# INTERCULTURAL GUIDANCE ABROAD: IMPACT ON SOCIAL NETWORK FORMATION AND L2 SELF-PERCEIVED DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

Contemporary research on language and intercultural learning during study abroad programs has led scholars to challenge the immersion assumption and to argue the need for interventions that would deepen and extend the learning potential of this experience (Jackson, 2018). In an attempt to underscore this point, this paper reports on an experimental study which explores the impact of a pedagogical intervention where two groups of Flemish students (n=34) are tracked during their Erasmus stay in Spain. One group of students (n=14) is enrolled in the intervention and encouraged to engage in linguistically and culturally challenging encounters while the other group is not (n=20). Both language use and social network formation are examined through an extended version of the SASIQ questionnaire (Dewey et al., 2013), completed following their abroad experience. Although it is not straightforward to grasp the influence of such curricular initiatives on learner interaction and language contact abroad, results from the study are consistent with previous findings on the importance of fostering social interactions for L2 development. Furthermore, a number of social network variables also point out how L2 self-perceived progress can be fostered abroad.

Keywords: social network formation; pedagogical intervention; language and intercultural learning; interactional contacts.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, European multilingual policies have striven towards educating our young generations to meet the challenges of multilingualism (Coleman, 2013). For this purpose, it has often been assumed that living and studying in another country strongly facilitate intercultural and language learning (Kinginger, 2009; Beaven & Borghetti 2018). This immersion assumption has made the Erasmus+ programme increasingly popular in Europe, as it is conceived as an excellent opportunity to improve participants' language skills, as well as their intercultural abilities (Beaven & Borghetti, 2018).

Of course, from a research perspective, learning outcomes cannot be taken for granted, but must be critically evaluated. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), learning outcomes during study abroad have been mainly measured through pre- and post-sojourn tests based on second language (L2) skills (for a review, see Kinginger, 2009). Regarding student sojourners' intercultural development, many scholars have attempted to measure their intercultural competence abroad by means of empirical studies (e.g. Paige & Goode, 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2009; Jackson, 2015; Borghetti, 2016).

The high variability in findings across such studies has revealed that, in spite of the great learning potential of study abroad (SA), the range of internal and external factors determining sojourners' learning outcomes abroad is wide and complex and nothing is guaranteed. Going abroad does not necessarily imply intercultural and language development (Jackson, 2015), nor does it imply that participants abandon their prejudices towards different cultures (Coleman, 2013). As Kinginger (2013) argues, participants encounter challenges affecting not only their linguistic and intercultural abilities, but also their self-image and the development of their identity, making it difficult for them to become more engaged in or less judgemental with their new reality, and therefore to use the foreign language.

Consequently, research has also focused on measuring the effect of different variables affecting the language and intercultural learning process abroad. Authors have investigated variables such as type and duration of stay (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Devlin, 2018), individual variables such as attitudes

towards the L2 and host community (Isabelli-García, 2006) and social interactions with the host community (e.g. Dewey et al., 2013; Paige et al., 2009). These interactions in particular have been proven to be connected to linguistic gains, such as L2 pragmatic competence development (Ren, 2018), and intercultural gains (Hernández, 2010; Martinsen, 2011). Notwithstanding, more recent studies have challenged the so-called immersion assumption and argue for the need for external interventions or guidance to deepen and extend sojourners' language and intercultural learning outcomes abroad (Jackson, 2018). According to Borghetti (2016), guiding students in this journey can help them turn first-hand experience abroad into a potentially enriching intercultural experience.

The present study responds to this call for guidance abroad and examines the role played by a pedagogical intervention focused on sojourners' interactional contacts abroad and their L2 self-perceived development. These contacts are also defined as 'social networks' (SN) or participants' social groups where interpersonal relationships are fostered and thus the chances of getting involved and participating in deeper and complex conversations increase (Dewey et al., 2013). Language development is envisaged as inherent to the intercultural learning process students undergo during the intervention, the main objective of which is to encourage participants to become 'intercultural speakers' through their social interactions by using the target language. Intercultural competence is envisaged as participants' ability to interact successfully in their own language with people from another culture, and intercultural communicative competence as the ability to do so in a foreign language (Byram, 1997).

## 2. Maximizing the Erasmus experience through educational support

As mentioned before, although research on SA outcomes has shown clear benefits, individual variation in such outcomes has often been found. According to García-Nieto (2018: 58), "understanding this variation is crucial for theory building and SA program design." Therefore, studies have focused on examining individual variables affecting learning outcomes abroad and, when it comes to language learning, interaction in the target language has often been considered as a catalyst for promoting development in language production abilities. A growing body of studies supports this hypothesis (Dewey et al., 2012; Isabelli-García, 2006; Trentman, 2013; Magnan & Back, 2007, among others). Kinginger (2008) found that students who reported having intense contact with the host community developed their speaking abilities further than those who barely experienced such contact. In fact, the most consistent effect of these interactions has been found on oral fluency and proficiency (Llanes, 2011).

These results have led to the investigation of learners' use of their time during a SA experience (e.g., Freed et al., 2004), and their development of in-country social networks (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2013). Others have investigated interactions with host families (e.g., Di Silvio et al., 2014), while fewer studies have examined interactions with same-age peers, either members of the host community or other SA participants (Bryfonski & Mackey, 2018).

While some studies argue that participants' motivation to improve their language abilities leads to more interactions (e.g., Hernández, 2010) and that greater language use is related to greater language gains (e.g., Foster, 2009), others challenge these assumptions (e.g. Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Freed et al., 2004). Despite participants' willingness to interact with the host community, they do not automatically succeed in developing such contacts, and when they do happen, such contacts are often superficial (Dewey et al., 2013). Contrary to their own expectations and those of many educators and administrators, students return home in some cases with reinforced stereotypes and discouraged from using their L2 during intercultural interactions (Jackson, 2010). These findings stress the importance of guiding students during the SA experience in terms of language development and quality of their intercultural encounters, as deeper conversations with fewer friends can be more effective in developing greater language gains than the sheer number of hours spoken (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014).

A growing body of research in the field of international education argues that learning outcomes abroad can be maximized by formal interventions before, during, and after SA (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Paige

& Goode, 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Vande Berg et al. (2009) found that pre-departure orientation with a cultural component was a significant predictor of language improvement. While some SA participants may be intrinsically motivated and prepared to face intercultural situations and interact with the host community in the foreign language, others may need support. Some may need guidance in reflecting on cultural differences, interactions, or conflicts in order to give them meaning (Peckenpaugh, 2018) and turn them into potentially enriching intercultural and linguistic experiences (Jackson, 2018). Tracking participants during these interventions will allow researchers to better understand what students go through during this experience (e.g., Vande Berg et al. 2012; Deardorff, 2015; Jackson, 2015, 2018) and should eventually lead to evidence-based SA program design. It will improve practices in the design, delivery, and evaluation of this kind of courses and, therefore, improve SA programmes for language learners (Jackson, 2010).

There are many attempts at curricular interventions before, during and after SA focused on encouraging learning mobility and supporting students in terms of personal growth and intercultural awareness. They can be found in the American context (see Paige et al.'s, 2009 work within the project 'Maximizing Study Abroad through Language and Culture Strategies'), the European context (see Van Maele et al., 2016 in relation to the project on 'Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers') as well as in the Asian context (Jackson, 2010). These projects and the interventions they examine have illustrated that the learning process abroad is a complex one, where language skills, language use and intercultural situations make the experience unique and challenging. Instructors cannot control all variables involved in participants' interactional contacts, but they can attempt to boost students' interactions and encourage them to focus on the quality of the language used during those intercultural encounters. Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) argue that one of the key methods for ensuring success on a SA programme is students' training on how to develop friendships and engage with cultural differences. In the same vein, DeKeyser (2007) suggests that once students are abroad, it may be crucial to give them assignments where they are encouraged to engage in meaningful interactions that will make them more confident when using the language.

The study presented here aims to complement such existing work by examining the role played by a pedagogical intervention carried out during the SA experience. With the focus on language gains and social interactions, the research questions addressed in this study are twofold:

RQ1: Does intercultural guidance influence participants' social interactions, L2 self-perceived progress after the experience, as well as the fulfilment of their expectations regarding L2 gains?

RQ2: Are interactional contacts in the target language of the host community related to participants' L2 self-perceived progress and expected L2 gains?

## 3. Methodology and analysis

### 3.1. Design of the pedagogical intervention

The intervention, called 'Intercultural Project Spain', is an optional, credit-bearing course embedded in the compulsory Erasmus programme for students of the Bachelor in Applied Language Studies at Ghent University (Belgium). All students spend the first term of their third year in a country other than Belgium. The SA semester is obligatory since it is seen as a catalyst for the use of previous knowledge of foreign languages, intercultural communication, intercultural pragmatics and cultural history developed during their first two years of study. Consequently, the objective is not to explicitly teach L2 communicative or intercultural strategies. Participants are encouraged to carefully observe and analyse new intercultural situations while participating in interactional contacts using the foreign language. Byram (2000) claims that critical cultural awareness does not come automatically with learning the language. To encourage students to reach higher levels of intercultural competence, authors such as Hammer (2012) or Jackson (2018) recommend intercultural education abroad based on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), with critical reflection as a central component (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

The intervention, divided into six thematic modules, consists of 14 tasks completed in the target language, and carried out through the eLearning platform of the university. The design of the tasks is inspired by Paige's work (Paige et al., 2009) and the IEREST Project (Van Maele et al., 2016), referred to above in the background section. Participants were required to engage in the tasks while abroad and complete each module every two / three weeks. The proposed deadlines allowed the instructor to provide participants with gradual feedback. Students had all material at their disposal before departure and could organise their own workload. They were evaluated based on task elaboration (if all questions were answered, if they had tried to see beyond generalizations and stereotypes, and how personal their answers were), task presentation (formal aspects), respect for deadlines, and active participation in forums and online conversations with the instructor. Students received feedback on their written and oral performance, but they were not penalized in terms of language accuracy. The intervention was piloted in the academic year 2016-2017 and implemented in a slightly revised version in the academic year 2017-2018. The final organization of the activities is as follows:

M1 Warming up before Erasmus: Students have to think about their personal and professional expectations, how they plan to accomplish them, and which cultural and language strategies they intend to use during their stay. They introduce themselves to the group and start interacting with peer students.

M2 Linguistic competence: Students have to reflect on the language used by different social groups. They work with challenging videos / documents on current trending topics that include cultural and social connotations that they need help from locals to interpret.

M3 Identities: Students work on personality, identity formation and aspects that may affect their self-image as L2 speakers in order to get to know themselves better and understand all the changes that they are likely to go through during their Erasmus experience. We depart from the idea that living abroad does not change the individual but helps the person to get to know him/herself better and discover aspects (s)he did not know about him/herself before.

M4 Getting involved with locals: The main purpose is to encourage students to engage in contact with the host community. Students meet up with four members of the host community who are eager to share their impressions about their own city (participants' host city) and their own prior experiences as Erasmus students in Belgium in previous years.

M5 Interculturality: These activities centre around intercultural aspects hindering or benefiting successful conversation and interactional contacts with the host community. Students work on how to detect and deal with these hidden aspects of culture while interacting with the host community.

M6 Life post-Erasmus: Students evaluate the long-term effects of the experience. What are the personal and professional experiences that they will bring back home? Knowing what they know now, what would they have changed if they could start over again? Activities in this module attempt to help them reflect on their personal, intercultural and language learning processes during the experience.

### 3.2. Participants

All participants (n=34) were students of the Applied Language Studies programme 2017-2018 at Ghent University going to Spain on an Erasmus exchange programme. The fact that the present study focuses on Dutch-speaking Erasmus students introduces an extra perspective to the dominant focus in previous research on students speaking more global languages (L1 English or Spanish). In particular, our students have the choice when abroad between using their L1 (Dutch), the target language of the country (Spanish), English as a lingua franca, or another second language altogether. Due to their academic studies, all of them speak more than two languages, which may have an impact on their social interactions and SN formation. All of them (n=34) have knowledge of English and Spanish and almost all of them speak French (n=33). More than half of the students (n=18) speak German. They have developed their proficiency in Spanish, English and French to a CEFR B2 level or even higher for

English or French, depending on the language combinations that they study in the programme. Their L2 proficiency at this stage is likely sufficient to allow them to establish the diverse and profound social contacts that we wish to encourage through the intervention.

Some of the participants (the experimental group [EG], n=14, 2 male and 12 female students) enrolled in the intervention, whereas the rest (the comparison group [CG], n=20, 5 male and 15 female students) followed the standard course requirements of their Erasmus Learning Agreement. Although one may suspect that members of the EG have higher motivation on intercultural and L2 learning, not all of them took part in the intervention for intrinsic motivational reasons, but rather because they needed extra credits to complete their Learning Agreement or found out late that some of their initial courses at the host university overlapped. Both groups are thus rather heterogeneous in terms of motivation as well as choice of destination city (13 different universities). Participants who took part in the pilot intervention during the previous academic year 2016-2017 were not included in this study since the data is not exactly comparable. The average number of weeks that they spent on the Erasmus exchange was n=17.5. All students decided to live in shared flats; none of them chose to stay in student halls of residence or host families.

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

An online survey, which was conducted after the Erasmus stay, gathered information about participants' linguistic knowledge (languages spoken and level), their stay abroad (number of weeks, housing arrangements, languages spoken in the housing and university context, etc.) and use of foreign languages. The online survey also focused on the nature of their social interactions by adopting the 'Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire' (SASIQ) developed by Dewey et al. (2012), which consists of items designed to compute various SN measures: size, intensity, density, durability and dispersion (further detailed in section 5).

Regarding the target language of the host country (Spanish), students were asked on a 5-point scale about their self-perceived L2 proficiency level in writing, speaking, listening and reading, ranging from 1= novice to 5= native-like. They were also asked about their L2 self-perceived proficiency progress in all four skills on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1= none to 4= a lot. Students were asked about the fulfilment of their expectations concerning L2 gains abroad on a 3-point scale, ranging from 1= less than expected to 3= more than expected. In order to look for significant differences between the EG and CG, independent-samples t-tests were conducted for each measure outlined above. Furthermore, to determine the relation between SN variables regarding L1/L2 Spanish speakers and participants' L2 self-perceived development in Spanish after the Erasmus experience, two-tailed non-parametric bivariate correlations were conducted by using Spearman correlation coefficients. The CG and EG were treated as one single group to obtain significant quantitative results that would allow us to delve into the role of interactional contacts on L2 self-perceived development in general.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Impact of intercultural guidance abroad on participants' SN formation, L2 self-perceived progress and L2 expected gains in Spanish

In order to understand better the nature of participants' social networks as described in Table 1, it is important to mention first that participants reported in the online survey (section 3.3) using English (35.6%) and Dutch (34%) slightly more than Spanish (29%) abroad. They spent most of the time with their Spanish social contacts speaking in Spanish (96%) and using Dutch almost all of the time with their Dutch-speaking contacts (93.8%).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for both the CG (n=20) and the EG (n=14) on variables from the SASIQ questionnaire (Dewey et al., 2012). Variables addressed are 'size' or number of social contacts; 'durability' or frequency of interaction with those social contacts based on a 4- point scale where 1= most frequent contact and 4= less frequent contact; 'intensity of friendship' or how close

participants are to those contacts on a 10- point scale where 1= mere acquaintance and 10= very close friends; 'dispersion', referring to the number of social groups participants have (e.g. friends from university, from Erasmus organizations, friends from home, etc.), and 'density' or number of social contacts participants have per social group. Regarding 'size', participants were asked to list up to a maximum of ten people (friends or acquaintances) with whom they had contact during their Erasmus stay, their nationality, which language they spoke with them, and the language level of those social contacts. The original SASIQ allowed students to list up to 20 people. However, we decided to limit the number to ten and include supplementary specific questions to the original version (see Table 2).

Each variable is divided into four subcategories in order to give more detailed information about the nature of those social contacts: 1) including all social contacts; 2) excluding L1 Dutch contacts; 3) including only members of the host community (L1 Spanish speakers) and 4) including only those contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (as L1 or L2). N refers to the number of participants in the CG or EG who reported having at least one social contact within each subcategory (and who therefore filled in the variables of 'durability', 'intensity', 'dispersion' and 'density' per social contact mentioned). Only 'size' includes all participants of the EG and CG even if they mentioned no social contacts in one of the subcategories. The minimum number of social contacts (Min) in 'size' can thus be zero. (Max) refers to the maximum value given in each variable.

*Table1. Descriptive statistics from the Study Abroad Interaction Questionnaire (SASIQ)*

| **Size of social groups** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | |
| Including all social contacts | 20 | 5 | 10 | 8.4 | 1.7 | 14 | 1 | 10 | 7.3 | 2.3 |
| Excluding L1 Dutch contacts | 20 | 1 | 9 | 5.5 | 2.3 | 14 | 1 | 8 | 4.6 | 2.4 |
| Including only L1 Spanish contacts | 20 | 0 | 4 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 14 | 0 | 6 | 1.6 | 1.7 |
| Contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2) | 20 | 0 | 8 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 14 | 0 | 6 | 2.1 | 1.8 |

| **Durability (frequency of interaction)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | |
| Including all social contacts | 20 | 1.3 | 2.2 | 1.8 | 0.2 | 14 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 0.3 |
| Excluding L1 Dutch contacts | 20 | 1.0 | 2.6 | 1.8 | 0.4 | 14 | 1.0 | 2.2 | 1.7 | 0.3 |
| Including only L1 Spanish contacts | 15 | 1.0 | 4.0 | 2.0 | 0.8 | 11 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 0.5 |
| Contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2) | 15 | 1.0 | 4.0 | 1.9 | 0.8 | 12 | 1.0 | 3.0 | 1.6 | 0.6 |

| **Intensity of friendship** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | |
| Including all social contacts | 20 | 5.5 | 8.8 | 7.1 | 0.8 | 14 | 6.5 | 10 | 7.9 | 1.1 |
| Excluding L1 Dutch contacts | 20 | 2.0 | 8.5 | 6.6 | 1.4 | 14 | 3.7 | 10 | 7.1 | 1.5 |
| Including only L1 Spanish contacts | 15 | 2.0 | 10 | 6.0 | 2.3 | 11 | 4.0 | 10 | 7.4 | 1.7 |
| Contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2) | 15 | 1.0 | 8.2 | 5.8 | 2.2 | 12 | 4.0 | 10 | 7.2 | 1.7 |

| **Dispersion (number of social groups)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | |
| Including all social contacts | 20 | 2 | 7 | 4.4 | 1.3 | 14 | 3 | 6 | 4.0 | 1.0 |
| Excluding L1 Dutch contacts | 20 | 2 | 6 | 3.5 | 1.2 | 14 | 2 | 5 | 3.2 | 0.9 |
| Including only L1 Spanish contacts | 15 | 1 | 4 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 11 | 1 | 4 | 2.6 | 1.0 |
| Contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2) | 15 | 1 | 5 | 2.7 | 1.3 | 12 | 1 | 4 | 2.8 | 1.0 |

| **Density (number people per social group)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | CG | | | | | EG | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Including all social contacts | 20 | 2.0 | 7.2 | 4.5 | 1.6 | 14 | 1.0 | 7.8 | 4.1 | 2.0 |
| Excluding L1 Dutch contacts | 20 | 1.0 | 5.7 | 3.2 | 1.2 | 14 | 1.0 | 7.0 | 2.9 | 1.8 |
| Including only L1 Spanish contacts | 15 | 1.0 | 1.7 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 11 | 1.0 | 3.1 | 0.7 | 0.8 |
| Contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2) | 15 | 1.0 | 6.5 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 12 | 1.0 | 5.5 | 1.9 | 1.2 |

Looking at 'size', Table 1 shows that the average number of contacts in both groups drops considerably when we exclude L1 Dutch contacts (7.3 to 4.6 in the EG and 8.4 to 5.5 in the CG). The same happens when we look at 'dispersion' (4.0 to 3.2 in the EG and 4.4 to 3.5 in the CG) and 'density' (4.1 to 2.9 in the EG and 4.5 to 3.2 in the CG). If we look at contacts among L1 Spanish speakers, differences between both groups are found in terms of 'durability'. EG participants speak more often with their L1 Spanish contacts on average (1.5/4) than CG participants (2/4). Remember that 1= most frequent contact and 4= less frequent contact. Regarding 'intensity of friendship', the average score is higher in both groups when L1 Dutch contacts are involved. Participants in the EG report having more intense relationships with their L1 Spanish contacts (7.4/8) and their contacts in Spanish in general (7.2/8) than participants in the CG (L1 Spanish = 6/8; contacts in Spanish in general = 5.8/8).

As mentioned before, variables from the SASIQ questionnaire were complemented by other measures (Table 2). 'Type of encounters' refers to the context where participants met their contacts. Encounters given by the students were subsequently organized in three groups: 'Profile 1: facilitated encounters', 'Profile 2: challenging encounters' and 'Profile 3: L1 attachment'. Profile 1 includes all encounters made possible by the host university through international activities, Erasmus organizations, or other international organizations students signed up to at the beginning of their stay. Profile 2 includes those encounters where students went 'into the wild' to meet new people, for example through Internet sites, sport and leisure activities organized for and by members of the host community, volunteering activities, etc. Finally, Profile 3 refers to those encounters where students remained in contact with friends at home via Internet, family or Belgian classmates in the same destination city. This data is presented in percentages because the total number of encounters are different for every student, and we are interested in highlighting the most dominant 'profile' of encounters or conversations per participant.

Moreover, we included an additional question about the 'quality' of participants' interactions (called 'Language intensity'). Students had to clarify in this variable the main focus of the conversations they had with every contact person. They were given three options: 'Topic 1: small talk' (events, weather, parties, etc.), 'Topic 2: academic issues' (deadlines, tasks, university matters, etc.) and 'Topic 3: personal conversations' (feelings, culture, identity, life, etc.). 'Language intensity' is again divided into the four above-mentioned subcategories and presented in percentages to illustrate in a more visible way participants' tendency to become more or less involved in academic or personal topics in their conversations.

*Table 2. Additional measures to the SASIQ: type of encounters and quality of L2 interactions with social contacts*

| **Type of encounters** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | | | |
| Profile 1: Facilitated encounters | 20 | 10% | 100% | 51,8% | 27 | 14 | 20% | 100% | 64,0% | 27,6 |
| Profile 2: Challenging encounters | 20 | 0% | 80% | 31,1% | 22,4 | 14 | 0% | 70% | 17,9% | 23,8 |
| Profile 3: L1 attachment | 20 | 0% | 33,3% | 17,1% | 9,9 | 14 | 0% | 80% | 18,1% | 23,9 |

| **Language intensity (all contacts)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **CG** | | | | | **EG** | | | | |
| Topic 1: Small talk | 20 | 33.3% | 61.5% | 43.8% | 7.9 | 14 | 30% | 70% | 45.9% | 12.3 |
| Topic 2: Academic issues | 20 | 10% | 38.9% | 26.5% | 9.6 | 14 | 0% | 40% | 24.5% | 14.2 |
| Topic 3: Personal conversations | 20 | 15.4% | 50.0% | 29.6% | 8.5 | 14 | 12.5% | 50% | 29.6% | 10.5 |

| **Language intensity (number** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

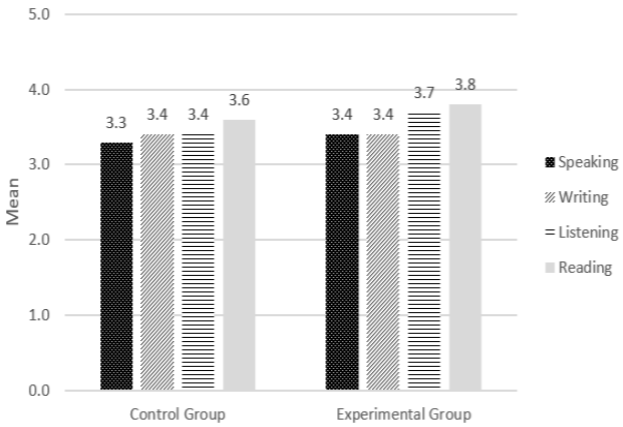
| of L1 Dutch speakers) | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | CG | | | | | EG | | |
| Topic 1: Small talk | 20 | 33.3% | 66.7% | 46.7% | 10.1 | 14 | 33.3% | 80.0% | 48.1% | 13.4 |
| Topic 2: Academic issues | 20 | 0% | 50.0% | 23.3% | 15.7 | 14 | 0% | 42.9% | 27.6% | 16.2 |
| Topic 3: Personal conversations | 20 | 0% | 58.3% | 30.0% | 13.1 | 14 | 0% | 45.5% | 24.3% | 14.1 |

| **Language intensity (L1 Spanish contacts)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | CG | | | | | EG | | |
| Topic 1: Small talk | 15 | 0% | 100% | 51.2% | 26.1 | 11 | 0% | 100% | 38.5% | 27.4 |
| Topic 2: Academic issues | 15 | 0% | 50% | 20.1% | 20.5 | 11 | 0% | 100% | 28.1% | 29.5 |
| Topic 3: Personal conversations | 15 | 0% | 100% | 28.7% | 29.0 | 11 | 0% | 100% | 33.3% | 28.9 |

| **Language intensity (all contacts in Spanish)** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** | **N** | **Min** | **Max** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | CG | | | | | EG | | |
| Topic 1: Small talk | 15 | 33.3% | 100% | 49.9% | 16.7 | 12 | 0% | 100% | 44.2% | 14.1 |
| Topic 2: Academic issues | 15 | 0% | 50% | 21.4% | 18.7 | 12 | 0% | 50% | 25.0% | 13.4 |
| Topic 3: Personal conversations | 15 | 0% | 66.7% | 28.7% | 22.3 | 12 | 0% | 100% | 30.8% | 16.2 |

Results in Table 2 indicate that in both groups, more than half of all encounters fall into the category of 'Profile 1: facilitated encounters' (64% in the EG and 51.8% in the CG). At the same time, less than one third of participants' social contacts occurs through alternative channels as indicated in 'Profile 2: challenging encounters' (17.9% in the EG and 31.1% in the CG). Regarding 'Profile 3: L1 attachment', almost 20% of the students' contacts consist of family and friends at home or L1 students in the host city. Looking at 'language intensity' in an L2 (excluding L1 Dutch speakers), Table 2 shows that almost half of the time, interactions are related in both groups to Topic 1: small-talk topics, almost one third of the time to Topic 2: academic issues, and around 25% of the time in the EG to Topic 3: personal conversations, and slightly higher in the CG (30%). Regarding L1 Spanish-speaking contacts, the EG spent 38.5% of the time on 'small talk', in contrast to the CG which spent more than half of the time in this kind of conversations (51.2%). The EG engaged in conversations about academic issues slightly more often (28.1%) than the CG (20.1%), and more in personal conversations about feelings, culture, identity, life, etc. (33.3%) than the CG (28.7%). We observe the same tendency regarding all contacts with whom they spoke Spanish (L1/L2), where the EG engaged again in conversations about academic issues slightly more often (25%) than the CG (21.4%) and more in personal conversations (30.8%) than the CG (28.7%).

Looking now at the participants' L2 self-perceived progress and L2 expected gains in Spanish, Figure 1 indicates that, after the Erasmus experience, both groups of students consider themselves as upper-intermediate speakers of L2 Spanish in all four skills, with slightly higher values for the EG, where 1= minimum level and 5= native-like. This data is complemented by participants' L2 self-perceived progress (Figure 2). Interestingly, Figure 2, where 1= no progress and 4= a lot of progress, reveals that the EG scores higher than 3 (medium progress) in all four skills, while the CG only scores higher than 3 for 'speaking' and 'listening'. Mean differences in 'writing' (EG M=3.4 against CG M=2.8) and in 'reading' (EG M=3.5 against CG M=3.0) stand out the most.



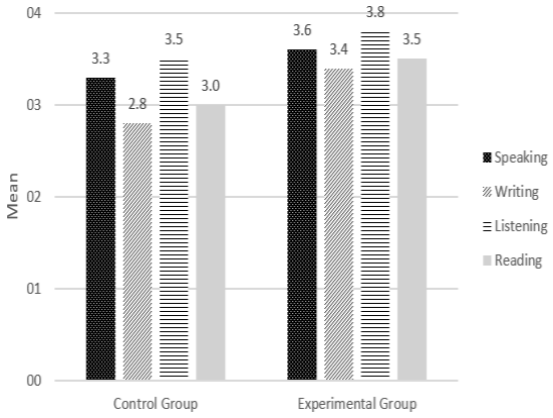



*Figure 1. Self-perceived level of Spanish after SA*

*Figure 2. Self-perceived progress in Spanish after SA*

Finally, regarding the fulfilment of their expectations concerning L2 gains in Spanish abroad, Figure 3 illustrates that the EG satisfied their expectations with regard to L2 development (2/3) more than the CG (1.5/3), where 1= less than expected, 2= as expected and 3= more than expected.

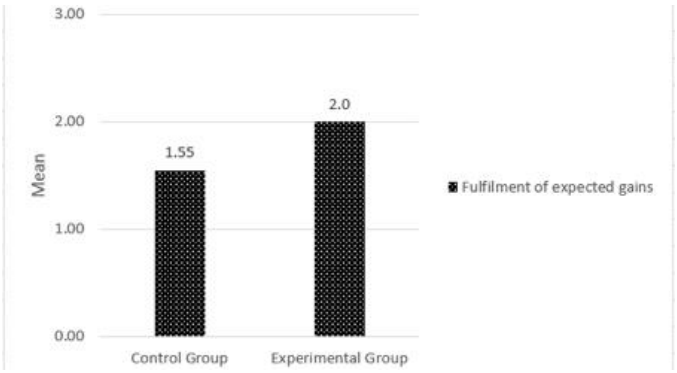



*Figure 3. Fulfilment of expected gains in L2 Spanish after SA*

In summary, we find several pieces of evidence that suggest that the EG has a slight edge over the CG in terms of SN formation and L2 perceived level, progress and fulfilment. Yet, it is also clear that these differences are relatively minor and that the sample of participants for a quantitative approach is rather small. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that independent-samples t-tests could not confirm the statistical significance of the observed differences for any of the SN or L2 variables presented here.

### 4.2. Connections between interactions with L1/L2 Spanish speakers abroad, L2 self-perceived progress and L2 expected gains

In order to shed more light on the relation between social interactions in the target language and L2 development abroad, we examine the correlations between SN variables regarding interactions in Spanish in general (L1/L2 contacts), participants' L2 self-perceived progress and expected gains in Spanish after the Erasmus experience (L2 expected gains) by conducting two-tailed non-parametric bivariate correlations using Spearman correlation coefficients (see Table 3). The CG and EG were treated as one group here to obtain significant quantitative results. N= 34 for Size, while n= 27 for the other features since there were seven participants who did not report having Spanish-speaking contacts (Size = 0).

*Table 3. Non-parametric correlations between SN formation (L1/L2 Spanish contact) and L2 self-perceived development / L2 expected gains*

| **n=27** | **L2 Progress** | | | | **L2 expected gains** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SASIQ | **Speaking** | **Writing** | **Reading** | **Listening** | |
| **Size (n=34)** | .242 (p .168) | -.041 (p .819) | -.116 (p .513) | -.154 (p .383) | .295 (p .091) |
| **Durability** | -.349 (p .074) | **-.507** (p .007)** | -.158 (p .432) | -.178 (p .374) | **-.445* (p .023)** |
| **Intensity of friendship** | **.451* (p .018)** | .355 (p .069) | .363 (p .063) | **.415* (p .031)** | **.646** (p .000)** |
| **Density** | .143 (p .475) | .089 (p .657) | .079 (p .697) | .240 (p .229) | .306* (p .121) |
| **Dispersion** | .301 (p .127) | .012 (p .951) | .189 (p .344) | .348 (p .075) | **.432* (p .025)** |
| **Topic 1: Small talk** | .036 (p .857) | .159 (p .430) | .115 (p .567) | .370 (p .057) | .184 (p .358) |
| **Topic 2: Academic issues** | -.217 (p .276) | -.197 (p .325) | **-.388* (p .045)** | **-.423* (p .028)** | .001 (p .997) |
| **Topic 3: Personal conversations** | .099 (p .625) | .000 (p .999) | .229 (p .250) | .090 (p .656) | -.035 (p .861) |

* Spearman's rho (2-tailed correlations)

Table 3 shows significant correlations between 'durability' or frequency of interaction and progress in 'writing' (r = -.507**, p = .007), as well as L2 expected gains (r = -.445*, p = .023). These correlations are negative because the lower the score in 'durability', the more frequent the interaction (1= most frequent contact and 4= less frequent contact). At the same time, 'intensity' of friendship correlates positively with progress in 'speaking' (r = .451*, p = .018), progress in 'listening' (r = .415*, p = .031), and with L2 expected gains (r = .646**, p = .000). 'Dispersion' also correlates significantly with L2 expected gains (r = .432*, p = .025). Regarding 'intensity of L2 interactions', negative correlations show that the more students tend to have 'small talk' conversations rather than 'academic' or 'deeper' conversations, the less progress they perceive in all four competences, although only 'listening' (r = -.423*, p = .028) and 'reading' (r = -.388*, p = .045) showed a significant correlation.

Given the intervention's focus on participants establishing interactional contacts within the host community in order to foster L2 learning, we repeated the same procedure, restricting the results to contacts with L1 speakers of Spanish (see Table 4). Again, n= 34 for Size, and n= 26 for the other features since there were eight participants who did not report L1 Spanish-speaking contacts (Size = 0).

*Table 4. Non-parametric correlations between SN (L1 Spanish speakers only) and L2 self-perceived development / L2 expected gains*

| **n=26** | **L2 Progress** | | | | **L2 expected gains** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SASIQ | **Speaking** | **Writing** | **Reading** | **Listening** | |
| **Size (n=34)** | .279 (p .110) | .097 (p .583) | .035 (p .842) | .216 (p .220) | **.380* (p .027)** |
| **Durability** | **-.436* (p .026)** | **-.516** (p .007)** | -.282 (p .124) | -.309 (p .162) | **-.445* (p .023)** |
| **Intensity of friendship** | .281 (p .165) | .224 (p .271) | .237 (p .244) | **.441* (p .035)** | **.408* (p .039)** |
| **Density** | .314 (p .118) | .208 (p .308) | .303 (p .132) | **.445* (p .023)** | .302 (p .134) |
| **Dispersion** | .340 (p .090) | .210 (p .304) | .317 (p .115) | **.441* (p .024)** | .276 (p .172) |
| **Topic 1: Small talk** | -.031 (p .879) | .245 (p .227) | .192 (p .348) | .332 (p .098) | .097 (p .636) |
| **Topic 2: Academic issues** | -.112 (p .586) | -.266 (p .190) | -.382 (p .054) | **-.468* (p .016)** | .001 (p .997) |
| **Topic 3: Personal conversations** | .113 (p .582) | .035 (p .865) | .176 (p .389) | .207 (p .311) | -.106 (p .607) |

* Spearman's rho (2-tailed correlations

As seen in Table 4, restricting the contacts to L1 Spanish-speaking participants does not radically change the overall results. Perhaps the most interesting difference with Table 3 is the additional correlations between 'size' and L2 expected gains (r = .380*, p = .027) and 'durability' or frequency of interaction and progress in 'speaking' (r = -.436*, p = .026), not present when all contacts in Spanish are included. It is also interesting to see that there are four significant correlations for self-perceived development on 'listening' with L1 Spanish-speaking participants ('Intensity of friendship': r = .441*, p = .035; 'Density': r = .445*, p = .023; 'Dispersion': r = .441*, p = .24; and Topic 2 'small talk': r = -.468*, p = .016) compared to two significant correlations with all people with whom the learners spoke Spanish ('Intensity of friendship' and Topic 2 'small talk').

## 5. Discussion

The data presented invite us to reflect further on whether a curricular intervention may influence SN formation, L2 self-perceived progress and expected L2 gains abroad, as well as on the relation between interactional contacts and L2 self-perceived development. Regarding SN formation, results reveal that the number of L1 Dutch contacts included in students' social groups is higher than the number of members of the host community and almost the same as international peers. This confirms what has already been documented in the SA literature, namely that Erasmus students are more attached than expected to their L1 / international environment where they use their native language or English as lingua franca (DeKeyser, 2007; Dewey, 2008; Coleman, 2013).

In contrast to participants in other exchange programmes, Erasmus students typically stay in shared flats or studios and not with host families. This means that, very often, they have to start from scratch when getting involved with the host community. As illustrated in 'type of encounters', our group of students tends to establish social contacts through facilitated channels such as activities organized by the host university and Erasmus / international organizations. These encounters can be beneficial for guiding students in their new life abroad, but they can also make them more prone to becoming attached to peer exchange students. Dewey (2008) found that learners who maintain strong ties with L1 or international students are less successful in having interactional contacts in the language of the host country. In fact, results on 'language intensity' point out that conversations in the L2 are more superficial than conversations with L1 peers, as participants tend not to engage in more personal-related topics. This is consistent with previous findings documenting that many of the conversations between learners and L2 speakers are superficial and do not give participants the chance to practice the L2 in an intensive way (Dewey et al., 2013).

These results raise the question whether it is possible to foster sustained and meaningful interactional contacts through a pedagogical intervention, which leads us to the analysis of participants' social networks and L2 development abroad in both the control and the experimental group. Although both groups are rather heterogeneous (section 1.2), the EG shows certain advantages in terms of 'intensity of friendship' and 'durability', as well as in 'language intensity' with L1 Spanish contacts, where the EG tends to get slightly more involved in personal-related conversations. Regarding L2 self-perceived development, progress is slightly higher for all four communication skills in the EG, as well as the fulfilment of their expected gains in L2 Spanish after the SA experience. These results support the hypothesis that fostering sustained and quality interactional contacts with the host community can lead to linguistic improvement abroad. Yet, it is important to add that the observed differences could not be validated statistically (t-tests did not reveal significance), which is perhaps not surprising, given the small size of the observed differences, added to the small sample, and high homogeneity of the studied population in terms of previous studies and language background.

Furthermore, regarding the link between interactions in the target language and language development, correlations were run for the student cohort as a single group due to the small size of the population. Results show that 'intensity' of friendship seems to play a major role in L2 self-perceived development. It correlates significantly with progress in 'listening' and fulfilment of 'expectations on L2 gains', both relating to interactions in Spanish with members of the host community (L1 contacts)

and interactions in Spanish in general (L1/L2 contacts). 'Intensity' of friendship also correlates with progress in 'speaking', although only when all interactions in Spanish are taken into account. Fulfilment of 'expectations on L2 gains' correlates with 'durability' or how frequently participants interact in Spanish within both categories (L1 and L1/L2 contacts).

When looking particularly at interactions with members of the host community (L1 contacts), additional significant correlations are found between the number of acquaintances participants have ('Size') and fulfilment of 'expectations on L2 gains', as well as between 'durability' or frequency of interaction and progress in 'speaking'. Additionally, while we only find two significant correlations regarding self-perceived progress in 'listening' when all interactions in Spanish are taken into account (with 'Intensity of friendship' and Topic 2 'small talk'), the number of significant correlations increases when we focus only on interactions with members of the host community (L1 contacts). In this case, self-perceived progress in 'listening' correlates significantly with 'Intensity of friendship', 'Density', 'Dispersion', and Topic 2 'small talk'. This raises the question whether pedagogical efforts should especially focus on fostering use of the target language in general or pay special attention to interactions within the host community. Moreover, it would be interesting to work with a larger population in order to run these correlations for the two groups separately and see if they yield different results.

## 6. Conclusions and implications for further studies

Overall, these results attempt to shed light on ways in which higher education institutions can help participants make the most of their SA experience in terms of linguistic and intercultural development. The fact that the EG tends to score slightly better than the CG in various SN and L2 measures makes it worth investigating further if pedagogic guidance during their time abroad actually encourages participants to engage in contacts in the target language and to implement acquired linguistic and intercultural knowledge in real-life situations. Further replications of the intervention may strengthen the statistical evidence for the quantitative effects that we have already observed. It will also be necessary to include qualitative data analysis that would allow us to understand the specific quantitative relations captured here, such as the role of 'intensity of friendship' on L2 self-perceived progress. Although the level of friendship may determine the quality of the interaction, "it is not yet a definitive answer regarding what factors influence social interaction most, how best to prepare learners for these interactions, or how to foster interaction during residence abroad" (Dewey et al., 2013, p. 87). Further studies should also look into students' narratives in order to gain a better understanding of what their expectations are, beliefs, and attitudes towards interacting with members of the host community and interacting in Spanish in general (L1/L2). A qualitative approach will enable researchers to look into possible individual differences, as well as underlying factors playing a role in establishing meaningful interactions within the host community.

In terms of curricular reflections, interventions such as the one proposed here should encourage learners to assume responsibility for their own learning process abroad and make them aware that developing sustained and meaningful contacts with the host community does not automatically happen. If we aim to bridge the gap between what students expect from their Erasmus experience and their actual achievements, it is important to take into account that results suggest that participants' fulfilment of their expectations in terms of L2 development has been at best satisfied but never exceeded (Figure 3). As it has been previously documented, SA participants may not use the target language to their level of expectation, even feeling a sense of frustration at not having sufficient contacts with locals when abroad (Meier & Daniels, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2015).

In fact, results indicate that the more interactions with the host community, the bigger the fulfilment of participants' expectations in terms of L2 achievement. Also, the more often they speak in Spanish with them, the higher their self-perceived progress in speaking. However, while they seem to understand the importance of these types of interactions for their language development, getting out of their comfort zone and seeking contact outside their L1 / international peer group seems to remain difficult. It requires effort, commitment and awareness of possible linguistic and intercultural

challenges. Borghetti (2016) claims that sojourners may find it reassuring to attribute their feelings of discomfort when interacting within the host community to external factors such as cultural differences, instead of reflecting on inner traits and available resources. For this reason, increasing explicit guided reflection in curricular interventions through tasks focused on making meaning of these intercultural encounters may foster the development of their sense of self-efficacy, which is considered key to developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Beaven and Borghetti (2018) maintain that, in order to create opportunities for intercultural learning, first-hand experience of cultural diversity must be accompanied by critical reflection.

As with every research report, the limitations of the study should be highlighted. Regarding the standardized measurement of SN formation, it is relevant to reflect on the extent to which participants' friends / acquaintances are the only actors responsible for their L2 self-perceived progress. As Dewey (2008: 101) mentioned in relation to the SASIQ, "it is possible that participants' social groups were larger than depicted by the survey itself but that learners only listed the people they felt were acquaintances or friends." Students may not have included other contacts such as host university professors or property owners, not considering them friends / acquaintances, although they may also have had an impact on their L2 self-perceived progress. A future adaptation of the SASIQ could allow students to distinguish their social contacts according to those who were relevant for them personally and those relevant in terms of L2 progress. This information could be gathered by asking participants to keep language diaries during the intervention in order to further our understanding on this count (McManus et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015). Moreover, additional measures of actual L2 development would complement the data on self-perceived progress, further clarifying the impact of curricular interventions on social interactions and language gains.

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