The learning potential of English as a lingua franca contexts in the eyes of study abroad students

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Abstract

This paper presents insights from two interview studies with the aim of shedding light on the learning potential of studying abroad in an area where English is used as a lingua franca. The majority of previous research on study abroad focuses on students' experiences of studying abroad in target-language regions, for example learners of English studying abroad in English-speaking countries. To date, the learning potential of spending time in English as a lingua franca (ELF) contexts remains an under-researched area. The present paper draws on two separate interview studies that have been conducted with five Turkish and five Swiss study abroad students that stayed in different European ELF contexts as part of their studies at higher education institutions. The data suggests that even though the participants still partially adhere to native speaker norms, they also discuss a number of characteristics of English as a lingua

franca study abroad (ELFSA) contexts that they deem conducive to learning English and enhancing their plurilingual competences

1. Introduction

Studying abroad (SA) is an important aspect of internationalization and its popularity has been growing for decades, which reflects the increasing interconnectedness of today's globalized world (Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Stewart, 2010). This is particularly true for tertiary education, where more and more higher education institutions offer SA programs (Anderson & Lawton, 2011). Especially students of second/foreign languages and pre-service language teachers are in some contexts encouraged or required to spend some time abroad in the target language (TL) region (Mitchell et al., 2015).

These programs are generally advertised by higher education institutions or student support groups as the ultimate opportunity to learn a foreign language effectively, to get immersed in a different society and culture, and develop one's intercultural skills, to make new friends, to grow as a person, and to develop important soft skills such as flexibility, communication, and problem-solving skills, which hone students' attractiveness on the job market. For a long time, it was taken for granted by students, educators, and researchers that SA participants would experience the total immersion into the host society and the TL. This immersion was widely advertised as one of the key assets of SA settings, rendering it a much more effective learning site than a traditional classroom (Kinginger, 2013). Recent more process-oriented SA research, however, has revealed great variability in the extent to which sojourners experience the linguistic and cultural immersion that is often assumed to happen automatically and invariably (Kinginger, 2013), a finding that can be partially accounted for by contextual constraints such as students' accommodation or type of university program (Bracke & Aguerre, 2015). In fact, SA students' social contacts often primarily consist of other SA students with whom they use English as a lingua franca (ELF). ELF is understood as any use of English among speakers of different first languages (see Jenkins et al., 2011). In the last decade there has been an increased research interest in the potential that such ELF interactions offer for the development of TL skills and learner identities. So far, however, no study has addressed how different groups of sojourners from different lingua-cultural contexts with different motivations to study abroad and different initial proficiencies conceptualize learning affordances of ELF interactions

and contextual characteristics of the ELFSA context (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022). The present article aims to address this research gap.

2. Literature review

Numerous studies testify that gaining access to interactional opportunities in local communities can be a difficult matter (Allen, 2010; De Federico de la Rua, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2008; Heinzmann et al., 2014; Kalocsai, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Rienties & Nolan, 2014; Schartner, 2015a, 2015b; Trentman, 2013; Umino & Benson, 2016; Wright & Schartner, 2013). Consequently, the widespread belief that SA is a kind of magic potion for language learning and intercultural development because it provides a full immersion experience is more of a myth than a reality.

This becomes particularly apparent when looking at studies that categorize and quantify different contact or friendship patterns of SA participants. De Federico de la Rua's (2008) study involving 241 Erasmus students showed that sojourners make many friends in a short amount of time. Most of them develop a cosmopolitan network made up of local friends from the host country, co-nationals, and internationals from other Erasmus countries. There were also a sizable number of SA students, however, who only had compatriot friends, which points to a failure in terms of local integration. On average, only 17% of all friends of the 241 Erasmus students in de Federico de la Rua's study were from the host society. Similarly, an interview study by Ehrenreich (2008) among 22 former German language assistants who taught German in English-speaking countries revealed that for more than half of the assistants, interactions with English first language (L1) speakers were rare. They often used German with compatriots or ELF to communicate with other language assistants.

While frequent contact with co-nationals as well as other international students is a logical consequence of the difficulty in gaining access to local communities, it tends to be viewed negatively by many sojourners in terms of the learning affordances it offers for their linguistic development (Allen, 2010; Barraja-Rohan, 2013; Borghetti & Beaven, 2017; Dervin, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2008; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Müller & Schmenk, 2015; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). In the case of interactions with co-nationals, the negative evaluations are related to the predominant use of the students' shared first language in this setting. In the case of interaction with other international students, the negative evaluations revolve around the use of ELF.

The skepticism with which many students view these lingua franca interactions stems from a widespread belief that only interactions with so-called "native speakers" (NS) of the respective language constitute viable resources for optimal linguistic progress. Sojourners typically question the value of lingua franca communities and interactions as meaningful language-learning opportunities before

departure (Borghetti & Beaven, 2017) and quite frequently also after their sojourn. Dervin (2013) reported rather negative attitudes towards using non-native varieties of English during sojourn in his questionnaire study conducted with 250 exchange students in Finland with English used in this context being referred to as "international broken English," "Erasmus English – English with many mistakes . . . without getting better," or "Globish which is defined as simplified English," among other things (Dervin, 2013, p. 107). Similarly, Müller and Schmenk's (2015) L1 English participants learning German while studying abroad in Germany indicated a clear orientation towards NS varieties. In the case of Lisa, one of the study participants, this orientation toward NS norms led her to ignore the learning potential of interactions with other fellow sojourners using the TL as a lingua franca as she refrained from using German with non-native speakers (NNSs). This eventually resulted in missing learning opportunities during her sojourn.

However, some participants in Müller and Schmenk's (2015) study were found to develop a more lingua-franca-friendly orientation after some time spent abroad despite initial skepticism. This is exemplified by Alex, another participant, reported to have shifted his focus from accuracy and nativelikeness to intelligibility (Müller & Schmenk, 2015). This allowed him to self-confidently engage in interactions with various German speakers, a finding that also resonated in Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014) and Borghetti and Beaven (2017). Müller and Schmenk (2015) argue that interacting with other international students using the TL as a lingua franca allowed Alex to construct an empowering sense of L2 self that provided him with a feeling of competence and legitimacy, and with the willingness to embrace the learning opportunities these interactions offered. During their sojourn in Italy, the participants in the Borghetti and Beaven (2017) study also reported having had more satisfactory interactions with NNSs than NSs whose communicative style they found "threatening" (p. 230). Making frequent clarification requests and mostly finding their NN interlocutors' speech unintelligible, NSs of English were anxiety-inducing conversation partners for sojourners in an Anglophone setting (Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014). Frequent negative feedback by NSs was considered to be stressful and discouraging for further communicative exchange by sojourners, at least for those with relatively lower TL proficiencies (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022). This resulted in increased interaction with NNSs even in the TL communities, which, in the end, turned out to be a noteworthy learning experience.

With increased opportunities to interact with NNSs using the TL as a lingua franca and with the burgeoning rise of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in the European context (Köylü, 2021), a new learning environment has thus emerged for sojourners as learners of English in continental Europe, where English holds the status of a lingua franca along with different official languages

in the host countries.[1] For instance, a sojourn in Denmark might signify the use of ELF besides the local language, Danish. Thanks to student mobility programs making it more accessible, such as Erasmus+, this new context has gained more significance for L2 English learners especially after Brexit. Operationalized as English as a lingua franca study abroad (ELFSA) (Köylü, 2016), this context has so far been investigated in a few studies pertaining to learner beliefs and attitudes and L2 development compared to traditional Anglophone SA and/or at-home formal instruction (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022).

For example, Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014) investigated the case of Turkish L1 sojourners spending a semester abroad in an ELF country. Their participants reported experiencing a clear shift in learner beliefs from accuracy and nativelikeness towards fluency and effective communication at the end of their Erasmus semester. The nature of interaction in this context indeed helps learners to become more self-confident TL users as they seek more opportunities to interact and practice their language skills while their partly idiosyncratic use of language is tolerated. Such forms of low-anxiety interaction and relaxed learning conditions result in gains in the TL (Borghetti & Beaven, 2017; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018).

This context also helps learners develop an L2 self and ownership of language as they frequently interact with other L2 speakers. The notion of empowering L2 identity through self-confidence, self-efficacy, or increased learner autonomy after some time spent in the ELFSA has been a major theme reported by Barraja-Rohan (2013), Dervin (2013), Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014), and Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022). Such a communicative experience has also led sojourners to criticize prescriptive teaching curricula in their home institutions (Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022) which posit native-speakerism at the center of the language classroom.

By and large, ELFSA constitutes a low-anxiety learning atmosphere with plenty of co-constructed learning opportunities with other fellow sojourners (Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). In terms of L2 development, Llanes et al. (2016), Llanes (2019), Köylü (2021) as well as Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022) looked into the potential of ELFSA and concluded that this context allows for development in L2 general proficiency, written and spoken skills after a semester spent abroad. Comparing ELFSA with traditional Anglophone SA and at-home formal instruction, Köylü and Tracy-Ventura (2022) displayed that there was no superiority of the Anglophone SA over ELFSA as all Turkish L1 sojourners as learners of English significantly improved their English oral fluency (speech rate and breakdown fluency) and accuracy in both Anglophone-SA (England in that study) and ELFSA (several ELF countries in continental Europe) contexts.

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[1]After Brexit, all the countries within the Erasmus program except for Ireland provide an ELFSA context for sojourners.

Thus far, few studies have investigated, however, to what extent ELFSA students' perceptions of the learning affordances of ELF interactions for L2 development reflect these empirical findings (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). Furthermore, the literature on ELFSA has not looked into the perceptions of sojourners in a comparative manner to see if learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds or learners with different motivations for SA perceive the ELFSA context differently.

Rather, learning opportunities of lingua franca contexts have always been a "side" finding of studies investigating the SA phenomena with a focus on learner attitudes, beliefs and awareness (Borghetti & Beaven, 2017; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018). The present study, in contrast, aims to investigate how two groups of sojourners from different lingua-cultural contexts with different motivations to study abroad conceptualize learning affordances of ELF interactions and contextual characteristics of the ELFSA context. Given the dominance of research exploring TL communities (e.g., Anglophone contexts for learners of English as an L2) (Borràs & Llanes, 2021), this study addresses the need to conduct further research to better understand the dynamics of ELF contexts when learning English as an L2. In an attempt to explore the learning potential of the ELFSA context, the current study is guided by the following research question:

RQ: How do Swiss and Turkish students studying abroad in an ELFSA context conceptualize their learning experiences and evaluate the learning potential of ELF interactions?

3. Methodology

3.1. The study

The study presented here draws on data from two research projects investigating ELFSA contexts. The first is a longitudinal mixed-methods study on L1 Turkish students studying in a variety of SA contexts, including the ELFSA context as part of their Erasmus sojourn. The study looked at the students' English development and the amount and types of contacts in their host communities. The second research project from which data are elicited is a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of Swiss international students' language attitudes, practices and competences investigating how effective different patterns of social relations and language use are for linguistic development, and what role students' language attitudes play for the development of their social relations and linguistic skills.

3.1.1. Turkish participants

As part of the larger project, the participants from the whole sample (N = 47) completed oral and written tasks before and after their sojourn to explore if they developed their English in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. A subgroup of participants (N = 5) was later selected for semi-structured interviews to talk about their contexts, their affordances and challenges when developing their English, their interlocutors and characteristics of their interactions, and how they interacted with people in this context using the TL (English) and, if ever, the local language. These participants first completed a biweekly Language Interaction Questionnaire (LIQ) (see https://www.iris-database.org/details/4N5mx-IIAkz); a total of 8 administrations over the course of a 16 week stay). A maximum variation sampling strategy was used to recruit interviewees on the basis of their reported amount of TL interaction from the most to the least frequent. Table 1 provides an overview of the Turkish study participants (N = 5) in an order of self-reported interaction ranging from the most frequent interaction (T-P1) to the least frequent (T-P5), including information on their initial English proficiency.

Table 1 Turkish study participants

Participant	L1	Initial English proficiency	Destination	Length of stay (weeks)
T-P1	Turkish	B1.2	Denmark	19
T-P2	Turkish	B2.1	Portugal	19
T-P3	Turkish	B2.2	Germany	20
T-P4	Turkish	B2.2	Germany	20
T-P5	Turkish	B2.1	Austria	19

3.1.2. Swiss participants

The Swiss students were also studying in a variety of SA contexts, including ELFSA contexts. A total of 85 participants completed an online questionnaire on their attitudes towards multilingualism, the importance of fluency as well as their language use anxiety before and after their stay and three online questionnaires on their social contacts and language use during their stay (roughly monthly). As part of the larger project, an interview study on the student's social contacts, linguistic practices and linguistic progress was conducted. The present article will focus on those students in the interview study who studied in an ELFSA context. Interviewees were recruited on the basis of their reported attitudes towards multilingualism, the importance of accuracy versus fluency in language use, and levels of language use anxiety following a maximum variation sampling strategy to

ensure that students with different attitudinal profiles were included. Table 2 provides an overview of the Swiss sample (*N* = 5).

Table 2 Swiss study participants

Participant	L1	Initial English proficiency	Destination	Length of stay (weeks)
S-P1	Swiss German	B2.1	Finland	11
S-P2	Standard German, Swiss German	B2.2	Sweden	10
S-P3	Swiss German	B2.2	Sweden	11
S-P4	Swiss German	B2.2	Denmark	9
S-P5	Swiss German	B2.2	Spain	7

The two participant groups differed with respect to some critical learner characteristics. One was a group of sojourners from a societally multilingual context (Switzerland) who studied abroad as a prerequisite for obtaining a teaching degree and who, consequently, primarily undertook SA for the sake of linguistic development. In contrast to this highly instrumental motive to study abroad, the other was a group of sojourners from a monolingual background (Turkey) who undertook SA completely voluntarily. Although both groups represented credit-seeking sojourners within the Erasmus scheme, this crucial difference in terms of their major motives to study abroad is expected to highlight different contextual characteristics of the ELFSA. The two groups also differed in terms of pre-departure English proficiencies. Most of the Turkish students were initially placed around B1 level, while the Swiss students' English was at B2 level (see Tables 1 and 2).

3.2. Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used in both studies and both the Turkish and Swiss participants were interviewed twice: once during their stay abroad and a second time after their return.

3.2.1. Turkish group

The Turkish participants were interviewed once in the 8th week of their stay and once upon program completion (19 to 21 weeks after their departure). The focus of the interviews was on major advantages and disadvantages of the students' chosen contexts in terms of learning English, how they built social relationships with people around (including type and amount of contact with these people), and how they reflected on their lived experiences in ELFSA as a multilingual

learning context. Data collection was completed in the spring of 2016. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and the structure of the interview followed a temporal logic. The researcher asked about participants' pre-departure expectations, their initial experiences, and how they planned to continue interacting in the TL. The post-return interviews were conducted following the stimulated recall protocol as the participants first listened to some excerpts from their first interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Turkish and audio-recorded. The data from the interviews were translated into English and later backtranslated into Turkish for meaning checking.

3.2.2. Swiss group

The Swiss students were interviewed the first time around the middle of their stay and a second time around 3 weeks after their return. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Swiss German. The interview protocol included general narrative questions as well as more specific follow-up questions. The interviews were conducted in Swiss German using the online platform whereby.com and lasted roughly an hour each. The first interview revolved around questions about significant social contacts maintained while abroad, the use of different languages during the stay, and the evaluation of the ELFSA context for the purpose of learning English. Among other things, the students were also asked to comment on their linguistic competences. The second interview focused on the last weeks abroad and how social contacts and language use had evolved since the first interview. In the second part, the focus was on the first weeks back home and retrospective evaluations of the stay. In the last part, the interviewees were asked about how the stay abroad shaped their future and how they expect their language use and the maintenance of newly established contacts to develop. Both the interview protocols and the anonymized transcripts will be made available open-access on SWISSUbase, a national, cross-disciplinary research repository (Heinzmann et al., 2023; https://www.swissubase.ch/de/catalogue/studies/13664/16331/overview).

Two project collaborators conducted the online interviews in the fall of 2020 and winter 2021 (one post-stay interview was conducted in July 2021). As an incentive, each participant received 50 Swiss francs after the post-stay interview. The interviews were audio- and/or video-recorded for transcription. For ease of writing and reading, the interviews were translated from Swiss German into Standard German during the transcription process. For the purposes of this article, excerpts from the interviews were translated into English.

3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data from both studies were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2015; Schreier, 2012). In a first step, main deductive categories were derived from the interview guidelines and the research question. These were supplemented with inductive subcodes as new topics emerged. In the Swiss project, three interviews were coded by three project members and the codings were compared and discussed consecutively to ensure intercoder reliability. On this basis, the coding system was revised, adapted where necessary and supplemented with coding rules. Two additional interviews were coded by two of the project members, and code definitions and coding guidelines were refined in the process. The remaining five interviews were subsequently coded by one individual. In the Turkish project, additional collaborators coded one of the interviews independently using the elaborated coding system. Subsequently, these codings were compared and discussed. On this basis, the category system was revised and supplemented with inductive categories. An additional interview was coded by two project collaborators and a comparison of the codings was carried out, whereby code definitions and coding rules were refined, while all incongruent areas were discussed and resolved.

4. Results

The results of the inductive content analysis revealed various contradictions in the narratives of the SA students when referring to different characteristics of the ELFSA context (see Table 3) and when assessing the language learning potential of the said context (see Table 4). These characteristics are further elaborated on in the following subsections.

Table 3 Characteristics of the ELFSA context

Characteristics	Evaluations of Swiss sojourners	Evaluations of Turkish sojourners
Interactions with L1 English speakers or expert English speakers (near-native speakers)	Disappointment about rare contact	
	Native speaker ideal still present	Native-speaker ideal at the beginning of their stay abroad
	L1 speaker as optimal language learning facilitator	
	Interactions induce anxiety and deficiency orientation	Interactions induce anxiety and deficiency orientation

Interactions with other L2 speakers of English with varying levels of English competence	Perceived as inferior for improving accuracy, but not for fluency	Not perceived as a source of development at the beginning
	Perceived as liberating, less deficiency-oriented and anxiety-inducing	Anxiety-free spoken interaction helping develop accommodation skills
	Perception of language learning potential dependent on English competence of interlocutors	Perception of language learning potential dependent on the amount of meaningful interaction
Multilingual/multicultural environment: English is not local language	ELF as communication tool	ELF as communication tool
	Focus on fluency, rather than accuracy	Focus on fluency and accommodation skills rather than accuracy or nativelikeness
	Opportunity to learn L3	Opportunity to learn L3
	Opportunity to develop plurilingual identity	Opportunity to develop plurilingual identity

4.1. Characteristics of the ELFSA context

4.1.1. Type of interlocutors and their linguistic competence

The most remarkable characteristics of the ELFSA context highlighted by the Swiss and Turkish sojourner-interviewees were the paucity of contact with English L1 speakers, the high frequency of interactions with other L2 speakers of English and, thus, the predominant use of ELF, and the multilingual and multicultural environment embracing linguistic differences. The students' evaluations of these characteristics will be discussed in this subchapter.

The most striking difference between a traditional Anglophone SA context and an ELFSA context is that the majority of the local population does not speak English as their first or one of their first languages. The chances of interacting with English L1 speakers in an ELFSA context are thus reduced, a circumstance that was commonly lamented by the Swiss students. Even though the Swiss students had chosen a non-Anglophone area for their SA, they had still hoped to meet more international English L1 speakers. Most Swiss students implied or explicitly stated that to them the ideal interlocutors to optimally improve their English language skills were or would have been English L1 speakers. When asked about who helped them most to improve their English language skills while abroad, students primarily named English L1 speakers. Some of the Swiss sojourners imagined that staying in an English-speaking area would have been more beneficial, especially regarding vocabulary acquisition and expansion (e.g.,

learning idioms), and overall accuracy improvement, as exemplified in the following quote: "I have the feeling that the level here [Denmark] is relatively high. That they speak English relatively well and are also very willing to do that . . . But I think if you go to England, it's still a little bit of an improvement to here. But on the other hand, it's also maybe just good that it's not their mother tongue either" (S-P4). This quote nicely illustrates that the Swiss students are still partially clinging to a native speaker ideal and at the same time trying to discard it. Even though they perceive interactions with English L1 speakers as the yardstick for successful TL acquisition, they also perceive certain disadvantages in interactions with L1 speakers, a point which will be addressed in more detail later.

Similarly, the Turkish sojourners expressed initial concerns about the paucity of interactions with English L1 speakers in the ELF context. Yet, with time, they valued the rather relaxed way of communicating with other L2 speakers of English through which mistakes or deviations from the norm were rather welcomed and evaluated as learning opportunities. Turkish participants also touched upon the importance of non-English L1 speakers as the major source of talk in English in the second interviews. They reported that most English L1 speakers tended to interact with co-nationals, leading the Turkish sojourners to seek opportunities to use the TL in their immediate Erasmus community. The Turkish participants also reported an initial orientation to NS norms. T-P3, for example, explained his disappointment when first hearing his professor speaking English with a heavy foreign accent. In their initial interviews, T-P1 and T-P4 also reported significant concerns about developing their English staying abroad in a non-Anglophone country. All Turkish participants, however, mentioned how with time, their initial orientation to native speaker norms changed as they came to interact with people with varied degrees of English proficiency. In the first interviews, all the participants reported a native-speaker-oriented ultimate attainment expectation. Yet, after a semester abroad, they valued communicative skills more than nativelikeness or grammatical accuracy: "never mind expert grammar . . . you only need some basic chunks at first . . . in any language and speak as much as you can without being afraid to make mistakes" (T-P2).

Being in an ELFSA context, the majority of the interlocutors were thus also L2 speakers of English with varying levels of English competence. Once again, mixed feelings can be identified in both populations regarding this circumstance, which was perceived as both a hindrance and a benefit for language development. One Swiss student expressed her conflicting perceptions as follows:

> So, I think there are like two sides. I think the advantages are certainly when you are in a non-English speaking country that you have fewer inhibitions to speak English even if you pronounce something differently or if you don't know

something. The others will understand you . . . yes, it's more of a relaxed atmosphere, I think, to learn. On the other hand, when you are in an English-speaking country, it's like this; you learn new words from the people who have that as their mother tongue and you also just know how to say it properly. Not how to say it, stupidly put, with a dialect[2]. And yes, but there you probably have, I would say, more inhibitions to speak simply like that. (S-P1)

Especially the sometimes perceived as faulty grammar of the interlocutors was considered unfavorable for accuracy development (see Table 4 and corresponding discussion). However, the interviewed sojourners also repeatedly described the ELFSA context as a relaxed and less anxiety-inducing learning atmosphere, which helped them perceive themselves as successful English users and which delineates its pedagogical value.

One Swiss sojourner (S-P5) reported that it is liberating to see that other people also make mistakes. Another Swiss interviewee also observed that when interacting with non-English L1 speakers she dared to ask questions regarding language use more than she thinks she would have in an English-speaking context:

> *I now dare to ask a little more when I don't understand something. I probably wouldn't have dared to do that in England, because I would have had the feeling that I was getting on their nerves if I always had to ask.* (S-P2)

Furthermore, in the eyes of both Swiss and Turkish sojourners, ELF contexts are less deficiency-oriented as students can compare themselves with other more or less successful learners of English. In an Anglophone context, they would be comparing themselves to English L1 speakers, which would make them more aware of their linguistic deficiencies. This in turn would have induced a certain reservedness when interacting with English L1 speakers. Students also appreciated the fact that in conversations with other non-English L1 speakers, the focus is on co-constructing meaning. Interlocutors strive to understand each other even when language use is creative or idiosyncratic. Rather than focusing too much on accuracy, the primary focus is on mutual understanding, for example by embracing a let-it-pass principle. One Swiss student that studied in Finland describes the learning atmosphere as relaxed as she feels that she is allowed to make mistakes:

> *I have the feeling that it's not bad if you mispronounce something a bit or don't exactly have the word you want to say and then you just paraphrase it. Maybe it's also because I speak English here more often than at home. I don't know . . . it's really quite relaxed.* (S-P1)

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[2] The participant refers to accent, not dialect.

In sum, NNS – NNS interaction was characterized as more tolerant of mistakes, welcoming different accents, focusing more on fluency than accuracy and a safe discursive context to develop one's English.

Overall, the students' evaluation of the potential for learning or improving their English varied across context. The decisive factor when evaluating the benefits of interacting with L2 speakers of English was the perceived proficiency level of the interlocutors. It was primarily more proficient speakers that were also deemed valid role models for English language learning. The majority of the Swiss students studied abroad in an ELFSA context where they perceived the local population to generally have a high command of English. Only the student studying in Spain reported that the general English level of the local population was rather low. When interacting with the local population, students could thus rely on English to varying extents.

Turkish sojourners also referred to interlocutors' proficiency in English as a crucial factor. If their interactants, mostly other fellow sojourners, were more competent than themselves, this was initially a factor for them to develop some sort of speaking anxiety. Similar to L1 speaker interaction, the participants reported refraining from such interlocutors at the beginning. But with time, they realized that more competent speaking partners helped them notice gaps or mistakes in their speech production, which they later repaired. Receiving clarification requests or negative feedback in general, the participants also acquired some survival skills to be able to convey meaning. A Turkish participant in Portugal reported that he sometimes found himself teaching some "basic chunks in English" to frequently encountered local people or his roommates to be able to communicate using ELF (T-P2).

4.1.2. Plurilingual communicative practice

Another characteristic of the ELFSA context frequently commented on by Swiss and Turkish students is the multilingual and multicultural nature of this learning environment. All the Turkish and Swiss participants reported multiple languages at use in their immediate environment (in their student housing, on and off campus settings). This brought patience, flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity (ToA) when interacting with speakers of other languages using ELF or other foreign languages learnt formally or informally, creating space for plurilingual language development. All of the Swiss interviewees reported how they mainly used ELF with their interlocutors but how they and their interaction partners would sometimes switch to their respective first languages, other languages they had learnt at school or even just come across, such as French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch,

Swedish, Russian, Hungarian and Slovenian, or the local language that they are in the process of learning. S-P5 describes how her language use is often plurilingual, especially when partying: "For example, when I go out for a party or the like, I'm super multilingual. Then I can suddenly speak a lot of languages." Pidgins and creoles (or unsystematic mixture of two languages) were also reported as part of this large collection of diverse ambient languages as an indicator for flexibility and ToA. For instance, T-P2 reported that his exposure to a lot of Portuñol and Spanglish during his stay in Portugal was an enriching linguistic experience: "It is really fascinating how people mix languages to communicate . . . inserting a word from this language and then switching to another." This diverse linguistic landscape and how people navigate through different languages in the ELFSA context was reported to be a crucial characteristic of the learning potential it offers.

Spending time in a place where another language, of which most of the SA students had no or only little knowledge prior to their stay, dominated everyday life enabled the students to experience the importance of ELF as a communication tool. All of them could rely on English when interacting with locals but also with other internationals. All students in the Swiss sample seized the opportunity and undertook efforts to also learn the local language by attending language classes. S-P3, for example, explains that she went to Sweden not only to improve her English but also to learn Swedish:

> *I just wanted to use the opportunity, when I am already in Sweden, to learn this language, because I just, I found, that is just, I would say, actually a unique opportunity just to learn a language, when you are just in the country and so.* (S-P3)

All Swiss and Turkish students confirmed that they had acquired at least basic language skills in the local language, which enabled them to interact with the local population. For those who aimed to develop the local language of the host country, ELF was a mediating language as they frequently switched to it when they could not express themselves in the respective local language. Whenever communication failed, both groups of participants reported that they could resort to English, which again underlined the importance of ELF. While the intensity of contact with locals varied across students, all of them primarily interacted with other international students with different lingua-cultural backgrounds. In these plurilingual communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), English served as a means to include everyone in the conversation with other languages still being spoken alongside. The students appreciated coming into contact with speakers of so many different languages and varieties of English and all of them also reported expanding their knowledge in other foreign languages while abroad. This shows that ELF contexts can facilitate the development of a plurilingual repertoire.

Students also reported that staying in an ELFSA context raised their awareness for linguistic diversity. They paid attention to different English dialects and accents, and language on a meta-level was also often a topic of conversation. Through interaction with other people with different competence levels of English and with other first languages, they also enhanced their accommodation skills, for example by having to simplify their English or by paraphrasing to make themselves understood.

Furthermore, in the process of gaining plurilingual competences, Turkish participants started to question the NS norms dominating the EFL classroom in Turkey, such as the absurdity of learning a structure like "notwithstanding the fact that" and how it is surreal to expect actual speakers to use such advanced vocabulary of low frequency or perfect "London accent" or "movie English" (T-P3). As frequently suggested, before the ELFSA experience they "could write a grammar book in English but had no idea how to start a conversation" (T-P1). So in the real world where interaction with speakers of languages other than English takes place, ELF has an indispensable communicative and pedagogical value. Using ELF, they were actually able to speak, which shortly resulted in their developing an ownership of the language (Kohn, 2018): "I was speaking in English but it felt like Turkish . . . something I had never felt before" (T-P3). The Swiss participants, in contrast, did not actively question the dominance of NS norms in the traditional EFL classes in Switzerland, which may be due to the fact that many of them seem to be torn between endorsing and rejecting the NS ideal as a useful yardstick for language learning.

4.2. Language development

The interviewed sojourners' experiences of studying in an ELFSA context were also reflected in the evaluations of their self-perceived linguistic progress (see Table 4).

Table 4 Areas of linguistic progress

Linguistic areas	Swiss sojourners	Turkish sojourners
Fluency	+	+
Vocabulary/formulaicity	+/-	+
Grammar	-	-
Pronunciation	-	-
Plurilingual competences	+	+
Awareness of linguistic diversity	+	+

Overall, most students in the Swiss and Turkish populations reported mixed feelings about the development of their English skills in the ELFSA context. All of them felt that they had primarily increased their fluency rather than

accuracy. In this respect, students highlighted the general importance of regularly using the TL without distinguishing between the use of English with L1 or L2 speakers. Over the course of their stay, their English language use became more casual, routine, formulaic and automated. One Swiss student reported that his fluency improved by regularly using the language, but, in his opinion, his English overall did not necessarily get any better: "Simply because I have to talk, it becomes more fluent/familiar. It doesn't necessarily get better, but it becomes more fluent/familiar, yes" (S-P4). By implication, this student does not consider the improvement of fluency to be an indicator of increased linguistic proficiency, which in turn diminishes its importance.

Regarding vocabulary gains, the interviewed students gave mixed evaluations. Some students mentioned that they expanded their subject-specific, academic English vocabulary while abroad. S-P5, who studied in Spain, explained that vocabulary was a linguistic area where she could profit from other international students and the local population, even though the average English level among locals was lower than her own. Other students, in contrast, voiced that the ideal interactional partners to expand one's vocabulary were or would have been English L1 speakers. In contrast to the area of vocabulary, most Swiss students felt that they had not improved their grammar or pronunciation due to the fact that they primarily interacted with other L2 speakers of English. Turkish participants had similar concerns at the beginning of their stay. Yet, towards the end they reported to have developed their English proficiencies holistically.

As previously mentioned, when evaluating their language gains, Swiss students drew comparisons to English-speaking contexts, which in their eyes would still be superior regarding improvement of grammar and pronunciation. Turkish sojourners characterized ELF talk as one "full of grammar and pronunciation mistakes and . . . simple words" (T-P1) during which they negotiated meaning through the use of several accommodation skills and code-switching. For those who were initially more proficient, this was disappointing as they expected to be exposed to "native-like use of English" (T-P3). Once they heard ELF talk in the EMI classroom (especially used by professors), they realized "how unnecessary [it is] to keep one's expectations high before departure" (T-P3). This rather negative attitude towards ELF in the first interview evolved into a more positive one as this participant noticed the "pedagogical value" of ELF (T-P3). ELF use was a *mediator* to negotiate meaning and initiate further conversations between learners of English, which helped them overcome speaking anxiety. It was also a tool to develop accommodation skills, while deviations from the target forms did not critically interfere with the targeted meaning.

The interviews suggest that students also have different expectations regarding the opportunities for language development in an ELF context with some

turning out to be more realistic than others. One Swiss student that studied abroad in Sweden expressed her expectations in the following way: "And . . . English has certainly also been important, but I think that because it's not primarily an English-speaking country, I didn't want to have too many expectations that I would be able to learn a lot there." (S-P3). In contrast with this student, another Swiss student (S-P2) that also went to Sweden was eventually disappointed about not having improved her English skills more noticeably. She explained her self-reported failure of improvement with the fact that firstly, she was not interacting with many English L1 speakers and secondly, the other international students with whom she interacted were not the most proficient English users, either. Apparently, she primarily used 'simple' English, which was not conducive to her improving her English skills. Overall, it was primarily when discussing the sojourners' improvement of grammar and pronunciation that the idea of the L1 speaker as the optimal language learning facilitator was most prominently drawn on.

5. Discussion

The results of the qualitative analysis clearly showed conflicting and evolving patterns in the way participants in both groups conceptualized their learning experiences in the ELFSA context as well as some subtle but interesting differences between the Swiss and Turkish participants.

The starting point of comparison for both Swiss and Turkish SA students were NS norms of ultimate attainment and a prescriptive perspective on language use and development. The students initially considered ELF as inferior and lamented the few interaction opportunities with English L1 speakers, thus construing it as a context with limited learning potential. With time, however, they started recognizing how liberating and beneficial communicating with fellow ELF users could be and stressing the affective advantages of this learning context.

The ELFSA context offered a more relaxed learning atmosphere where ELF talk and interactions created a linguistically diverse environment in which all fellow sojourners negotiated meaning to communicate. In the eyes of the interviewees, ELFSA thus constituted a low-anxiety, less deficiency-oriented atmosphere where deviations from the target norm were tolerated and where more competent interlocutors scaffolded less competent ones. This finding complies with those in the literature which suggest that the ELFSA is a low-anxiety environment where sojourners learn to prioritize fluency, communicative strategies, and rapport-building skills over accuracy (Kalocsai, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022). While the Turkish participants seem to have fully embraced these advantages of the ELFSA context and, as a consequence,

have developed a critical stance towards a narrow NS orientation in English language teaching, the Swiss participants seem to be more ambivalent in their evaluations. They, too, came to appreciate the ELFSA context as liberating and empowering, but at the same time they still considered English L1 speakers to be the optimal language learning facilitators. Unlike the Turkish participants, they also did not openly question or criticize the prevalence of NS norms in English language teaching. This difference may be due to the amount of time spent abroad. The Swiss students spent noticeably less time abroad and their beginning appreciation of the ELFSA context for English language learning might also have developed into a stronger rejection of the NS ideal if they had stayed longer. Another possible explanation for the differing evaluation might lie in the fact that the Turkish participants undertook their stay entirely voluntarily, whereas for the Swiss participants, the stay abroad was a prerequisite to continue their studies and to be able to obtain a teaching certificate for English. The fact that these students will soon be English teachers themselves and, as such, will be linguistic role models for their students and part of a highly prescriptive enterprise may have counteracted a greater demise of the NS ideal in this population.

Another characteristic of the ELFSA learning context that the interviewees frequently mentioned was its multilingual and multicultural nature. The students not only came into contact with the local language/s in their everyday lives, but they also made efforts to acquire basic knowledge of the local language. Apart from the local language, they also encountered other languages, primarily when interacting with other international students in their student residence or their higher education institution. The students frequently switched between different languages or used or expanded their intercomprehension and accommodation skills. Some of them also reported having developed a deeper interest in matters related to language in general. Lastly, in interactions with speakers of other languages, the interviewed students had the opportunity to experience ELF as a communication tool. During their stay abroad, the students predominantly used English to ensure that everybody could participate in the conversation and that nobody was excluded. The ELFSA context thus provides a rich linguistic environment where students can experience the benefits of using ELF and where they also have the opportunity to get in touch with other languages and to simultaneously develop their plurilingual competences.

In the eyes of the students, the ELF learning context with its prevalence of NNS-NNS interactions primarily facilitated developing their fluency and accommodation skills, but less so their accuracy and pronunciation, which is clearly reported in the interview data. This finding is also in line with the current literature in that NNS-NNS interaction is a major source of English practice and development (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022; Tanaka, 2007). These insights contribute

to our understanding of the value of ELF communication and NNS interaction, which have been long overlooked in SLA (McGregor, 2021). Our results extend those in the literature to two groups of sojourners from different L1 backgrounds, with different motivations to learn English and different educational orientations. It was apparent in our dataset that the Swiss group, who were studying abroad to complete one requirement of their study programs, adhered to the NS speaker ideal more than the Turkish group, who were mostly non-language majors and only studying abroad voluntarily. Though this latter group also initially adhered to the NS ideal, they effortlessly adopted a plurilingual identity after some time in the ELFSA context. It could be argued that the Turkish participants managed to establish a more emancipated L2-user identity with greater speaker satisfaction (see Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017).

6. Conclusions

Our results highlight the discrepancy between what students expect from their stay in an ELFSA context and their actual experience of it. While, initially, they did not see the full potential of this context for language learning, they came to experience the ELFSA context as a powerful learning context while abroad. Moreover, our findings suggest another discrepancy between how our participants were trained and instructed to use the language in the formal classroom at home as opposed to what they were exposed to in terms of language use in the actual SA context.

To attenuate the discrepancy between students' initial expectations and their actual experience abroad, we suggest implementing pre-departure orientation classes or workshops which might prove useful as a pedagogical implication of our study. In these classes, language issues could be raised and discussed and former sojourners could be invited to share their experiences. The insights gained in relation to the discrepancy between language learning experiences in the traditional classroom and the SA context could be helpful for those in charge of curriculum and material design as well as teacher education, paving the way for a more pluricentric and pluricultural pedagogy. Finally, the results from this study bear implications for international offices at teacher training sites. In many cases higher education institutions will not accept ELFSA contexts as legitimate contexts for the required language stays of future language teachers. In light of our findings, as well as previous findings on the linguistic progress made by SA students in ELFSA contexts (Llanes et al., 2016; Llanes, 2019; Köylü, 2021; Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022), we advocate for reconsidering these policies and for recognizing ELFSA contexts as legitimate language learning environments.

Naturally, our findings need to be interpreted with a number of limitations in mind. For example, it needs to be acknowledged that the Swiss and Turkish participants were not matched for destination country. Hence, we are comparing different geographical ELFSA contexts (e.g., Finland, Spain, Germany). Consequently, differences in students' evaluations of the English learning potential of their SA destination may be related to their perception of the prevalence of English use in their environment and the English proficiency of the local population rather than differences in learner characteristics. Furthermore, findings cannot be considered generalizable given the small sample. Rather, they offer first insights into possible correlates of differing student perceptions and the dynamic nature of these. Our participants only represent two lingua-cultures and tertiary-level sojourners in Europe. We report on data from semi-structured interviews limited to the scope and lived experiences of our participants. A broader look at international student mobility within a mixed-methods study comprising a sample representing a variety of lingua-cultures from different educational levels would yield more comprehensive results to better understand the role of the ELFSA context in English learning. Future research could also investigate whether different ELF destinations are conceptualized to be more or less beneficial for English TL development and provide more empirical insights into whether differing starting proficiencies, language backgrounds and motivations for study abroad go hand in hand with differential perceptions of the learning potential of ELF contexts. Moreover, future research could investigate the effect of pre-departure orientations as suggested above on the perceptions of SA students before and during their SA.

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