

German Study Abroad Students' Language Learner Identity and Investment in English^{1,2}

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Abstract

Within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), there has been an abundance of research targeting students' study abroad experiences in native speaker environments. Due to the current global role of English, the variety of study abroad contexts is expanding; however, the amount of research set in nonnative speaker environments is negligible. In the present study, I take a social perspective by focusing on study abroad (exchange) students' language learner identity and investment in English in nonnative contexts. Seven female university students from a European country, namely, Germany, were interviewed. They had taken part in the Erasmus+ student mobility program previously. The collected data were subjected to the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), which resulted in four emerging themes, namely, native speaker idealism, global citizenship, plurilingual attitude, and engagement in language practices. Based on the findings, some hypotheses are proposed and ideas for further research suggested.

Keywords: study abroad, Europe, English, language learner identity, investment

1 Introduction

In the current era of globalization, internationalization has become a significant aspect of higher education (Jackson, 2008; 2010). Consequently, participation in study mobility programs is increasing (Block, 2007; Jackson, 2010; Kinginger, 2009). This growing trend has also attracted the attention of researchers within the field of second language acquisition (SLA). As Churchill and DuFon (2006) point out, “there are perhaps few contexts as potentially rich and complex as study

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2 The research findings were presented at the 2nd International Conference on Communication across Cultures (Warsaw, Poland; 29–30 September 2016) by the author of the paper.

abroad” (p.1). There have been numerous studies reporting on how study abroad (exchange) students’ linguistic abilities and individual learner differences change in native speaker contexts (for overviews, see Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Jackson, 2008; 2010). In the case of the English language, however, native speaker contexts are no longer the only ones worth studying. Due to the spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and the internationalization of higher education, it is becoming equally sensible to conduct research in a nonnative English-speaking environment as well. Nevertheless, the number of studies examining study abroad students’ language learning experiences in nonnative English-speaking contexts is still scarce (e.g., Dervin, 2013; Kalocsai, 2009; Smid, 2017; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). Also, the range of the populations under scrutiny has been limited (Block, 2007)—for example, to my knowledge, no research has been conducted with exchange students from Germany. Thus, as Kinginger (2013) argues, “there is a clear need for greater diversity in the sending and receiving countries represented in the literature” (p.6).

Research into the study abroad context has undergone some changes over the years. While earlier research tended to focus on the linguistic product of learners, which principally required the adoption of quantitative methods; in recent years, the emphasis has shifted to the language learning process (see Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Jackson, 2008). Consequently, the examination of individual learner differences, such as motivation, autonomy, or identity, has gained momentum with a tendency to situate studies in the qualitative research paradigm (Churchill & DuFon, 2006). A central facet of this move is context-specificity, whereby special significance is given to the setting of the study (Jackson, 2008). These developments are consistent with the current state of the field of SLA, which can be characterized by an interest in the social aspects of language learning (Norton, 2013).

The study abroad phenomenon can particularly benefit from an identity approach, given the multitude of new experiences exchange students are subjected to—all of which can lead to identity expansion (Jackson, 2008). Researchers adopt various interpretations of identity according to their research purposes (e.g., Dervin, 2013; Kalocsai, 2009; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). What is common among these studies in the field is the integration of poststructuralist theories of identity as part

of their theoretical frameworks, which conceive of identity as socially constructed (Block, 2007). Throughout the present paper, language learner identity is understood as a result of the learner's relationship with the language. As such, Norton's (2013) concepts of identity and investment are drawn upon; these are treated in more detail in the following section.

With the above-outlined gap in mind, the study presented below aims to discover former German exchange students' relationship with the English language and their language-related experiences during their study mobility period. It does so by investigating the participants' language learner identity and their investment in English during their time spent in a nonnative context. The value of the research lies in its theoretical framework: It adopts Norton's (2006) interpretation of language learner identity as a sociohistorical construct along with the concept of investment, the sociological equivalent of motivation, which seem to be compatible with the complex social landscapes today's globalized world casts upon us. The research design, conforming to the earlier-mentioned ideas, includes a qualitative data collection instrument. The structure of the paper is as follows: first, an elaboration of the aforementioned framework is offered. Then, the research methods employed by the study are detailed. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed, followed by a summary at the end.

2 Theoretical Background

The following subsections are dedicated to the presentation of the study's theoretical framework. First, there follows an overview of the main developments associated with the English language in the current era of globalization. Then, the main variables of the study, namely, language learner identity and investment, are explained. Finally, a short introduction to the European context—particularly, Germany, that is, the place of origin of the present study's participants—is provided.

2.1 English in the Era of Globalization

2.1.1 ENL to EFL to ELF. Today, English is more than just a language of

its native speakers. It has become a symbol for the current interconnected world: It exceeds geographical borders, encompasses a wide range of cultures, and provides the linguistic means for various spheres of our lives (Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as ELF, which, adopting Seidlhofer's (2011) definition, can be interpreted as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (p.7). Thus, ELF emerges out of the communicative needs of its users (Seidlhofer et al., 2006), and it also serves as a primary contact language through which practices of globalization are performed (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011).

For the purposes of the present study, it is important to distinguish ELF from English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a native language (ENL). As Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey (2011) point out, from an EFL perspective, nonnative speakers of English are more likely to communicate with native speakers, and they regard ENL as the norm to be followed. This understanding does not seem to do justice to the nature of today's global linguistic landscape, which is more in line with the ELF perspective. According to this view, there are more nonnative speakers of English than natives, all of whom develop their own distinct variety of the language. Consequently, the linguistic products of nonnative speakers are not compared to that of the native speakers (Jenkins et al., 2011). To sum up, one can look at ELF as a means of communication, of which the linguistic basis is the English language; however, it is continuously formed by and transformed to the needs of its users (Jenkins et al., 2011). Since the emphasis in ELF interactions is on the success of the negotiation of meaning, the (communicative) function of the language surpasses its form. In other words, instead of linguistic correctness, the pragmatic aspects of language use—such as the use of various communicative strategies—come to the fore (Jenkins et al., 2011).

2.1.2 Concomitants of the status of English as a global language. In the current era of globalization, the field of SLA is undergoing changes. First and foremost, it can be argued that the status of English as a global language is transforming our understandings concerning the motivation behind learning English. The

main reason behind this stems from the fact that English is no longer owned by its native speakers as they are outnumbered by nonnative speakers (Holliday, 2005). As a result, *native speakerism* (Holliday, 2005)—a long-held belief according to which the native speakers of the English language are regarded as the ideal speakers of the language, and thus, to be emulated—seems to be disintegrating. In fact, already a decade ago, Ushioda (2006) argued that learners of English no longer had a distinct target group they intended to identify with, and, consequently, proposed to replace Gardner and Lambert's (as cited in Ushioda, 2006) integrative orientation by Yashima's (2002) *international posture*. The latter concept—in response to the current world order—was created to convey the following: “interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and ... openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude towards different cultures” (Yashima, 2002, p.57). In other words, considering the increase of the use of ELF among people of different linguistic backgrounds, it can be argued that, today, people's motivation to learn English is mainly rooted in their desire to become part of a global community (Ushioda, 2013).

The diversification of contexts in which current English language use takes place marks another turning point within the field of SLA. Due to the concomitants of globalization, including the internationalization of higher education, the accelerated mobility of people, or the spread of information and communications technology, people are exposed to the English language in more varied ways than before (Ushioda, 2013). These have contributed to what Ushioda (2013) calls “contextual diversification” (p.3) within the field of SLA, which is generally interpreted at the global and local levels. Along the same lines, it is noteworthy to mention that the “contexts of learning and using English in the globalised world are becoming fluid, flexible, mobile, transitory, borderless and less easily definable” (Ushioda, 2013, p.5). In such a contextually diversified and intricate world, it is not surprising that social embeddedness has become of special significance in SLA research (Block, 2007).

2.2 Language Learner Identity and Investment

In the current age of globalization, people are exposed to a vast number and wide array of external influences from around the world, which impact on their identities (Ushioda, 2013). Consequently, Arnett (2002) argues that the current world order imposes duality on people's lives: Each person is a participant of both a global and a local context, the result of which is the co-existence of a *global identity* and a *local identity*. Not surprisingly, this proposal has been recognized by the field of SLA due to the global status of the English language, which can trigger the development of a global identity (Jackson, 2010).

As has been shown above, the contexts in which language learning happens nowadays have become increasingly diverse (Ushioda, 2013). Thus, taking a social (i.e., identity-centered) approach regarding the language learner seems to be reasonable as it enables the examination of the interrelationship between the learner and the social world by which one is surrounded (Norton, 2013). Furthermore, the complex nature of the social embeddedness of language learning lends itself to poststructuralist theories, which conceptualize the identities of today's language learners as "multiple, changing, and a site of struggle" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.414). Under this line of thinking, language is understood as a "social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (Norton, 2006, p.502). With the above-mentioned in mind, the present paper adopts Norton's (2013) definition of language learner identity, described as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p.45). This interpretation seems to be promising in that it ascribes a multidimensional nature to language learner identity by which various aspects of the phenomenon may be uncovered.

From the above-mentioned discussion, it can be seen that *human agency*—that is, the ability to participate and negotiate (see Ushioda, 2006)—is intricately linked to language learner identity. This is reflected in the arduous task of finding one's voice in a foreign language in that, as Ushioda (2011) claims, "language is a medium of self-expression and a means of communicating, constructing and negotiating who we are and how we relate to the world around us" (p.204). The notion

of investment incorporates language learner identity and human agency by identifying that, in many cases, language learners' motivational dispositions and language practices do not match (Norton & Toohey, 2011). In so doing, investment helps to examine the linkage "between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and their changing identities" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.420). Due to the depicted relationship between language learner identity and investment, both constructs are included in the study presented below.

Finally, the concepts of *imagined community* and *imagined identity* (Norton, 2013) also lend themselves to inclusion in the present discussion. The earlier-mentioned complexity of today's language learning contexts—particularly, being a participant of a global context (Arnett, 2002)—involves being in contact with different people and cultures over time and space. This contact, that is, an imagined community, is realized through human imagination due to the absence of any direct links with its members (Norton, 2013). According to Norton and Toohey (2011), our ability to imagine things also connects us with our desired future, the result of which can be referred to as imagined identity. As Norton (2013) proposes, being affiliated with an imagined community and being engaged with a local one can be equally indicative of investment. It is safe to conclude that the construct of language learner identity consists of various subcomponents—such as global, local, and imagined identity—which are intricately linked, and thus, can best be observed via qualitative inquiry (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

2.3 The European Context

The study to be presented below was conducted in Europe, which abounds in national languages. Motivated by the presence of this multilingualism, a *plurilingual identity* is promoted within the European Union (Ushioda, 2006). However, in the current era of globalization, such a linguistically diverse landscape also necessitates a contact language, the role of which is fulfilled by ELF (Gnutzmann, Jakisch, & Rabe, 2014). These circumstances provide a fertile ground for the examination of language learner identity.

Up until now, the language learner identities of European study abroad

students who went to a non-English-speaking country seem to have received scarce attention: the literature review yielded four such studies, all of which manage to provide a different angle of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Virkkula and Nikula's (2010) research supports Norton's (2013) conception of language learner identity in that it is continuously being reconstructed. Dervin's (2013), Kalocsai's (2009), and Smid's (2017) studies highlight the use of ELF as a means to achieving successful communication by relying on accommodative strategies. These authors also shed light on the fact that being situated in a non-English-speaking country is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, ELF gives the opportunity to communicate with students from various linguistic backgrounds; on the other hand, not speaking the language of the host country can constrain access to local people's communities, which is why many students feel motivated to learn the local language. It is hoped that the current study with German study abroad students can contribute to the earlier-mentioned literature.

To my knowledge, German university students' language learner identity has received scant attention from researchers; what is more, the findings appear to be inconclusive thus far. Gnutzmann, Jakisch, and Rabe (2014) found that students were aware of the lingua franca aspect of English in Europe, still, they regarded the native speaker varieties of English to be the norm. Erling's (2007) study, on the other hand, showed that students were not in favor of any native speaker variety, but rather identified with the functional feature of the language, which enabled them to become part of an international community. In fact, Erling proposed that the use of English could expand students' identities, (re)creating layers, such as local, national, European, or global. There could be at least two reasons behind the different outcomes of the aforementioned studies, both of which targeted German university students. One is that in Erling's study, the participants were English majors, while Gnutzmann et al.'s study involved students of various subjects (including non-language-related ones). In a similar vein, the differing findings could be attributed to the fact that the two pieces of research were situated in different settings—the former in the capital of Germany, the latter in a small German city. Although the present study includes a special group of German university students—namely, students who

were participants of a student mobility program—it is thought that the above-cited research could help interpret the findings.

3 Research Methods

The present study is situated in the qualitative research paradigm. This choice is motivated by the study's focus on the effects of social context, the examination of which is thought to lend itself to a qualitative inquiry (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). An important feature of a qualitative study is accessing the insider meaning of the targeted phenomenon, which, in the present case, was aided by the fact that the researcher used to be an Erasmus+ student. Thus, it can be argued that relating to the experiences and perspectives of the participants of the study was a relatively smooth process.

The study presented below seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What characterizes the language learner identity of German university students who took part in an Erasmus+ study mobility semester? (2) What is the investment in English of German university students during an Erasmus+ study mobility semester?

3.1 Participants

Both convenience and snowball sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) were used to gather respondents for the study. Altogether seven university students—all of them females—took part in the research. Their mean age was 28. Participation was voluntary. The participants were German citizens, attending a major public university in Cologne³, Germany at the time of the research. Two of the respondents were doing their Bachelor's, five of them their Master's degrees. Their specializations represented the disciplines of humanities and sciences (both natural and social sciences). All the respondents resided in a non-English-speaking European country either in the academic year of 2014–2015 or that of 2015–2016. The host countries included

3 In 2015, Cologne was the fourth most populous city in Germany with 1.05 million inhabitants [Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2016). *2015 Demographic Yearbook* (Issue No. 66). New York, NY: United Nations.].

Finland (1 participant), Hungary (4 participants), Sweden (1 participant), and Turkey (1 participant).

The respondents spent one semester in a partner institute of their home university. They were grantees of the Erasmus+ program, which is a popular exchange program in Europe. It was established by the European Union in 2014 to promote the internationalization of higher education, employability, and crucial 21st-century skills, such as lifelong learning or intercultural competence, within European countries (European Commission, 2013).

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used as a means of data collection in the present study. It adopted the introspective technique (Dörnyei, 2007). The instrument was subjected to a validation process because it was designed for the purposes of the present study—which was preceded by a pilot study in the Hungarian context (for more information, see Smid, 2017).

First, a literature review was conducted, which entailed both theoretical and empirical pieces. The articles were selected according to their relevance to the variables of the present study, namely, language learner identity, investment, and language use. During the literature review, the following categories were created and chosen to be covered by the interviews: use of English, influence of the environment, positive and negative experiences, being a language user before, during, and after the mobility. Then, the newly designed interview schedule was reviewed by an experienced researcher, who is also an expert in the area in question. This step resulted in some minor changes. Then, pilot interviews were carried out with five Hungarian participants who used to be Erasmus+ students (Smid, 2017). Based on the pilot interviews, the interview schedule was refined.

The Hungarian version of the interview schedule was translated into English by the researcher. Following that, a pilot interview was conducted with a former Erasmus+ student from Germany using the think-aloud technique (Dörnyei, 2007). Finally, the interview schedule was refined (see the Appendix for the final English version of the interview guide).

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

A secretary responsible for international affairs at a major university in Cologne, Germany was contacted with the research ideas at the beginning of the second semester of the 2015–2016 academic year. She agreed to send out a recruiting template prepared by the researcher to all the former Erasmus+ students of the university via email. Altogether four students responded to the inquiry and volunteered to participate in the study; in addition, three more students were gathered with the help of these participants.

The dates of the interviews were set according to the availability of the interviewees. Each of them was interviewed individually, either in person or via Skype. A sound recording application on the researcher's cell phone was used to record the interviews. They took place between June 2nd and June 29th, 2016, and varied from 18 to 28 minutes in length. At the start of the interviews, the respondents were briefly informed about the research and assured about data confidentiality. Although the interviews consisted of set questions, the interviewees were encouraged to diverge from them and comment on issues that emerged as important. The interviews were conducted in English. The participants' proficiency levels were considered appropriate for the purposes of the interviews, despite English not being their mother tongue.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The recorded interviews were transcribed in a Microsoft Word file by the researcher. Although the think-aloud interview prompted some minor changes concerning the interview schedule, its transcription was kept in the data pool because it was thought to contain rich data. Next, the data were analyzed according to the principles of the constant comparative method (see Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Regarding the data analysis, two things should be acknowledged: it was influenced by the literature review, and the researcher undertook it with one of the basic principles of the qualitative inquiry in mind, that is, the existence of multiple realities (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The emerging themes, along with their definitions and relevant, illustrative quotations taken from the data pool, were entered into a Microsoft Excel file to achieve an organized view of the data. After the analysis of

the interview data, member checking was done with one of the participants to see whether the researcher's interpretation of the examined phenomena was valid (see Dörnyei, 2007).

4 Results and Discussion

In what follows, the results of the data analysis are presented and discussed with reference to the above-reviewed literature. The data analysis yielded four emerging themes, which were termed as the following: *native speaker idealism*, *global citizenship*, *plurilingual attitude*, and *engagement in language practices*. It has to be mentioned here that minor linguistic errors are corrected when presenting quotations from the participants to aid reading (see Dörnyei, 2007). Also, the interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality (see Dörnyei, 2007).

4.1 Native Speaker Idealism

The emerging theme of native speaker idealism stands for the participants' attitudes to native speakers of the English language, their views on a native environment being the ideal context for practicing the language, and their wishes to attain native-like proficiency. This theme emerged as one of the most dominant aspects of the respondents' language learner identity.

Given the global spread of English, it is surprising that all the participants reported on the necessity of being surrounded by native speakers when questioned about their image of what constitutes an ideal learning environment. The following are a few illustrative quotations: "One of the most important things is being surrounded by native speakers and that's quite difficult in Hungary because, firstly, most Erasmus students are not natives ... and also the lecturers, the teachers" (Isabell, interview data, June 2, 2016); "To be surrounded by native speakers and to have a lot of practice. ... Being in Hungary, this environment wasn't present because I wasn't surrounded by native speakers" (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016);

Ideal surrounding would mean to me that the people I speak to would have

English as a mother language. It was not the case so we spoke English a lot, but there were no corrections if we made lots of mistakes. (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016)

Since all the students declared that they had used English almost all the time during their mobility period, and that, consequently, their language skills had improved, their views as to what counts as an ideal setting to practice the language is questionable. Here follow some of the respondents' accounts concerning their linguistic progress: "I think that I profited from being spontaneous and not caring much about mistakes and just talking" (Nina, interview data, June 3, 2016); "I wanted to improve my scientific vocabulary, and I am really good at reading scientific articles now" (Greta, interview data, June 8, 2016); "During the stay I became more fluent and after the stay I'm confident now with my English skills. ... I am more used to switching directly to English or to discussing a bit more" (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016); "I noticed that I learned a lot more vocabulary than I thought I would" (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016).

The aforementioned findings could be explained with the help of a long-held belief within the field of English language teaching, namely, native speakerism (Holliday, 2005). In support of this argument, five students also ascribed importance to accent, either claiming that they were not satisfied with their pronunciation or the opposite. One interviewee was, in fact, glad to share that her happiest moment during the mobility period had been the fact that the native speakers of the host country (i.e., Sweden) had not identified her as German as she had been able to speak English without a German accent. Another participant's belief regarding native speakerism was reflected through vocabulary use; to demonstrate: "I mean their [teachers'] English was good, no question, but still, it was not perfect, there was no use of, you know, those idiomatic expressions, for example" (Isabell, interview data, June 2, 2016).

The above-cited findings contradict Erling's (2007) in that, here, the participants' ideas concerning the English language approximated the EFL rather than the ELF paradigm (see Jenkins et al., 2011). Gnutzmann et al.'s (2014) findings, on the other hand, are supported. However, it has to be noted that, while the participants

in all these studies are of German origin, it is not clear to what extent the study mobility period influenced the interviewees' attitudes and views in the present study. Therefore, the earlier-presented comparisons should be taken with caution, and thus, research—especially, longitudinal—is further needed with study abroad students from Germany.

4.2 Global Citizenship

The next emerging theme, global citizenship, refers to the participants' positions in the current, globalized world and the essential role English has in it. This theme bears resemblance to Yashima's (2002) concept of international posture in that it emerged from the respondents' being members of an international community thanks to their participation in the Erasmus+ program as well as their extensive traveling abroad and ability to make friends from all over the world. In addition, the present theme can be related to the concepts of imagined community and imagined identity (Norton, 2013) since the students' investment in becoming participants of a global community of English users can be fueled by their imagination.

The participants' accounts made it clear that their means in achieving global citizenship was, without question, speaking English. To demonstrate: "I also think now that it's [speaking English] important, and I think it's very practical that you can trust it that anybody can understand at least a little bit of English" (Nina, interview data, June 3, 2016); "I think it's super important, I mean most of the papers in psychology are in English so you really need to understand the language, there is no other choice" (Isabell, interview data, June 2, 2016); "I think it's important, especially for someone in the sciences ... one needs it to do research and to have publications" (Helga, interview data, June 29, 2016); "It's useful, flexible, unavoidable, but I also fear that it contributes to neglecting other languages" (Franziska, interview data, June 29, 2016);

In the world more people speak Spanish, but English seems to be the most important language to communicate as well as on the Internet. It's also the same when you are travelling: you need English to communicate and make new friends. (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016)

It's something that I could always rely on and which makes me very flexible on where I want to live. For example, if I want to live in Budapest, I can or if I want to live in Copenhagen, I can, and the same goes to other countries. I could live everywhere else. (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016)

During their mobility period, the participants' global citizenship was primarily achieved through being part of the Erasmus+ community, which had both its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it gave the participants a sense of belonging, which was expressed by one of the interviewees in the following way:

My group of friends, none of which was an English native speaker, none of them was a Hungarian native speaker, except a few, but we could all communicate in English and for all of us it was a foreign language, so it also gave us a group feeling. (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016)

On the other hand, as some of the respondents noted, it was difficult to depart from the Erasmus+ community and establish meaningful connections with the local people mainly due to the linguistic barriers. To cite two of the participants: "It's really complicated to learn Hungarian, so I was not able to speak with Hungarians in their language. So it was always like an Erasmus bubble, we did not really see the real Hungarian lifestyle" (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016); "I'm really sad that I didn't know Finnish. It would have been nice to talk to the locals in Finnish and be able to get to know their culture better" (Greta, interview data, June 8, 2016). Such an ambiguity concerning exchange students' language experiences in a non-English-speaking European country has been reported by Dervin (2013), Kalocsai (2009), and Smid (2017) as well.

While it is true that the integration of the former emerging theme with the present one results in inconsistency, Gnutzmann et al.'s (2014) findings shed light on the same occurrence. One possible explanation may be that the inconsistency could stem from the multidimensional nature of language learner identity (see Norton, 2013). Another reason could be an individual difference variable, namely, language learner beliefs, which is responsible for native speaker idealism (see Holliday, 2005). It can be argued that the students' English-related beliefs, which they developed (i.e., internalized) throughout their school years, are influential to such an extent

that they cannot be overridden by relatively new experiences, such as those related to the global role of English. Again, this argument needs further empirical support along with a focus on study abroad students' belief systems concerning the English language.

4.3 Plurilingual Attitude

The third emerging theme was named plurilingual attitude for two reasons: one was the participants' interests in practicing another foreign language besides English during their stay abroad, the other was their general openness towards other foreign languages. Thanks to the interviews, it was found that three respondents had studied the language of the host country during their mobility period intensively and continued studying it even after returning to their home context; two participants were so motivated by the native language of the host country that they planned to study it in the future. The general linguistic profile of the interviewees also reflected an interest towards foreign languages with five participants speaking at least one foreign language besides English at an A2- or higher level (based on their self-report, see Council of Europe, 2001).

When being asked about the reasons behind learning to speak foreign languages other than English, the participants cited the following: being keen on learning languages, being able to communicate with distant relatives or with the native speakers of the target language, the beauty of the language, understanding the locals, and respect for the native speakers of the language. To illustrate with quotations: "When you go to a foreign country, I think you should make an effort and learn the native language at least on a basic level, this is a manner of respect" (Helga, interview data, June 29, 2016); "I always think it's important that when you visit foreign countries, you also try to learn the language because the language is the key to the culture and the people" (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016); "I thought about learning Spanish again because I was really sad that I couldn't speak with my Spanish friends in Spanish—it made me motivated" (Greta, interview data, June 8, 2016); "I thought about learning Spanish because I will travel to South America in three months. I really like Spanish, plus, most people in the world speak Spanish. Plus, I

want to be able to communicate in Peru” (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016).

Kalocsai’s (2009) and Smid’s (2017) research, similarly to the present findings, point out the participants’ interest in and use of local languages. It is highly likely that the above-mentioned findings regarding the difficulty of reaching local people contribute to the participants’ interests concerning foreign languages. Since the present study was conducted in Europe, it was expected that multilingualism would appear in some form (see Ushioda, 2006). Based on the current findings as well as some earlier-mentioned studies (e.g., Gnutzmann et al., 2014, Kalocsai, 2009), it can be argued that multilingualism and the use of ELF cannot be separated when conducting language learner identity-related research in European contexts—an argument that needs to be considered by future studies.

4.4 Engagement in Language Practices

The last emerging theme is termed engagement in language practices, which expresses the interviewees’ active participation in contexts where they used English. In so doing, it is indicative of Norton’s (2013) definition of investment. This theme is two-dimensional in that it does not only incorporate the interviewees’ accounts of their autonomous behavior during their study abroad period, but also the post-mobility reflections of their language practices.

The host university provided a major arena for practicing English as most of the students—unlike at their home university—had classes in English, and the language was the only means to communicate with their peers and teachers. Consequently, three participants noted that their academic language had improved, mostly in the domains of reading and writing. To cite two of the participants’ accounts:

I had some online courses for which I had to read books in English, and it was really good, it helped a lot. ... I’m sad that we don’t have English courses here [at home university] so my scientific language needed improvement. (Greta, interview data, June 8, 2016)

I think I did learn something during the Erasmus semester, especially because of my teachers who were really helping me. It was really their feedback

and taking me seriously as an Erasmus student because it's not always the case I know. ... I had all my courses in English so I had a very high number of spoken English lessons a day. Some of my papers had to be written in English, and I got corrections in English, and I had to rewrite them, and I could learn from my mistakes. It really helped me to improve my academic skills. (Mia, interview data, June 27, 2016)

Concerning the interviewees' participation in contexts outside the university, seeking the company of mostly non-German people emerged as a primary aspect. Here follow some accounts: "It made me happy that I was able to talk with people who came from different parts of the world on a daily basis" (Elisa, interview data, June 14, 2016);

To use English, I think, was the most important during my stay because everybody can speak more or less English, and so I was able to do it with my flatmates—two of them were from France, and one from Spain. If we hadn't had English, it would have been hard to communicate. (Nina, interview data, June 3, 2016)

In my free time, I spent a lot of time with my Swedish friends and another good friend of mine—she spent a year in Australia and then a year in America, but compared to them, my vocabulary was really poor. (Isabell, interview data, June 2, 2016)

These findings are also indicative of an earlier-discussed identity facet, that is, global citizenship. One intriguing fact here was that five participants had deliberately chosen to live with non-German-speaking students during their stay abroad so that they would be forced to use the English language at home. However, according to some of the participants' reflective accounts, such a decision did not always turn out to be fruitful. Considering the aforementioned findings under the theme of native speaker idealism, it is not surprising that three participants complained about their linguistic accuracy not having improved and about not being surrounded by native English speakers, who could have helped them achieve their desired linguistic gains better by correcting their language mistakes. To cite but one example: "I would have been happier if I had had the chance to speak to native speakers because

I think I could have benefited more that way” (Greta, interview data, June 8, 2016). Notwithstanding, the communicative function of language use also emerged as two participants had mentioned not being bothered by making mistakes while engaging in communication in English during their mobility: “I had no other goals than making myself understood. ... During this stay English was merely a vehicle, which allowed me to conduct my research and communicate with my partners” (Franziska, interview data, June 29, 2016); “I think that it’s not about mistakes, but about being understood” (Nina, interview data, June 3, 2016).

The above-presented findings confirm the relationship between human agency and language learner identity (see Ushioda, 2006) in that the respondents’ participation in the surrounding contexts can be linked to some aspects of their identity, namely, native speaker idealism and global citizenship. Given the participants’ multilingual linguistic repertoires, their language practices during their mobility period could not be fully interpreted since the present study only targeted investment in the English language. Therefore, future research should take a wider perspective on this phenomenon and extend the examination of investment to all the languages one speaks to be able to uncover deeper connections between human agency and language learner identity.

4.5 Overall Discussion

The present study shows that an identity approach concerning the language learner has the potential to uncover various social phenomena and to assess the impact of their power on the language learning experience as well as on learners’ investment in their use of the language. Native speakerism has been found to be the prevailing language ideology among the research participants despite the emerging trend in Europe that favors the communicative function of the English language over an adherence to native forms (see Seidlhofer et al., 2006). As a result, the students’ beliefs appeared to generate ambivalent attitudes toward nonnative speakers when it came to practicing English with them: The respondents’ main concern seemed to be the accuracy of their linguistic product. Based on their participation in the exchange program, it is reasonable to assume that all the participants possessed sufficient

levels of language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, writing), and thus, could be considered fluent English speakers. However, one's language proficiency should also entail a set of pragmatic skills to be regarded a competent user of a language (see Jenkins et al., 2011). In intercultural environments, the pragmatic dimension of language use becomes more focal because of the differences concerning the participants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the need to achieve mutual understanding: As Jenkins et al. (2011) indicate, negotiation strategies, the use of creativity, or code-switching are essential in intercultural communication. Due to the heightened contact between people of diverse backgrounds, these pragmatic skills are more important than ever, and a study abroad semester can offer a good opportunity to develop them. However, being preoccupied with one's linguistic product might hinder that development. Alternatively, raising exchange students' awareness about the pragmatic aspects of language use might lead to better gains.

It was expected that today's complex, interconnected state of the world would manifest itself in the language learner identity of the interviewees. The adoption of Norton's (2013) concept of investment made it possible to see that the participants' seeking mostly the company of non-German people in their free time was an investment in their language learner identity. The language practices these interactions entailed strengthened the students' access to the larger, global sphere of English speakers and contributed to the formation of their global identity. Here, it has to be emphasized that the students were participants of numerous communities—the Erasmus+ community, the global community of English speakers, the host country, their native country, the community of Europeans, their home university as well as their host university. These affiliations can mean different layers of identity (see Erling, 2007), which may not be consistent with each other. To give one example: even though it is through the functional role of English (i.e., ELF) that the aforementioned communities can be linked together—due to the prevalence of their nonnative English-speaking populations, the participants aspired to attain native-like proficiency in English, which is done when intending to communicate mostly with the native speakers of the language—as the EFL paradigm postulates (see Jenkins et al., 2011). The interconnection of the identity layers might be further complicated

by the different languages used for enacting them. Considering the multilingual linguistic repertoires the participants possessed or aspired to possess—in line with the multilingual language policy of the European Union (Ushioda, 2006), the earlier-mentioned assumption might hold true. This discussion leads one to conclude that language learner identity may indeed be a “site of struggle” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.414).

5 Conclusion

The study presented above aimed to further the understanding of the language learner identity of German university students who had participated in a study mobility program. Native speaker idealism, global citizenship, and plurilingual attitude emerged as major facets of the participants' identities, supporting Norton's (2013) interpretation of language learner identity as being multidimensional. The respondents' relationship with the English language seemed to be somewhat ambivalent, and this finding is empirically supported (Gnutzmann et al., 2014). Some aspects of the participants' language learner identity could also be traced via their investment in English, which corroborated the decision to include both variables in the study.

The research reported here is not without its limitations. It has to be stressed that the study involved only female participants, which could have biased the findings. In future studies, it may be worth considering the gender variable so as to obtain a more balanced view of the phenomena in question. Another possible weakness of the study is that retrospective accounts were used for data collection, which, relying on the participants' memories, may have weakened the overall quality of the findings (see Dörnyei, 2007).

The findings of the present study call for several interesting lines of further inquiry. Future studies could include participants from as many perspectives as possible, that is, besides Erasmus+ mobility students, their program coordinators, instructors, buddies⁴, and friends could also be interviewed to understand the

4 A buddy is a mentor who studies at the host university and is assigned to an Erasmus+ exchange student during one's study mobility period.

observed phenomena better. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are especially recommended as possible changes in the students' identities and investments during the mobility period could be observed. A focus on the multilingual nature of the target population's language learner identity and investment in language practices is also warranted to be able to obtain a more comprehensive picture of their identity construction and dynamics. Lastly, pedagogically-oriented studies would have a great deal to offer for the field as international mobility continues to flourish highlighting the need to enhance the success of future exchange students' study abroad experiences (see also Jackson, 2010).

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Appendix

Final English Version of the Interview Guide

- (1) How old are you? How long have you been learning English? What other languages do you speak? At what level? What do you study at university?
- (2) When did you participate in the Erasmus+ exchange program? What country did you go to?
- (3) How did you choose the host country?
- (4) What were the advantages of being an Erasmus+ student in the host country? What were the downsides of being an Erasmus+ student in the host country?
- (5) Please, describe what an ideal surrounding means to you when it comes to practicing the English language.
- (6) What do you think about the role of the English language in today's world?
- (7) How had you seen yourself as a speaker of English before your mobility? How did you see yourself as a speaker of English during your mobility? How do you see yourself as a speaker of English now?
- (8) How did you prepare for the use of the English language before moving to the host country?
- (9) What goals did you set for your mobility concerning the English language?
- (10) How did your English benefit from the mobility period?
- (11) Please, think of an ordinary day during your mobility. How often did you use the English language?
- (12) With whom did you use the English language during your mobility? In what contexts did you use the English language during your mobility?
- (13) How would you describe the kind of English you used with other Erasmus+ students during your mobility?
- (14) Please, think of those moments when you communicated with the native speakers of the host country in English. What positive experiences did you have? What negative experiences did you have?
- (15) If you think about your use of the English language, what was the biggest challenge you encountered during your mobility?
- (16) If you think about your use of the English language, what was your happiest moment during your mobility?
- (17) What efforts did you make to use the English language during your mobility?
- (18) What role does English play in your life at the moment?
- (19) Would you like to further develop your English? Why?
- (20) Would you like to learn another foreign language? Why?
- (21) What do you think an exchange student needs for a successful study abroad semester?
- (22) Would you participate in the student mobility program again? Why?