The role of international student interactions in English as a lingua franca in L2 acquisition, L2 motivational development and intercultural learning during study abroad

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Abstract

Crossing borders features prominently as a theme in study abroad, not only in terms of students' physical border crossings but also in their intercultural interactions with second language (L2) speakers whose background (linguistic and otherwise) they may perceive as markedly different from their own. Researchers have had a long-standing interest in study abroad participants' interactions with other L2 speakers abroad for their perceived potential to enhance L2 development, L2 motivation and intercultural learning processes. The focus of existing studies in this area has been on the interactions of study abroad participants with host national students, while their interactions with other international students who are also L2 users abroad have received far less attention, despite the ever-growing international student populations at European universities. This study examined students' views regarding the role that *lingua franca* (LF) interactions with other international students played in their L2 acquisition, their L2 motivational development and their intercultural learning during study abroad. The data were derived from an empirical study that involved 81 German ERASMUS students who were studying in the UK for up to one academic year. The students' views were elicited at the end of their stay with open-ended questionnaire items, and their verbal responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The analysis of the students' reflections revealed a number of functions in each of the three areas, highlighting the potential of international student interactions as a viable

source of L2 acquisition, L2 self-motivation, and intercultural learning during study abroad.

1. Introduction

The promotion of student mobility forms a key objective of European higher education policy, which has come to feature prominently in the internationalization strategies pursued within the individual member states, both at the national and the institutional level (Engel, Sandstrom, Van der Aa, & Glass, 2015). The EU's ERASMUS program (European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), which has constituted part of ERASMUS+ since 2014, is by far the world's largest mobility program for students and staff in higher education with more than 300,000 funded student exchanges per year. "Improved foreign language competences" and "enhanced intercultural awareness" are two of its key learning objectives (European Commission, 2014, p. 31).

Participation in study abroad involves border crossings not only in the form of students' physical relocation to another national context, but also as part of their engagement in interactions with other second language (L2) speakers whose background (linguistic and otherwise) students may perceive as markedly different from their own. A greater abundance of opportunities for engagement in such intercultural interactions is arguably one of the key features that distinguish study abroad and home country environments, traditionally conceived. Unsurprisingly perhaps, there has been considerable research interest in L2-mediated interactions as they may promote second language acquisition (SLA) through comprehensible input, noticing, the production of output, negotiation of meaning, and implicit and explicit feedback (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996, 2015; Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1985). There is also research evidence that intercultural interactions may strengthen students' L2 learning motivation (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Yang & Kim, 2011) and promote the development of intercultural competence, investigated mostly in terms of more positive attitudes towards the "other" (e.g., Hernández, 2010; Kinginger, 2008; Yager, 1998).

Presumably on the assumption that first language (L1) speakers provide superior input for SLA, the existing study abroad research in this area has focused on exchange students' interactions with host nationals. Interactions with other international students abroad, be they temporarily mobile within their degree program (as is the case for ERASMUS students) or degree-seeking (i.e.,

studying towards an entire degree at a university abroad), remain considerably under-researched, despite the ever-growing international student populations at European universities. The present study seeks to contribute to this area by examining students' views on the role that interactions with other international students played in their L2 acquisition, L2 motivational development and inter-cultural learning during ERASMUS study abroad.

2. Literature review

International student populations at higher education institutions in most European countries are growing, largely due to increasing numbers of credit-mobile European students that participate in ERASMUS+ exchanges (European Commission, 2018), and to increasing numbers of degree-mobile students from within and outside of Europe (Eurostat, 2018). Perhaps not surprisingly in this light, study abroad research carried out in Europe has found that a major part of international students' social networks abroad consists of other international students (e.g., Beaven, 2012; de Federico de la Rúa, 2008; Hessel, 2016). As a result, the daily interactions within their local friendship circles frequently involve the use of a *lingua franca* (LF), defined here as a language which is neither of the students' L1. Rather, the language of communication may be one that is either widely spoken in the destination country or another widely spoken language, such as English. In the current study, which is set in the UK, English as the lingua franca used among the international students happens to fulfil both of these roles. It is clearly beyond the scope of this article to discuss, or even to summarize the current debates in the field of English as a lingua franca (ELF; e.g., Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2013). Most significantly, the definition of ELF interactions adopted in this study is one that excludes English L1 speakers as participants. While there are wider definitions that include English L1 speakers (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2013), the narrower view is consistent with the research interest in ELF interactions among international students for whom English is a second language.

Empirical studies on students' views regarding the benefits of LF interactions with other L2 learners for SLA (only few of which involve study abroad participants) have typically produced rather negative results. The participants in these studies tended to hold strong reservations against other L2 speakers as a source of learning and showed clear preferences for L1 speaker input. These preferences were based on beliefs in the superiority of L1 speaker input in terms of accent, grammatical correctness, lexical diversity, and idiomaticity (e.g., Dervin, 2013; Friedrich, 2000; Li, 2009; Matsuda, 2003; Timmis, 2002). However, a recent study with 141 ERASMUS study abroad participants in Italy conducted by Borghetti and Beaven (2017) indicates what seems to be a cautious shift in

learner attitudes towards greater recognition of the potential benefits of LF communication with other L2 speakers (in this case other international students abroad) for L2 learning. The participants' views still tended to show a preference for L1 speaker input, sometimes based on such deep-seated assumptions that they failed to understand how this could even be questioned. And yet, counter-tendencies were also evident in the data. For example, some students thought that L2 speakers were more supportive and accommodating in their language behavior, and showed greater understanding of their communicative needs, which the participants considered beneficial for learning. These views were more prevalent among the students who reported having used English rather than the host country language as a lingua franca during study abroad.

There are indeed empirical grounds to justify and support such a shift in beliefs. Studies focusing on L2 learner interactions suggest that while they do not tend to be as lexically rich and syntactically complex as conversations with L1-speaking participants (e.g., Sato, 2015), they tend to involve higher volumes of learner output (e.g., Porter, 1986), self-corrections (e.g., Shehadeh, 2001), and corrective feedback (Sato & Lyster, 2007). This may be a result of learners being more ready to take risks in speaking and signal to their fellow learners that they are experiencing difficulties with comprehension (e.g., Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Pani-nos, & Linnell, 1996), as well as lower levels of anxiety experienced in interactions with other learners (e.g., Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). A recent classroom-based study by Sato and Viveros (2016) also found that L2 learners with lower L2 proficiency levels tended to engage in more supportive and collaborative interactions, which tended to produce more opportunities for learning than interactions among more advanced-level learners. While these studies were carried out in a classroom context, they highlight LF communication that involves only L2 learners as a context that may bear its very own advantages for SLA. However, research in the field of study abroad has yet to link LF interactions among international students abroad more strongly with linguistic outcomes, measured and perceived. The current study examines study abroad participants' perceptions regarding the role of LF interactions with other international students in their L2 learning.

To the best of the author's knowledge, no study abroad research inquiry to date has examined the ways in which LF interactions among international students may affect students' L2 self-motivation to use and further improve the L2. Existing studies merely touch upon the motivational capacity of contact with L1 speakers (e.g., Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006; Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014). In the present study, self-motivation to use and further improve the L2 is conceptualized as resulting from learners' reflections on their *L2 self-concept*, which denotes the conceptions individuals hold about themselves as users and learners of the L2 (Mercer, 2011). Self-concept extends across time, containing

conceptions of the self in the past, the present, and the future, with the latter expressing mere possibilities for self-development (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is a well-established construct in social cognitive psychology that forms part of the present-orientated dimension of self-concept. In general terms, self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about their "capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3), or more simply put, an individual's beliefs about what he or she is able to do. Bandura (1994) proposed that self-efficacy plays a central role in how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave in relation to specific tasks. This includes what kind of tasks or activities they pursue, as how controllable or threatening these are perceived, how much effort they expend on them, whether they persist when obstacles are encountered, as well as how much stress and anxiety they experience during task completion (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). In L2 learning, stronger self-efficacy in a given skill domain has been associated with higher levels of engagement in L2 usage and fewer avoidance behaviors, lower levels of L2 use anxiety (e.g., Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006), more effort expended on L2 learning (e.g., Mills et al., 2006), more effective usage of strategies (e.g., Graham, 2007), greater persistence in the face of difficulties (e.g., Matthews, 2010), stronger valuing of L2 learning (e.g., Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007), and higher attainment in the respective L2 skill domain (e.g., Hsieh & Kang, 2010). Both Bandura's theoretical considerations and the results obtained in SLA research support the notion that L2 self-efficacy plays a key role in self-motivation to use and further improve the L2. It is therefore included as a construct in this study on the impact of LF interactions with other international students on L2 self-motivation. It is plausible that engagement in such interactions should affect L2 self-motivation because they provide learners with self-relevant information that may lead to development in their L2 self-conceptions, including L2 self-efficacy in pertinent domains. The present study examines this hypothesis based on the students' reflections.

The third domain under consideration concerns students' intercultural learning, that is, the development of their intercultural competence in the context of their interactions with other international students. Intercultural competence itself remains a debated construct with regard to its content, structure and assessment. However, currently widely accepted conceptualizations of the construct converge in proposing a multi-dimensional construct with affective (attitudes towards self and other), cognitive (knowledge and awareness of self and other), and behavioral (skills in relating) dimensions (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Rathje, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Thus, the students' responses are analyzed with regard to development in these three domains, and with a focus on developing *intercultural awareness* in particular, as it constitutes a key learning

objective of participation in the ERASMUS+ program (European Commission, 2014). Intercultural awareness is widely regarded as part of the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). It is understood here as awareness of the *relativity* of beliefs, values and expectations transmitted within different social groupings, and their impact on human thought and action (one could think of this as a kind of *meta-cultural awareness*), as well as awareness of *one's own* internalized beliefs, values and expectations (*self-awareness*). Developing such awareness has been held to be crucial for interpreting and evaluating other belief systems, expectations and behaviors in their own terms rather than according to one's own expectations of what is normal, and for developing a respectful attitude towards them (Bennett, 2009; Chen, 2010).

Based on the knowledge gaps identified, the present study sought to answer the following research question: What are the students' views concerning the role that interactions with other international students in English as a lingua franca played in (1) their L2 acquisition, (2) the development of their L2 self-motivation, and (3) their intercultural learning during study abroad?

3. Method

3.1. The study abroad context: The ERASMUS program

The present study is set in the context of ERASMUS, the world's largest formal exchange program for students and staff, which now forms a major part of ERASMUS+ (European Commission, 2014). ERASMUS exchanges last between 3 and 12 months (6.2 months on average; European Commission, 2015). The preparation of ERASMUS students typically involves assistance with academic and administrative matters, and advice on dealing with practicalities in the host country in the form of one-off preparatory events or online learning modules. Further support that students receive from their departmental ERASMUS coordinators varies greatly from some initial academic advice to more comprehensive mentorship before and/or during the exchange, depending on the individual. Linguistic preparation and in-program provision of L2 instruction are not a mandatory part of ERASMUS placements in the UK so long as the minimum language requirements of the host universities are met (as was the case for all participants in the current study). Placements are typically implemented in the form of a direct-enrolment program where exchange students attend courses together with local students. Participants in the current study reported having 11.3 academic contact hours per week on average.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were 81 German university students (57 female, 24 male; mean age: 22.21, *SD* = 1.37) who were studying a range of subjects at 44 different higher education institutions across Germany. In order to identify them correctly as outgoing ERASMUS students to the UK, the students were recruited via email through the ERASMUS offices of their German home institutions. Of the participants, 40 students were studying in the UK for two terms or more (Group 1), while 41 students were staying in the host country for one term only (Group 2). Upon departure, students had completed an average of four terms of their home degree with good success (average GPA = 2.0 on a scale from 1 [highest] to 6 [lowest]). All students had extensive English language learning histories with 8-9 years of learning English at school and an average of two terms of English language instruction at university. Their proficiency at program entry, based on their most recent IELTS/ TOEFL/CAE result and the baseline proficiency test, was upper-intermediate to advanced.

3.3. Instruments

All students completed comprehensive questionnaires in German prior to their departure, after one term abroad, and after nine months abroad (students in the longer term abroad Group 1 only). The questionnaires were administered via an online platform and accessed anonymously with a personalized link that was emailed directly to each participant by the survey host. The questionnaire itself was preceded by a consent form, which detailed the conditions of participation, and the processing and storage of data. The wider questionnaire contained closed- and open-ended items that captured psychological constructs, such as L2 self-efficacy, L2 use anxiety, L2 learning effort expended, as well as the participants' L2 learning and mobility histories, academic background, study abroad placement, course work and extracurricular activities abroad, L2 learning experiences, intercultural interactions, and reflections on the study abroad experience as a whole. With particular relevance to the data discussed below, the students' views concerning the role of ELF interactions in their own learning were elicited using the following open-ended item (English translation/German original):

> What kind of role, if any, do you think the interactions with other international students (except English mother-tongue speakers) played in your learning?
> [Welche Rolle, falls überhaupt, hat Ihrer Meinung nach die Interaktion mit anderen internationalen Studierenden (englische Muttersprachler ausgenommen) für Ihren Lernprozess gespielt?]

A written response to this item was not mandatory. An alternative response option was ticking a box labelled "None/keine Rolle". While the questionnaire as a whole was themed around the students' L2 learning, their L2 self-motivation, intercultural learning and personal development, this specific item was deliberately kept open to avoid leading the students to any of the three areas in particular, and to allow for individual and different associations in the response. The disadvantage of this strategy is that more students may have shared thoughts on the role of their interactions with other international students in relation to their SLA, their motivational development, *and* their intercultural learning if asked specifically.

3.4. Procedures of data analysis

The students' questionnaire responses were imported into MAXQDA 2018 for coding. They were analyzed using thematic content analysis, in which the three *a priori* main categories were: the perceived role of interactions with other international students for whom English was L2 in the students' *second language acquisition* (1), in their *L2 motivational development* (2), and in their *intercultural learning* (3). Thematic sub-categories were developed inductively based on the analysis of the data. The analysis followed the procedures for thematic content analysis detailed in Kuckartz (2012). In the reporting, all sub-categories or themes are exemplified with one illustrative quote irrespective of category size (i.e., their prevalence in the data).

4. Findings

The clear majority of students in both groups (77.5 % in Group 1; 85.4 % in Group 2) thought that the ELF interactions with other international students had played a role in their English language acquisition, their motivational development and/or their intercultural learning abroad, which they elaborated upon in a written response. The number of students who explicitly stated that these interactions had played an *important* or *very important* role was higher within Group 2, among students who had studied abroad for one term only. The following sections will discuss the ways in which the interactions with other international students were perceived to contribute to the students' L2 learning, their L2 self-motivation and intercultural learning.

4.1. The role of lingua franca interactions in students' L2 learning

Just under half (41.5 %) of the students' responses in the abroad group (Group 2), and 27.5 % of those in the longer term abroad group (Group 2) referred to the

role of LF interactions with other international students in the students' *L2 learning*. The most prevalent theme within both groups was *fluency development through LF communication*. For the advanced classroom learners in the present study, LF communication with other international students played a key role in developing the fluency in English that they so desired. Some students explicitly stated that the interactions with other international students were their *only* outlet for speaking practice during their stay in the UK:

Extract 1

A very large role because other than with my local language buddy the interactions with English students were rather limited.

Significantly, in the students' responses there was a certain duality between gratitude for the possibility to practice the language and feelings of discomfort associated with speaking. Their statements frequently featured expressions such as "having to speak" or "being forced to speak" English (Germ. *man war dazu gezwungen*) with other internationals, thus expressing a certain pressure to engage in something that one does not feel comfortable with and would otherwise not choose to do:

Extract 2

One was forced to speak English, whereby it became the normal language of communication.

This relates to initial, sometimes rather strong inhibitions and uncertainties surrounding the students' ability to converse in English, which was perhaps unexpected considering their extensive English language learning histories (this motivational theme will be discussed in Section 4.2). Most importantly here, the interactions with other international students facilitated L2 fluency development by pushing the students to speak in a context that was perceived as a rather safe space for doing so. Other than fluency development, students also referred to the contribution of LF communication to building their vocabularies:

Extract 3

Everyone has their own active vocabulary. By talking to international students I picked up new words that I like but haven't used actively yet.

Students also reported observing preferences in word choice, which they associated with different groups of L1 speakers, for example, their fellow L1 speakers of German:

Extract 4

Everyone has a different active vocabulary. The vocabulary of Germans seems quite similar. So it was interesting for me to see what kind of words the French tend to use actively.

Further and in relation to meta-linguistic awareness, students reported developing awareness of what they thought of as L1 transfer patterns:

Extract 5

Sometimes one would notice mistakes that seemed typically 'French', for example, but similarly would take care to watch one's own language and vocabulary.

As another perceived benefit of LF communication with English speakers of different linguistic backgrounds (mostly other ERASMUS students from within Europe), students referred to improvements in their listening comprehension skills and particularly in their ability to understand different accents:

Extract 6

It was important in order to learn to understand different accents.

While there was consensus in the students' responses regarding the benefits of conversing with other international students for developing fluency, they seemed more divided on its efficacy as a source of input for SLA otherwise (e.g., grammatical correctness, eloquence, vocabulary). Five students explicitly expressed doubts regarding the potential of this practice for learning, and even concerns about it being counterproductive, as one risks the acquisition of "incorrect" language:

Extract 7

You gain confidence in speaking but there is no guarantee for correctness, hence no real improvement.

There is an assumption here that the language used in LF communication may not be "correct" while the language of L1 speakers must be, and is therefore the only valid input for L2 learning. This also supposes a view of SLA as an un-reflected osmotic process that is contingent largely on the correctness of the source. Thus, as previously observed (e.g., Borghetti & Beaven, 2017), some of the students' statements expressed or implied inferiority of LF communication with other L2 speakers to communication with L1 speakers as a source of L2 learning. That said, a number of students expressed an opposing view, proposing that LF communication was just as helpful in developing L2 proficiency as speaking with L1 speakers:

Extract 8

Speaking English, regardless of whether that is with native or other non-native speakers, can only be helpful.

A few students even referred to "incorrect" language or mistakes made by others as a resource for their own learning:

Extract 9

A large part of my interactions in English was with international students. That was very exciting for me since you can learn from others' mistakes.

4.2. The role of lingua franca interactions in shaping students' L2 self-motivation

15 of the students' reflections (7 in Group 1; 8 in Group 2) referred to the role that interactions with other international students in ELF had played in shaping their L2 self-motivation. The central theme in this category was the vital role that these interactions played for some students in building their self-efficacy in conversing in English, and thereby their self-motivation to speak. Despite their extensive histories of learning English, the students' L2 speaking self-concepts tended to be underdeveloped and marked by uncertainties surrounding their ability to converse. ELF interactions with other international students for whom English was a second language were perceived as an initially "safer" context for speaking practice. The sense of being in a safe context for speaking practice seemed to be conveyed through a sense of being on equal footing, mistakes going unnoticed, and shared understandings of what it means to be an L2 learner:

Extract 10

An important role. I felt that I wasn't the only one who couldn't speak perfect English. We encouraged each other and were understanding of the other's situation, which helped me to carry on learning and gave me courage to speak. It was easier to speak English with each other where one is not afraid of making mistakes as no one can speak the language perfectly.

In the minds of the students, the language produced neither had to be perfectly correct, nor free of an L1-influenced accent, which seemed to enhance their self-motivation to engage in speaking practice. In particular, the thought of not having to worry about making mistakes featured prominently in the students' answers, as exemplified by the following comment: "A very important role. You learn to just converse despite the language barrier without feeling the

pressure that every mistake in grammar or word choice gets noticed immediately". Some also reported meeting specifically for speaking practice:

> Extract 11
>
> *We met on a daily basis and talked to each other. In doing so, one gains self-confidence confidence in the language.*

The L2 practice within these LF interactions enabled *enactive mastery experiences* (Bandura, 1997), that is, experiences of successful communication, which was a key factor in building the students' self-efficacy in using the L2 in social interactions and in enhancing their self-motivation to speak. LF interactions also seemed to strengthen students' self-efficacy by providing opportunities for mere self-validation. In other words, they provided perhaps over-due answers to questions of how well the students were able to converse (on different topics, in different settings, etc.). As uncertainties surrounding students' speaking skills get reduced, the certainty of self-beliefs and predictions of performance success increase, which enhances self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). One such source of self-validation (and often one of self-enhancement for these advanced learners) were external comparisons with other ESL speakers:

> Extract 12
>
> *I might sound like a douchebag, but when others are worse* [at English] *than I am - which many of them are – then it does give you confidence.*

Vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997), that is, watching perceived similar others (their international peers) succeed at conversing in English, were another source of self-efficacy represented in the data. Such observations build confidence by conveying to the students that successful communication in English is a realistic option for them as well:

> Extract 13
>
> *It gave me some vocabulary and above all self-confidence since many weren't good* [at English], *but managed well nonetheless.*

LF interactions with other international students did not only have the capacity to strengthen the students' self-efficacy and self-motivation to *speak* English, but in some cases also enhanced the students' self-motivation to further improve their English. As a type of vicarious experience, one student reported being motivated by encounters with highly proficient students for whom English was a second language. The highly proficient ESL speakers seemed to serve as

mastery models for self-development with whom the student could identify. These encounters may enhance L2 learning motivation in several ways: by increasing self-efficacy through the vicarious experience and by replacing native speaker ideals, which may contribute to greater accessibility and specificity of learners' ideal L2 selves:

Extract 14

A lot, since I almost only interacted with other international students. It has motivated me to improve my English further since I met quite a few who can speak English really, really well.

The interactions with other international students also had the capacity to enhance self-motivation to improve the L2 by highlighting the value of English as a tool for relating to others from around the world. This motivational capacity seemed to derive from the transformation of an imagined potential into lived experience through the interactions with international peers:

Extract 15

A large part of my interactions in English was with international students. . . . They also strengthened my interest in further improving my English language skills since it was only thanks to the English skills we had acquired that we could talk and get to know each other in the first place.

With particular significance to discussions of ELF as an impediment to multilingualism, there were also instances of enhanced self-motivation to learn additional languages represented in the data. The underlying motive appears as a generalized integrative motive for learning further foreign languages. One may highlight this as an instance where learning English actually enhanced or even conditioned motivation to learn other languages:

Extract 16

I got to know many new perspectives and their cultures and am motivated to learn more languages.

4.3. The role of lingua franca interactions in students' intercultural learning

There were 20 responses in total in which students elaborated on the role of interactions with other international students in their intercultural learning. The responses in this category were spread almost evenly across the two groups (9 in Group 1, and 11 in Group 2). Most commonly, they referred to interactions

with other international students as an opportunity for learning about other "cultures" or national systems, as exemplified below:

> Extract 17
>
> *The other international students made it possible for me to gain insights into foreign cultures.*

This strong interest in getting to know more about other systems, societies or "cultures" is unsurprising perhaps for internationally mobile students, and yet encouraging as it cannot be taken for granted. Significantly, it seemed to stimulate engaging conversations and personally meaningful exchanges in L2. The level of complexity and biases in what the students learned about *the Other* in their exchanges would be worth an investigation in itself, which would require the recording and analysis of these discourses. Considering the students' own perspective on this matter, some students stated that the "insights into other cultures" gained in the conversations with their peers had indeed helped them to let go of preconceptions and prejudice, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

> Extract 18
>
> *A very important role because they* [the interactions] *provided me with insights into other cultures and cleared prejudice out of the way.*

The second major theme was related to the students' exposure to different perspectives and gaining insights into different systems. This theme reflects a developing awareness that one's familiar social norms, expectations and assumptions regarding ways of life are not be taken for granted, absolute or normal, but relative:

> Extract 19
>
> *The interactions with other international students are also about exchanging experiences of living and studying in the different countries. This exchange is very beneficial for learning because it shows you that systems and methods are relative, and that other approaches and ways of thinking also lead to success. Getting to know these other perspectives is a real enrichment of one's own thinking and learning.*

While such growing awareness of the relativity of familiar beliefs, norms, and expectations may be considered as part of the cognitive domain of intercultural competence, it is also associated with affective changes as it enables a re-e*valuation* of other belief systems, expectations, and behaviors as different but equally valid, rather than as "ab-normal" or "strange" according to one's own standards. The excerpt below exemplifies such a self-perceived shift towards greater tolerance of other ways of thinking and behaving:

Extract 20

The communication with other international students has really helped me a lot in terms of self-confidence and tolerance since I got to know a lot of new perspectives and their cultures.

Also belonging under this theme of developing intercultural awareness, some of the responses provided indications for growing self-awareness that is, an increasing awareness of the specifics of one's own belief system as a result of the interactions with other international students:

Extract 21

A very important role because the exchange on the different cultures influenced my perspective on my own culture, other cultures and European culture very strongly.

5. Discussion

The present study examined students' views regarding the role of ELF interactions with other international students in their second language acquisition, their L2 motivational development and their intercultural learning during study abroad.

For the advanced classroom learners in the current study, the ELF communication with other international students emerged as a key site for developing the much-desired fluency in English, as illustrated by the excerpt below:

Extract 22

I had no inhibitions to speak English and therefore learned much more than I ever learned at school or in any language course. I developed a real feel for the language.

Most significantly in this respect, the students' statements highlighted the importance of LF interactions with other international students as a *safe* space for practice. Thus, not only were opportunities for extended conversations with other international students more available than with L1 speakers, but they may also be the initially *preferred* choice, especially among the less efficacious students. In this respect, Hessel (2019) showed with the same sample of advanced classroom learners that the students' self-efficacy in using the L2 in social interactions upon arrival in the UK statistically predicted their patterns of social contact with host-national students, as well as overall L2 proficiency gain during study abroad (Hessel, 2017).

Further perceived linguistic benefits of LF interactions included improved listening comprehension and ability to understand different accents, vocabulary acquisition (including discussions *about* vocabulary), and developing meta-linguistic awareness. However, while there was wide consensus in the responses

regarding the benefits of L2 practice in LF interactions for developing fluency, the students' attitudes were more varied regarding its efficacy as a source of L2 learning otherwise. Interestingly in this regard, the benefits of LF communication for L2 learning were more consistently supported by students in the shorter term abroad group, who had studied abroad for one term only. Thus, the role of length of stay in the perceived benefits of LF interactions with other international students would be an interesting theme for further exploration in future studies.

As for the most prominent motivational functions of LF interactions, the analysis highlighted their significance in helping the students to build up self-efficacy in using the L2 in social interactions. The key mechanisms in this process were enactive mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997), vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997), that is, observing peers succeed at conversing in English, as well as external comparisons with the skills of other ESL speakers (Marsh, 1986). Even if external comparisons with peers may not be favorable and students find themselves among the less proficient speakers in their international student group, these comparisons will still contribute to increasing self-certainty (i.e., provide answers to questions such as "How good am I at speaking?") and thereby strengthen self-efficacy. This key motivational function of LF interactions among international students is highly important because self-efficacy in using the L2 in social interactions has been shown as a predictor of overall L2 proficiency gain during study abroad (Hessel, 2017). The students' reflections also highlighted that even participants with extensive L2 learning histories may still struggle with a weak L2 speaking self-concept and benefit greatly from LF interactions in this regard.

Considering this linguistic and motivational potential, student support programs need to raise awareness of LF interactions with other second language speakers/international students as a viable source of L2 learning in its own right so that students may make the most of the affordances of contemporary study abroad contexts. As pointed out by Borghetti and Beaven (2017), study abroad participants may still not be cognizant of the learning potential of LF interactions due to the prevailing dominance of L1 or native speaker models in L2 learning and teaching. It is also important in this regard to make students aware that they are multilingual speakers, whose linguistic repertoire is different from that of monolingual speakers of the language they are learning. Besides recalibrating goals and role models, such awareness may orientate them towards other L2 speakers in the external comparisons that inform the formation and development of their L2 self-concepts.

It would also be desirable for host institutions to harness the motivational and linguistic potential of international student interactions directly by encouraging and supporting gatherings of this kind. Bringing together international students with a shared interest in L2 practice is different from the commonly run

ERASMUS societies, in which the focus tends to be on shared interests of travel and cultural exchange. If the exchanges in these meeting spaces are partly facilitated (e.g., when the space is first opened up), they may provide a context for implementing the suggestions for supporting students' intercultural learning provided below, in order to take their conversations about cultural phenomena to another level. Significantly, this does not make opportunities for interactions with L1 speakers obsolete since exposure to a wide variety of speakers is desirable for students' linguistic development. It also remains unclear to what extent, for example, self-efficacy built up in LF communication may readily transfer to interactions with L1 speakers.

In the intercultural learning domain, the students' statements are indicative of a number of desirable learning processes, including the development of intercultural awareness, and associated changes in attitude towards more tolerance of other ways of thinking and behaving. Another component of the attitudinal dimension of intercultural competence, curiosity and interest in other cultures (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), is also evidenced well in the students' statements. Moreover, some of the reflections suggest that simplistic generalizations about the Other (stereotypes and prejudice) are being replaced with more complex beliefs as a result of the students' exchanges. However, the students' use of the word *culture/s* in the present study suggests an understanding of the concept as a monolithic entity that defines people, largely referring to nationality, rather than culture as a fluent, negotiated, and often instrumentalized process of identification, inclusion and exclusion. This understanding may be prompted through salience of the students' national identity in this context, or it may represent a generally narrow understanding of the concept (similar to "large culture" as defined in Holliday, 1999). Significantly, the latter bears a danger of essentializing, that is, *reducing* self and other to a single identity marker (in this case nationality) and over-emphasizing difference rather than recognizing commonalities, for example, in shared subject cultures, sports cultures, student culture and so on (e.g., Dervin, 2016).

It is therefore highly desirable in the context of pre- and in-program interventions to extend students' conceptions of culture and raise awareness of intersectionality, that is, the multitude of identity markers such as gender, age, social class, or profession in any one individual (see e.g., IEREST, 2015, for actual teaching resources). Such deconstruction of the concept should also address the political dimension of culture and its instrumentalization in processes of othering, inclusion and exclusion, both on the individual and the collective level. This will facilitate the recognition of these processes at work in the students' interactions abroad and help them to consider overlaps and commonalities with others, rather than dwelling on difference constructed along national lines as their

awareness of the relativity of belief systems grows. Developing intercultural awareness, that is, growing awareness of the relativity of belief systems, including one's own, while desirable, liberating or "mind-opening," also creates threats to self-concept and is therefore troublesome (Perkins, 1999). This is another strong rationale for combining the *experience* of diversity during study abroad with *guided reflection* in order to enable transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Moreover, while intercultural learning processes were evidenced in statements of about 25% (20 out of 81) of the participants, it remains unclear whether the other students experienced similar learning. Facilitation of intercultural learning before, during and after study abroad serves to support these processes in all participants to maximize its potential as a transformative experience for learning and self-development.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide initial insights into the role of LF interactions with other international students in study abroad participants' L2 acquisition, L2 motivational development, and intercultural learning, and thereby inspire further research on this largely unexplored topic. The findings highlight the potential of LF interactions for enhancing student learning and development in all three of these areas. Undoubtedly, there are limitations to using open-ended questionnaire items as a means of data elicitation, as compared to face-to-face interviews, for example. Above all perhaps, they constrain the length and depth of the response obtained and do not allow for clarifications or follow-up questions. They also lack in context concerning the participant background (the "self" that is speaking) and the position from which the statement is being made. Naturally, there is a bias in the interpretation of findings towards those participants who decided to provide a written response, rather than ticking the "no role" option.

Future work will need to investigate the ways in which LF interactions may affect the L2 learning, L2 self-motivation and intercultural learning of study abroad participants and the dynamics involved further and in greater depth, using face-to-face interviews or focus groups. The affordances, as well as the limitations and potential detriments of LF interactions need to be explored with learners at a range of different L2 proficiency levels. Studies employing mixed methodologies may also attempt to link students' engagement in LF interactions with linguistic and motivational outcomes in a quantitative manner. Future studies may also inquire further into the students' *discourses*, their co-construction of images of self and other, their positioning and resistance in the context of LF interactions in order to gain deeper insights into the level of criticality of these informal exchanges. Research on study abroad participants' interculturality in the context of LF interactions will need to

consider students at different L2 proficiency levels as the latter would presumably influence the depth and complexity in which beliefs, expectations, experiences, and cultural phenomena can be discussed. The findings of this study highlight LF interactions among international students as a promising area for study abroad research with a number of interesting directions, all of which are highly pertinent to study abroad practice and programming.

Acknowledgments

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