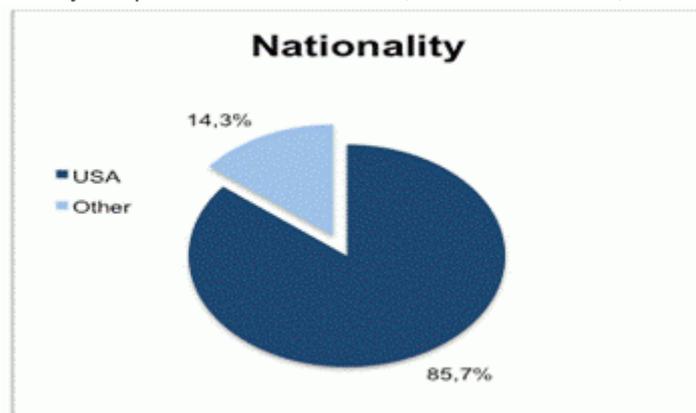


Image 2. Participants' Nationality

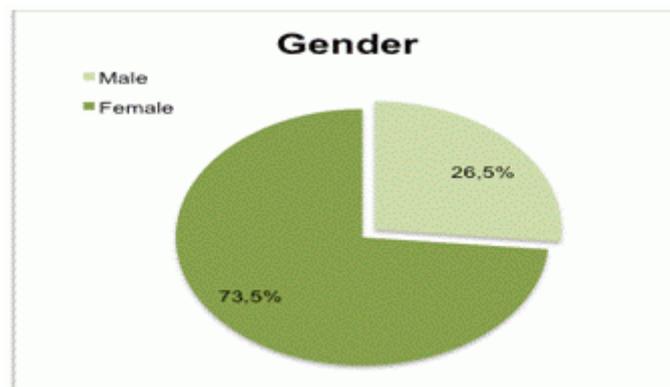
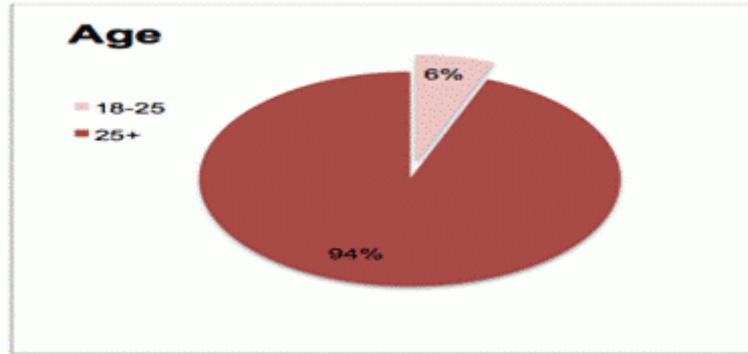
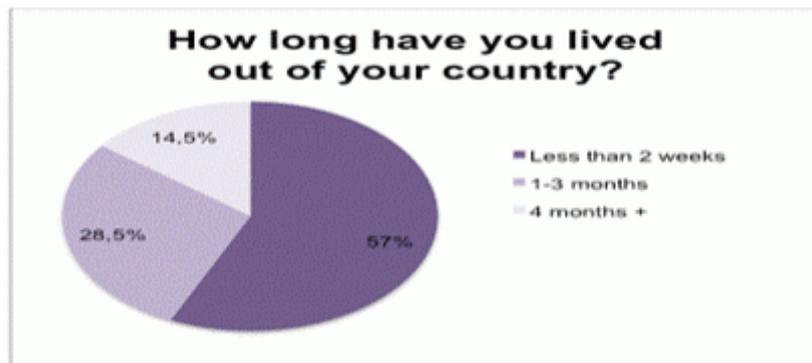


Image 3. Participants' Gender



*Image 4. Participants' Age*

Half of them had already traveled outside of their countries although, according to the numbers, they did it on holidays, as only 14.5% have lived outside of their countries for more than four months.



*Image 5. Participants' Traveling Previous Experience*

The amount and the quality of the subjects' experiences in other cultures and their reactions to the changes or differences is relevant as the more exposed a subject is to other cultural environments, the greater his/her capacity to understand diversity, to tolerate unfamiliar situations, to reflect before judging and to solve conflicts will be.

Spanish as a Foreign Language Programs at Centro de Estudios Hispánicos at Antonio de Nebrija University traditionally hosts a great number of students from the United States. Therefore, we had included in our survey some items related to changes of home or School/ College, as many of the students from this country need to move to another city, or even state, when they start college. Actually, 85.7% of the respondents of our survey were from this country. Of the students polled, 26.5% had found it difficult to adapt to the new school/college, commenting that the most difficult part had been making new friends.

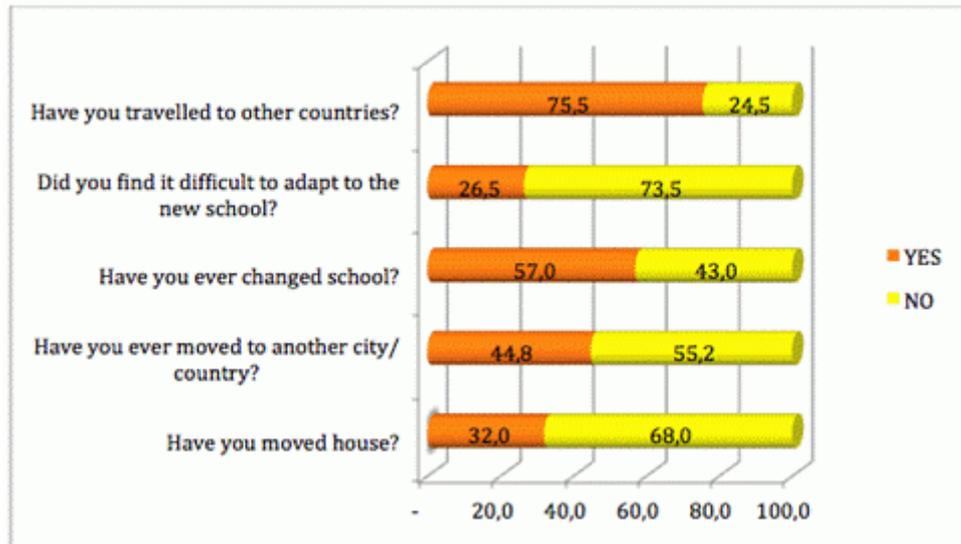


Image 6. Participants' Adaptation to Change Previous Experience

### 2.1.2 Section 2: What do Spaniards think about your culture/ your country?

As we already mentioned in Section 1, it was foreseen that most of the students polled would be coming from the United States (as data evidenced afterwards). Therefore, a series of stereotypes considered to be typical of this culture/ nationality were selected and included in this second section of the survey: patriotic feeling, the importance of money, addiction to technology, individualism, time consciousness, food, and political correction, among others. The aim of this section was to offer the students some recognizable points from which to start reflecting upon their own culture. The peculiar thing would be that, this time, they would need to do it from the point of view of others, from what they sensed other cultures (in this case, the Spanish culture) think about their country, their culture and their nationality. Let's now look at the data obtained from this section of the survey where we used a rating scale 1 to 5 (where 1 was "totally disagree", 2 was "disagree", 3 was "neutral", 4 was "agree" and 5 "totally agree").

40.81% of respondents agreed with the statement "My country fellows are materialist", and 59.18% answered they totally agreed with it. Taking into account that the adjective *materialist* implies certain negative connotations, the data indicated that the majority of the students polled understand that the image their country projects abroad is one of a materialistic society. This does not mean that students agree with the statement (and probably many of them do not) but at least the survey results are indicative that they understand that the members of a culture can perceive it in one way, while, at the same time, this culture can be interpreted by the people outside it in a different way. Here there are some more examples drawn from the analysis of the data compiled that support this dual perception: 69.38% agreed or totally agreed with the statement "My country fellows are noisy"; 95.91% also agreed or totally agreed with the statement "My country fellows are addicted to technology", and 87.74% agreed or totally agreed with the statement "My country fellows are always busy and are time-conscious".

From these data we can conclude that most of the answers in this section reflect how conscious students are of the image their culture of origin projects. In this case, as the majority of respondents came from United States, the image obtained was that of a society that is apparently perceived from the outside as materialistic, noisy, technologic and fast. Maybe the students polled are not like that, or they have an explanation to clarify those descriptions: for example, they could argue that not everyone in the United States is materialist but, as their country is the leader of the capitalist Western world, it is perceived as such. They could also explain that they may only be noisy when they are in a group or with friends and, as this is the way they usually travel abroad, this is the image perceived by the people in the target country. Another possible explanation would be that, as the bigger information firms, social networks and communication conglomerates have their headquarters in the United States, this seems to make Internet use and access and other technological elements (cell phones, social networks, etc.) widely common in everyday life, which makes them be perceived as a very technological society. Or as a last example, in the movies (great source of information of North American culture for other societies), big cities such as New York, Los Angeles or Chicago are presented as large metropolis where everybody runs and is very busy. Maybe we are using ideas that are closed to stereotypes, but in the end, they are recognizable images and perceptions through which, in this case, United States society is evaluated, and even judged.

Thanks to the reflection about their own culture that we intended the students to make throughout this second section of the survey, we believe that they are now more capable to understand that other cultures, such as the Spanish culture in this case, assign a series of behaviors and characteristics to other societies/ cultures, such as the North American society in the examples, which may or may not be faithful to their reality.

The next turn of the screw would be that the student started suspecting that there will be differences between the two cultural environments: their culture of origin and the Spanish/Madrid target culture. In principle, it could be considered as a matter of opposition of concepts: if the US society is perceived from the outside as materialistic, it would be logical to think that Spanish culture will not be such (they have probably heard that in Europe there are more social security benefits, that working regulations tend to protect the worker, that as Spanish economic development is smaller, its consumption rates are be smaller too, etc.). Another example would be that, if people from the US have new technologies more integrated in their daily lives, they might start realizing that in Spain these new technologies may not be as accessible, that there may not be free Wi-Fi available, that Internet connection may be slower or that phone call rates may be more expensive. Or maybe, if their culture of origin is perceive as very time-conscious, by opposition, Mediterranean cultures may live at a more relaxed pace and may put more emphasis in the quality than in the quantity of time.

As a summary, section 2 of our survey intends to make students reflect upon their cultures of origin and upon how they are interpreted by other cultures. It also tries to make them understand that the difference in the interpretation (native versus foreign) is mainly due to the existing differences between the two cultures: my culture is this way and things are done this way; therefore, if in other cultures things are done differently, this culture is then different to mine. These differences make each culture understand, interpret and even justify their own cultural behaviors (the things that are done this way because in my environment they have always been done this way). Therefore, people tend to interpret a new culture using the same interpretation patterns that are valid in the culture of origin. However, the fact of using the same interpretation patterns to analyze a different cultural environment that is regulated by different patterns, inevitably leads the subject to criticize or judge those behaviors that are alien and unknown.

Our intention with this project was to make the students become conscious that in the target culture many things are done in a way that differs from the way they know and that certain actions are interpreted in a different way because different interpretation patterns are used. It does not have to be better or worse, it is only different and it has an explanation. The most important thing is to make the students reflect upon the difference before criticizing it and to make them understand the reasons behind those behaviors that are unknown to them.

### **2.1.3 Section 3: How much do you know?**

The last section of our survey is presented as a small cultural test and bears a double objective: on the one hand, to compile information about what international students exactly know before arriving in Madrid and what preconceived ideas they have about Spain. On the other hand, the second aim is to prepare them for recurrent situations and habitual behaviors in Madrid daily life that, out of experience we know they are going to experiment at some point of their study abroad experience and are going to shock them. All the items in this section are accompanied by a picture or image in order to facilitate a full understanding of the cultural situation we wanted the students to be exposed to.

We would like to mention that, as certain resources were not available to us by the time this survey was passed to organize a post-survey workshop with all the participants about the survey and its content, students were given a document that could be called "Quick Tips to Spanish Cultural Behaviors". In this document, the students are briefly explained the reasons underlying the idiosyncratic cultural behaviors presented to them in the survey. In the document, each explanation is illustrated by the same image used in the survey in order to help the students remember and connect ideas.

The most typical reactions of someone facing a situation or witnessing a behavior which is alien to him/her and that, therefore, is not completely understood is feeling offended (they are doing this to me because I am not Spanish and they do not like me), feeling angry (I want to leave this restaurant but they still have not brought the check, they are so slow), feeling isolated (I am the only one that is different, I do not have friends here) or feeling disenchanted (I do not know why I decided to come to this country, it is not what I expected). All these negative feelings that can be experienced in culture shock situations distort the perception a subject is forming about the target culture and may ruin the experience abroad. This is what we have intended to avoid with this proposal.

Now, the results of the most representative items in the third section of the survey will be commented on in order to illustrate better the objectives of this last section. First of all, we will deal with personal space. We know that in Spain, in comparison to other cultures such as North American culture, our personal space is smaller and interpersonal display of affection is more physician and public. One of the items in the survey showed the picture of two youngsters passionately kissing in the mouth in a park. To the question "Would this behavior take place in your country?" 77,6% of respondents said that only some people do it, from where we deduce that most people would find this behavior unusual. The following item, illustrated by the picture of two young girls kissing on the cheeks, asked if greeting people with two kisses on the cheeks is normal in the students' country of origin. 73,5% of respondents said no. From this data we conclude that both behaviors are perceived as unusual by most of the subjects and will probably be interpreted according to their own cultural patterns: they may think that a man/boy is a pain if he wants to kiss them the first time they meet, they may feel intimidated if someone is too close, they may judge the couple in the park as exhibitionist or too liberal, etc.

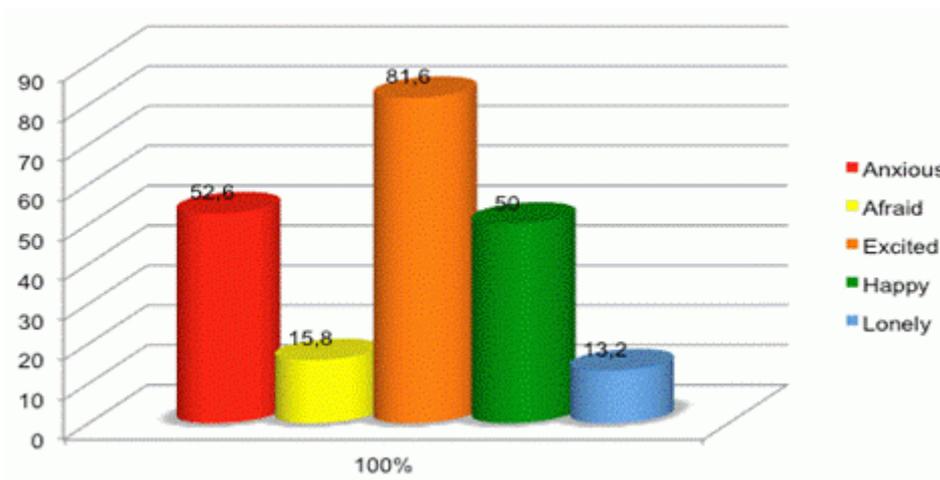
In order to help them think about the Spanish culture and minimize the culture shock effects, in the "Quick Tips to Spanish Cultural Behaviors" document the same picture of the couple kissing in the park is presented with this text: "In Spain, personal space is smaller than in other cultures. There is a lot of physical contact and closeness. It is normal to see couples holding hands, kissing and hugging in public places (metro, parks, etc.)". The text that goes with the picture of the two young women kissing in the cheek says: "In Spain, when you meet someone for the first time in an informal context, Spaniards usually greet others with a kiss on each cheek. It is common between girls and between boys and girls (not so common between two boys). Spaniards also kiss their friends when you see them or when you say goodbye". Now, they now that it is common in Spain to kiss your friends, to hold hands and to touch them, etc. They may not like this behavior, they may sometimes feel uncomfortable, they may love it and adopt this behavior to greet their country fellows. The most important thing is that they now know that this is a behavior they are going to witness regularly in the new cultural environment and that it does not make sense to judge it according to their interpretation patters as they do not work properly in this case in Spain.

Here we have another example, this time related to the food in Spain. Another item in this third section of the survey was a multiple choice item illustrated with a picture of the floor of a bar covered with paper napkins and toothpicks. The question was: “How would you react if you entered a bar and the floor looked like this?” Three options were given: (a) I would not even enter because it is dirty/ I would leave; (b) I would assume they have a problem with the cleaning service, and (c) It is fine. I guess they offer great food and many people eat here. 71.4% of respondents said they would not even go in; 22.4% said the owner had a problem with the cleaning service and only 6.2% would deduce that it is a good place to eat. Clearly, the majority of the students entering a bar like this will be shocked, as they will tend to interpret this situation using the patterns of their culture of origin (they have a cleaning problem, the bar is dirty, the food is sure to be bad, etc.). The “Quick Tips to Spanish Cultural Behaviors” document explains that “traditional Spanish bars with a lot of clients usually have their floors covered with paper napkins and toothpicks. It is interpreted as a sign of good quality. A Spaniard would think: many people eat here so the food must be good”. We do not know if our students will finally go in a bar like this but if they do, or if they see the floor from the entrance, they will probably not judge the place from the point of view of their culture of origin (where this would be unthinkable); we hope they will understand that this is normal in Spain.

## 2.2 Exit Survey

Out of the 49 students who answered the survey at the beginning of their program in Madrid, only 38 answered the exit survey, which was passed just before the end of their one-month stay. The aim of this exit survey is, on the one hand, to make students reflect upon the cultural experience they have lived in an environment that is different from the one they are used to, and, at the same time, we wanted to obtain information about their adaptation process to this new life. We will now summarize briefly the most relevant results obtained from this exit survey.

First of all, we wanted to obtain information about how the participants remembered feeling when they arrived in Madrid. The attitude and the positive predisposition help enormously to adapt to a new cultural environment. As it can be seen in the graph, most of our students were excited, more than half of them were anxious, and only a small percentage felt afraid and lonely. All these feelings are normal and correspond to the typified reactions when facing new situations.



*Image 7. Participants' Feelings at Arrival*

Regarding the adaptation process of the participants to the new Spanish cultural environment, 73.7% found the effort to adapt a hard process, although only occasionally. In 65.8% of the cases they wanted to escape the Spanish culture at some point or another. 60.5% found shocking or disgusting things and felt weird or nervous when relating to Spaniards; however, only 2.6% did not feel accepted by locals. When, at some point, participants had negative feelings, 79% solved it contacting their friends and family back home (phone, Skype or Facebook), 60.5% going out with other country fellows and 29% going out with Spaniards they had met.

With regards to the aspect of the Spanish culture they had more difficulties adapting, 63.2% answered that the foreign language; 36.8% food and eating habits; 24.2% said social interaction and 13.2% schedules. In 10 of the cases, students said to have suffered some kind of discrimination during their stay in Spain. Among this discrimination cases they mentioned the impatience they were treated with, how linguistically inferior they felt when Spaniards assumed they had a lower level they believed to have; and in two cases they made reference to being treated badly because of being North-American or Afro-American.

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### 3. CONCLUSIONS

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As it has been seen along this presentation, culture shock is a process that every foreign student participating in an experience outside his or her cultural environment of origin will suffer to some extent. The aim of the surveys we designed, as well as the explanatory material students were given after, has always been to help students adapt to the Spanish culture in the least aggressive way possible and to open their minds so that they can understand and tolerate different forms of thinking, acting and living. With the data compiled from the analysis we intend to improve the surveys so that they can fit better the students we host at Antonio de Nebrija University. To conclude, we consider it essential to implement lectures and workshops on culture shock and adaptation process in every international department; they will improve the quality of the international experience of our students.

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