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Writing Development During Study Abroad: The Role of Language Contact and Social Networks

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Abstract

Previous research on the benefits of study abroad (SA) has mainly focused on oral communication skills and L2 English, while written communication and other foreign languages have received far less attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating writing development in L2 German. It also aims to further the discussion about methods to assess writing development by combining different types of data. We investigated the writing gains of 30 Belgian students in L2 German after one semester abroad. Pre- and post-SA writing samples were analysed using linguistic and task-related assessment criteria. We triangulated the results with data about self-perceived language gains, on the one hand, and self-reported language contact and social networks during SA, on the other. The results indicate a correlation between self-report writing gains, language contact, and social networks.

Keywords

Writing development; Writing assessment; CAF; Functional adequacy; Study abroad; Language contact; Social networks; L2 German

Introduction

In recent years, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has accumulated a growing body of research that deals with the linguistic benefits of study abroad (SA). Most of this research has focused on the areas of speaking and vocabulary, for which clear gains
have been documented in many studies (for an overview, see Llanes, 2011; Magnan & Lafford, 2012; Varela, 2017). In comparison with these areas, research on writing development in an SA context is scarce, although writing development is actually a growing area of research in SLA (Manchón, 2012). Moreover, the few existing studies on writing in SA have reported contradictory results, ranging from clear gains (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011) to moderate or no effects (Freed, So, & Lazar, 2003; Serrano, Tragant, & Llanes, 2012). The relative scarcity of studies on writing development during SA and the conflicting results they have generated point to an area of research that needs further exploration.

In our study of such writing development, we introduce a facet of agency that has only recently started to attract attention in research on SA and language gains: the social networks in the target language established by students abroad. The theoretical basis for the importance of social networks for general language acquisition can be found in interactionist approaches to SLA. According to interactionist theories, the amount and quality of interaction in the L2 is expected to have an impact on general L2 development. Although interactions in the L2 in an SA context are mainly oral in nature, one can hypothesize that increased oral practice also impacts on writing, among others, through the development of ‘inner speech’ in the L2 (De Guerrero, 2006). Furthermore, an SA sojourn also offers increased access to written input in the target language through the surrounding linguistic landscape, e.g., public signage (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008).

In addition to adopting the recent focus on social networks, our exploration is novel in two other respects: first, we broaden the methodology to measure writing development by combining traditional purely text-based parameters of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) with a recently developed instrument to assess the functional adequacy (FA) of a
text produced in response to a task (Kuiken & Vedder, 2017); second, we compare two
groups of SA students that differ with regard to their destination: countries where the target
language (German) is spoken, vs. non-German speaking countries. In this way, we address
a problem of past studies that have regularly compared SA and non-SA cohorts. These
cohorts are likely to differ in motivation (Sanz, 2014). The compared groups in our study
have similar levels of motivation and L2 proficiency, and similar exposure to the social
upheavals of SA, but differ in destination and consequently in the extent of contact with
the target language through social networking and the surrounding linguistic landscape.

In the following, we present an overview of studies in the area of writing
development and SA to identify the need a) to explore social networks during SA and b) to
broaden the methodological framework by combining CAF and FA analyses.

1.1 SA and writing development: an incongruent picture
The effect of SA on writing development has received little attention to date, which is
evidenced in two overview studies on the effect of SA by Llanes (2011) and Varela (2017).
Llanes (2011) reported in her review only seven out of 40 studies on language acquisition
during SA that included writing (Evans & Fisher, 2005; Freed et al., 2003; Llanes, 2010;
Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009). In Varela’s (2017) meta-
analysis of 33 studies on language gains during SA, only five included writing (Llanes,
Tragant, & Serrano, 2012; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011; Sasaki, 2007; Serrano,
Llanes, & Tragant, 2011; Stronkhorst, 2005). Their effect sizes vary considerably between
d=.505 (Llanes et al., 2012) and d=1.550 (Stronkhorst, 2005). Hence, the picture that arises
from the few available studies is unclear. In the following literature overview, we highlight
potential reasons for the diverging findings. These include independent variables of the
study design and population, on the one hand, and characteristics of the dependent
variables chosen, i.e., data collection and analysis, on the other.
1.1 The effect of independent study variables on L2 writing gains

The independent variables impacting L2 writing gains during SA that are most often discussed in the literature are duration, initial proficiency level, the target language, writing instruction and opportunities to write before and during SA, and agency of the participants during SA.

Differences in *duration* might partly explain the contradictory findings in the SA literature (DeKeyser, 2014). Consider, for example, the disparity between the null-effects reported in Freed et al. (2003), where the sojourn abroad was limited to 3 months, and the positive effects in Sasaki’s studies, where the students spent up to 9 months abroad. In Serrano et al.’s (2012) study, the written production of 14 Spanish-speaking learners of English did not reveal significant gains after one semester abroad. Instead, after two semesters, all dimensions under study (fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical richness, and accuracy) showed significant increases. By comparison, gains in oral performance had already occurred after one semester. Likewise, Sasaki (2011) showed in a longitudinal study with Japanese learners of L2 English that the positive effect of SA on writing fluency and composition quality increased proportionally to the time spent abroad.

A variable that interacts with duration is *initial proficiency level*. Lafford and Collentine (2006) suggest that a minimum threshold level is needed to ensure a minimal amount of interaction in the target language, especially in the case of shorter SA sojourns. On the other hand, there also seems to be a maximum threshold level, since Stronkhorst (2005) associated higher levels of initial proficiency with lower progress of his participants. This finding is in line with Rifkin (2005) who documented a ceiling with regard to linguistic text quality in L2 learners in a university context.
Not only proficiency level, but also the *target language* itself and its global significance might have an impact on the motivation to achieve high gains during SA. Most SA writing studies report about L2 English. Being the uncontested global language, it is likely that SA participants are strongly motivated to learn it (see, especially, Sasaki, 2011), which might not apply to the same extent to other L2s. In addition, English often serves as the lingua franca among SA students with different L1s (Kalocsai, 2014). This might explain that positive findings were obtained for writing in L2 English (i.e., the Japanese and Spanish/Catalan studies mentioned before), but not for L2 French (Freed et al., 2003). Nevertheless, some studies report positive findings also for L2 writing in languages other than English (e.g., Godfrey, Treacy, & Tarone, 2014 on L2 French).

With regard to *writing instruction and opportunities*, Sasaki (2004, 2007, 2009, 2011) mentions intensive writing programmes in the US-based host institutions of her SA participants as an important factor for the high gains in writing she observed. This underscores the importance of different traditions in the host and home institutions with regard to L2 writing across the curriculum (Barquin, 2012; Sasaki, 2004). However, writing development not only increases with explicit training during SA, but also with the sheer amount of writing practice. For example, the participants in Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014) did not receive explicit writing training during SA. Instead, they were encouraged to practice free writing in the L2 to gain additional credits for their SA sojourn at their home institution, which led to observable gains. The same effect is corroborated in Stronkhorst (2005) who compared two student groups, one of which had to write extensive final reports about their SA experience in the target language and outperformed the other group by far in terms of writing gains (the effect sizes were 1.550 and .748, respectively).
Finally, several authors directly or indirectly refer to *participants’ agency during SA* as an important factor. Sasaki (2007) interprets the writing gains of SA students within a socio-cultural framework, arguing that the social context while abroad had a positive impact on students’ agency as writers in the L2. More specifically, Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) found evidence for the importance of social networks during SA: The high-gainers among their participants had more contact opportunities thanks to student jobs and a broader social network of relationships. A similar correlation is corroborated by Fraser (2002) who found that the participants with the highest writing gains also showed the highest target language engagement during SA, more specifically attending additional intensive language courses outside the university and actively engaging in social contact with locals in free-time activities.

There is strong theoretical support for the importance of *social networks* for language learning during SA. The quality of L2 interactions depends on the learner’s ability to create social networks with native speakers. Learners who befriend native speakers will likely use the L2 more and, most importantly, engage in more complex and extended discourse than those who do not (Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013). It is assumed that precisely this kind of complex and extended social interaction will result in language gains, and more specifically in writing gains (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Weissberg, 2005) through the internalization of L2 social speech which favours “the development of the L2 as a tool for thought,” also referred to as inner speech (De Guerrero, 2006, xiv). Indeed, in recent research, it has been shown that social network variables, such as size (number of native speakers in the network), dispersion (number of social groups in which the students participated), durability (frequency of interaction) and intensity (level of friendship) are linked to L2 gains, at least for speaking (Dewey, Bown, & Eggett, 2012; Dewey et al., 2013; Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Bown, & Martinsen, 2014). However, no
study on writing development during SA to date has included social networks as a main independent variable.

1.2 The effect of chosen dependent study variables on the outcome

The inconclusive results found in literature about writing gains during SA cannot be ascribed only to external circumstances of the sojourn and characteristics of the participants. Another potential source is the diverse ways in which writing gains are defined and measured. These dependent study variables include the chosen comparison skill and/or comparison group, the task, and the measures and statistical methods used to identify writing gains.

Comparison skill. The studies that report little to no gain often compare the results for writing with those for oral skills. For example, Freed et al. (2003) compared the oral and written fluency of 15 US learners of French studying abroad and 15 studying at home. While the SA context proved beneficial for developing oral skills in terms of CAF, no significant progress was found in writing skills. The higher benefit of SA for oral skills as compared to writing skills might come as no surprise, since most L2 interactions during SA are in the spoken mode. However, according to process-oriented insights in L2 writing (Manchón, 2009), we can assume that the general proficiency and fluency acquired in the immersion situation will also have a cross-modal impact on writing proficiency. In this vein, Barquin (2012) suggests that the increase in general language proficiency during SA might free attentional resources that can be directed towards content, style and lexicon during post-SA writing.

Comparison groups. Most comparative studies use two cohorts based on convenience sampling, with the experimental group consisting of SA students, and the comparison group consisting of a group of students staying in the home institution (AH)
during the same period. The majority of these studies report higher gains in writing in the SA as opposed to the non-SA group (Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011; Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009). Sasaki (2004, 2007, 2009, 2011) found that SA students outperformed AH students in a number of aspects. Though both groups improved their general English proficiency, only the SA group improved in speed of writing, quantity of words written, and overall composition quality. In addition, the SA group also developed higher abilities in qualitative dimensions of writing, such as writing styles and use of writing strategies.

The studies by Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014) took a different approach and compared writing gains during a six-month period of formal instruction at home immediately before SA with the gains made by the same participants during a three-month SA sojourn. The higher gains observed after SA seem to suggest that a sojourn in a real-life communicative context for a short time is more beneficial to foster development in L2 writing than a classroom-learning context. However, Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) suggest the alternative explanation that the writing instruction obtained before departure only started to automatize during the SA sojourn. This corroborates the findings of Serrano, Llanes, and Tragant (2011) who demonstrated that intensive classroom instruction at home can be equally beneficial as SA to promote L2 development. Sanz (2014) indicated that the comparison SA-AH bears an important limitation, since SA students might a priori have a higher motivation to learn the language. This is corroborated by Sasaki (2011) who explained that long-term SA sojourns are highly competitive for Japanese students; hence, this group consists of high-achieving students only.
Task chosen to investigate writing gain. The tasks used for the collection of pre-/post-test writing data in SA studies differ widely, ranging from closed tasks such as cloze tests (e.g., Fraser, 2002) over narrative tasks (e.g., Llanes, Tragant, & Serrano, 2012) to argumentative or persuasive writing tasks (Freed et al., 2003; Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011). The preference for argumentative tasks can likely be linked to the academic environment of SA. The degree of cognitive task complexity needs to be carefully balanced in view of the test takers and the aspect of writing ability that is targeted. According to Weigle’s (2002) classification of tasks in terms of cognitive demands, argumentative and persuasive essays have a high level of cognitive complexity since they require the writer to include or generate new information, which coincides with the descriptors of advanced levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). On the other hand, lowering the cognitive demand of the writing task can free resources for the linguistic processing during writing (Johnson, 2017). Furthermore, in the SA context, the L2 is mainly used in oral interaction. Therefore, a task that is more susceptible to potential cross-modal development might capture similar benefits to those reported for oral gains during SA (Strobl & Baten, forthcoming).

Measures chosen to investigate writing gain. Closely related to the question of which writing task is most appropriate to elicit writing competence, is the question of how writing development should be measured. Most studies include general linguistic ability that can be measured both in terms of lexical and/or syntactic richness and in terms of accuracy (absence of errors), using CAF measures (e.g., Freed et al., 2003; Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009) or relying on standardised tests such as the IELTS (e.g., Stronkhorst, 2005). It is interesting to note that studies relying mainly on CAF data tend to report gains only for specific domains, whereas at the same time, the
values for other domains stagnate or even decrease. For example, Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014) observed significant improvements after SA in fluency and lexical complexity. However, no significant gains were found for syntactic complexity. This disparity of gains in some domains but not in others is in accordance with previous CAF studies and in line with CAF theory (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014). CAF traits do not necessarily develop in tandem. Rather, often gains in one domain are made at the expense of a decrease in another domain (see also Verspoor & Smiskova, 2012).

Another product-oriented measure is composition quality, which has been investigated based on standardised rating systems such as the English Composition Profile (e.g., Sasaki, 2004) or the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (e.g., Godfrey, Treacy, & Tarone, 2014). Few researchers looked into process-oriented features, such as writing fluency, the use of writing strategies (e.g., Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011), and self-efficacy (e.g., Sasaki, 2011). For example, Sasaki’s SA participants reported higher motivation after the SA experience to write better texts and to voluntarily practice writing.

Norris and Manchón (2012) distinguish between two fundamentally different approaches towards writing development, either as linguistic development (which can be measured using CAF-related parameters), or as gain in control over textual output. One possible way to measure the latter is the recently developed tool for the analysis of functional adequacy (Kuiken & Vedder, 2017). The rubrics developed by Kuiken and Vedder (2017) help to analyse L2 text quality in response to a specific writing task, answering the need to integrate functional adequacy into the assessment of L2 writing identified by SLA scholars (Pallotti, 2009; Kuiken et al., 2010). The combination of both a linguistic and a task-oriented evaluation of writing development seems to be especially
interesting for the assessment of advanced L2 writing, as L2 learners in a university context have been documented to reach a ceiling with regard to linguistic text quality (Rifkin, 2005).

Finally, self-report data can help to complement the picture of writing development in SA studies. Several studies have suggested a positive relationship between writing development and high language engagement in all skills during SA (Fraser, 2002; Freed et al., 2003; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Sasaki, 2011). It therefore makes sense to include self-report data about language engagement during SA in studies about writing development. A widely used self-report questionnaire to document language use in an SA context is the Language Contact Profile (LCP) developed by Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, and Halter (2004). It solicits participants to self-report how often they performed various activities in their L1 and L2 with different interlocutors. There are, however, a couple of limitations to self-report data (Fernández & Gates Tapia, 2016): it is by definition subjective, participants might interpret questions in different ways and/or provide desirable responses, over-reporting the amount of language engagement, while the time gap between the reported period and data collection might jeopardise accuracy. To strengthen the validity of self-report language engagement data, it is recommended to use them in combination with other tools, such as diaries, interviews, or social network analysis (McManus et al., 2014; Fernández & Gates Tapia, 2016).

1.3 Research questions of the present study

From the overview of the literature on writing and SA, three desiderata stand out: first, there is a need to investigate social networks during SA as an independent variable in its own right; second, the comparison between SA and AH groups should be revisited; and
third, the methodology to measure writing gains needs to be broadened, adding a task-oriented criterion, such as functional adequacy.

Given the fact that the considerable majority of studies on SA (and writing) is concerned with L2 English which has a specific status as global language, it is also important to investigate the benefits of SA for other L2s. The target language of the present study, L2 German, is heavily under-researched with respect to SA. A search of empirical studies on SA effects and L2 German reported by Ecke (2014) yielded only 22 publications, 14 of which investigate linguistic gains. The linguistic areas covered by these and two more recent studies are vocabulary (Walsh, 1994; Ecke, 2012; Arnett, 2013) pragmatics (Barron, 2003; 2019; Blood, 2018), morphosyntax (Walsh, 1994; Arnett, 2013), and pronunciation (Marx, 2012; Müller, 2013). The only study in L2 German and SA focusing on writing is Fraser (2002) who operationalized writing development with cloze test scores, restricting its investigation to higher lexico-grammatical accuracy.

Against the backdrop of this scarcity of research on SA and L2 German, and given the recent interest in the role of social networks in SA, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1  What aspects of writing, if any, develop or improve in learners of L2 German residing in a German-speaking vs. a non-German-speaking country?

The present study takes a multidimensional approach by combining traditional CAF measures with a recent method to investigate functional adequacy (Kuiken & Vedder, 2017).

RQ2  What is the amount of language engagement and how does the social network in L2 German differ between SA students residing in a German-speaking vs. a non-German-speaking country?
As opposed to previous studies that compared SA to AH students, in the present study, the whole cohort under investigation participated in an SA programme, but in different locations. A group of participants spent their SA in a German-speaking country, another group in a non-German-speaking country. In this way, we overcome a frequent design flaw in SA studies indicated by Sanz (2014, p. 3), which is caused by comparing two groups (SA versus AH students) who may be fundamentally different with regard to motivation. Intuition suggests that the amount of social contact in the L2 is higher in a country of residence where this language is spoken. Therefore, we hypothesize greater writing gains due to higher L2 exposure during SA in the experimental as opposed to the comparison group. However, given the importance of social network variables transcending sheer amount of contact (Dewey et al., 2012; Dewey et al., 2013; Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014) for language gains, it is necessary to investigate these variables in depth.

RQ3  Can writing development during study abroad be linked to the intensity of language contact with the L2 and the social network built during study abroad?

Two studies previously linked writing development through SA to aspects of social networks (Fraser, 2002; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009). The present study relates the findings of RQ1 and RQ2 to each other in order to verify whether such a link exists.

Methodology

2.1 Participants

The present study involved 30 students at a Belgian University with L1 Dutch who went abroad for one semester within the European ERASMUS programme. They were in their
fifth semester of a three-year bachelor programme in applied language studies. In this programme, the students major in two foreign languages from a list of seven (German, English, French, Italian, Russian, Spanish or Turkish). All participants in the present study majored in L2 German and had an advanced medium or high writing proficiency level (CEFR-levels B2 or C1) before they went abroad. In their study programme, an SA semester (i.e., a four- to five-month sojourn) is compulsory for all students. Consequently, we do not compare SA students to AH students, but two groups of SA students based on their host country of residence abroad. The experimental group (EG) consists of twelve participants who spent their SA semester in a German-speaking country, at one of five different universities in Germany and Austria. The comparison group (CG) consists of 18 participants who spent their SA at one of ten different host institutions in non-German-speaking countries (Spain, Italy, France, Turkey, Russia). This means that all participants had the same pre-departure conditions, but different linguistic conditions during SA, i.e., working language(s) at the host institutions, everyday language(s) and linguistic landscapes in the public space. Moreover, since 15 different institutions in seven different countries were involved, the participants had different conditions during SA with regard to formal writing instruction and writing opportunities in the target language, although all participants attended courses related to, or taught in the target language. However, unlike AH students, our CG participants also changed their linguistic and social environment. Therefore, the experimental and control groups in our study design are more comparable in terms of motivation and self-efficacy than the SA and AH groups in traditional comparisons.
2.2 Data collection

2.2.1 Questionnaire
The participants filled out an online questionnaire (see Appendix C) after returning from their SA. The questionnaire was specially designed for the purpose of this study, drawing upon earlier research on self-report data in SA contexts (Fernández & Gates Tapia, 2016; Freed et al., 2004) and consists of four sections: (i) language background, (ii) language contact, (iii) social networks, and (iv) language gains. In sections (i) and (iv), the participants were asked to self-estimate their proficiency in all foreign languages and the progress they had made during SA, respectively. The two remaining sections focus on language use and social network formation during SA.

In the section on language use (ii), the participants were asked to estimate roughly what percentage of time they used the languages they knew, totalling 100%. In addition, they indicated the frequency of specific language interactions in L2 German according to a list of 13 activities (5 speaking, 3 writing, 2 listening, 3 reading) on a 5-point-Likert scale. This methodology is similar to McManus, Mitchell, and Tracy-Ventura (2014) but the present study includes fewer items (13 instead of 26) to efficiently fit the purpose of the study, which is to obtain a global view on language use (see Table 2 in the results section for the list of 13 activities).

To investigate the social networks of the participants (section 3), the present study adopted eight questions from the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire (Dewey et al., 2012, 2013). Participants first listed a maximum of 20 people with whom they had social contact during their SA. For each person listed, they indicated their nationality and proficiency in the language used for communication. Furthermore, they provided additional information about their relationship: how they met, how often they had contact,
which language they used, how intense their relationship was, and to which social group(s) the person belonged. Regarding the latter, respondents could choose between six pre-defined categories (following McManus et al., 2014: living environment, university life, organized free time, general free time, virtual social activities, and work activities) and/or add their own ones.

2.2.2 Written data
To investigate potential development of writing in L2 German, all participants wrote two personal narratives just before and after their SA. We used this task as a baseline writing task to gauge overall writing development over time, instead of a more structured writing task, such as argumentative writing, which assesses additional task-related skills.

Arguably, a narrative task risks being less sensitive to development at higher proficiency levels (Rifkin, 2005). However, there are several advantages of a narrative task, as opposed to a more complex task. It can be reasonably attempted within a relatively short amount of time without necessary pre-writing reflection; the lower cognitive load frees capacity for the formulation process (Johnson, 2017); and writing anxiety has a lower impact on performance (Zabihi, Mousavi, & Salehian, 2020). Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that a narrative task prompt based on personal experiences in the present or in the recent past is potentially sensitive to cross-modal language development (i.e., across the oral and written modes). This is especially important in an SA context where L2 interactions are mainly oral in nature. Finally yet importantly, the task is not sensitive to potential academic writing skills that some of the participants might have acquired at the host institutions during their SA sojourn (and others not).

All writing was completed in class under test conditions, with pen and paper and without auxiliary means. The writing task was timed, as students had 20 minutes to complete each writing task. The writing prompts of the two tasks related to their SA
expectations and experience, and were intended to stimulate fluent writing without necessary pre-writing reflection. The pre-ERASMUS prompt stated: “On my way to [city]: my expectations, my hopes, my fears;” the post-ERASMUS prompt was: “My Erasmus experience: What I had expected and how it turned out to be.” The two prompts differ with regard to the tense use they trigger: whereas the first one triggers the use of present and future tenses, the second one is likely to trigger a more complex tense system representing two different stages in the past. However, this does not jeopardise the comparability of the written data for our purpose, as tense use was not included in our analysis measures and does not necessarily have an impact on syntactic complexity in L2 German.

2.3 Data analysis

Multiple measures were employed to assess the students’ writing. These measures target complexity of linguistic form, accuracy of linguistic form, and fluency (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998; Housen, Kuiken, & Vedder, 2012) as well as functional adequacy (Kuiken & Vedder, 2017).

*Fluency* (F) was examined in terms of number of words written (nW). As the writing tasks were timed, the length of texts gives an indication of fluency. Although it is sometimes argued that length-based measures may be problematic as an index of fluency (Baba & Nitta, 2014), Freed et al. (2003) and Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) found measures related to text length to be efficient in this research context.

*Accuracy* (A) was analysed by computing the ratio of error-free clauses (i.e., all clauses free of grammatical and lexical errors, excluding stylistic infelicities and punctuation errorsii) per total number of clauses (ERC/C). Following Bardovi-Harlig’s (1992) arguments against the T-unit, we decided to segment the texts into clauses rather
than into T-units. Clauses were then classified depending on whether they contained errors or not.

**Complexity (C).** This study examined both syntactic and lexical complexity. For syntactic complexity, we calculated the mean period length (MPL) and the number of clauses per period (C/P). Lexical complexity was examined using mean word length (MWL) and Guiraud’s index of lexical richness: word types divided by the square root of the word tokens (RootTTR). The square root counteracts the effect of text length. Van Hout and Vermeer (2007) advocated that RootTTR is one of the most adequate and reliable measures for lexical richness in L2 learners’ productions.

In addition to this selection of well-established CAF measures, the students’ writing production was also evaluated in terms of functional adequacy (FA) by using Kuiken and Vedder’s (2017) rating scale. Kuiken and Vedder (2017) developed this tool to assess the functional dimensions of L2 production. The four dimensions of the scale intend to grasp to what extent the L2 production is ‘adequate’ in relation to a particular, argumentative, language task. In the present study, the learners engaged in narrative writing based on a short writing prompt instead of argumentative writing. To account for the different writing task, we adapted Kuiken and Vedder’s (2017) taxonomy and collapsed the four original scales into three: (i) content (collapsing the two original dimensions of content and task requirement) (in the following, FA1); (ii) comprehensibility (FA2); (iii) cohesion and coherence (FA3). The scale descriptors were translated or paraphrased in German. The raters were three (near-)native speakers of German with ample experience in evaluating written texts in L2 German. To foster inter-rater reliability and to fine-tune the German version of the rating tool, two training sessions were organized based on 18 randomly selected texts that were assessed by all raters independently. Intra-class correlations
revealed that inter-rater reliability was high for FA1 (.799, \(p < .001\)) and FA3 (.820, \(p < .001\)). However, for FA2, the reliability was slightly lower (.651, \(p < .01\)). Discussions in the follow-up training session revealed diverging interpretations of the term ‘comprehensibility’, meaning either that the reader could infer the message of the text or that the message of the text was clear without reader effort. Based on the discussion, the descriptors of the FA2 scale were adapted, including the reader’s effort to infer for meaning. For the actual study, the 60 texts produced by the 30 participants (30 pre-SA and 30 post-SA) were anonymised and randomly assigned to the three raters. Each of them assessed 20 texts based on the revised version of the three rating scales included in our study (see Appendix B).

Results

3.1 RQ1 – Writing development

Given the hypothesised difference between EG and CG in terms of language engagement and social network formation in German, we analyse the writing development in L2 German for the two groups separately and compare the results. First, we provide information about the self-reported language gain during SA, including writing. Then, we present the results of the experimental analyses regarding lexical and syntactic complexity, accuracy and fluency, on the one hand, and functional adequacy, on the other.

Table 1 summarizes the self-perceived proficiency and gains of the participants according to L2 skill. All four skills are presented in order to frame the results for writing.

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

TABLE 1
Self-Reported L2 German Proficiency and Language Gain Through SA of Participants on Likert Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EG (n = 12)</th>
<th>CG (n = 18)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-perceived</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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<td>3.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-perceived gains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 = none/minimal, 2 = basic knowledge, 3 = intermediate, 4 = advanced and 5 = native-like), all participants rated their overall skills in L2 German around ‘advanced’, with no significant difference between EG and CG. In both groups, the self-perceived proficiency in the two receptive skills, reading and listening, is rated higher than in the two productive skills, writing and speaking.

In contrast, students in the EG perceive significantly higher gains in all four skills (with 1 = none/minimal, 2 = average, 3 = high) compared to the CG. This is especially true for the two skills related to oral communication, speaking and listening, where the gains reported by the EG are nearly twice as high as those reported by the CG. The gains in writing are rated considerably lower than in the other three skills in both groups. However, the students in the EG also perceived average gains in writing. In the following, we will describe to what extent this perception corresponds to the experimental measures based on the pre- and post-SA writing tasks.

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations (in parentheses) of the CAF measures for the pre- and post-SA texts written by the two groups of students. The table also includes the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests performed for each of the measures comparing pre- and post-SA. We also ran a Mann-Whitney U test to compare the
pre-SA scores between both groups. These results are not included in the table, as the groups do not significantly differ with regard to any of the pre-SA measures.

<INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>

TABLE 2  
CAF Measures According to Group (mean scores; standard deviations in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EG (n = 12)</th>
<th>CG (n = 18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘pre’</td>
<td>‘post’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy EFC/C</td>
<td>.76 (.09)</td>
<td>.75 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency nW</td>
<td>197.17 (40.77)</td>
<td>218.83 (62.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical complexity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWL</td>
<td>5.17 (.18)</td>
<td>5.39 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RootTTR</td>
<td>8.77 (.84)</td>
<td>9.18 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntactic complexity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPL</td>
<td>17.12 (4.06)</td>
<td>14.81 (2.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/P</td>
<td>1.99 (.53)</td>
<td>1.97 (.34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results overall seem to suggest that one semester abroad does not result in measurable development of writing with respect to CAF, based on a personal narrative task. Significant changes can only be observed in the EG, where mean word length (as an indicator of lexical complexity) increases and mean period length (as an indicator of syntactic complexity) decreases. The same tendency is apparent in the CG, but it does not reach significance. Similarly, there is a non-significant tendency of increased fluency in both groups.
Table 3 presents the mean rating scores and the standard deviations of the three dimensions of functional adequacy, including the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests performed for each of the dimensions comparing pre- and post-SA.

<INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>

TABLE 3
Functional adequacy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EG (n = 12)</th>
<th></th>
<th>CG (n = 18)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘pre’</td>
<td>‘post’</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA1</td>
<td>4.33 (.99)</td>
<td>4.83 (1.19)</td>
<td>-1.387</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.83 (.94)</td>
<td>5.08 (.67)</td>
<td>-7.22</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA2</td>
<td>3.58 (.67)</td>
<td>4.50 (.91)</td>
<td>-2.598</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* mean scores on a scale from 1 to 6; standard deviations in parentheses

In both groups, the scores are already relatively high before SA. More importantly, in both groups, the post-SA ratings are higher than the pre-SA ones. However, the improvement is only significant in one dimension (FA3) and in one group (EG). In other words, the writing of the students who spent their SA in a German-speaking country significantly improved with regard to coherence and cohesion.

3.2 RQ2 – Language contact: language use and social networks

In this section, we report on selected results from the questionnaire regarding language use and social networks during SA. To begin with, Table 4 shows the self-reported proportion of language use for the L1 (Dutch), the L2 under investigation (German), and the L2 (English) used as a lingua franca among SA students for both groups, including the significance level of difference between EG and CG (p) and the effect size (r).

<INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE>
The percentages reveal that the participants used their L1 (Dutch) to a considerable extent while abroad, on average one third of the time. They use their L1 even more often than they use English, which usually serves as the lingua franca in SA contexts (Kalocsai, 2014). Both Dutch and English are used to the same extent in both groups. In contrast, the proportion of German use is significantly different across groups, with the students residing in a German-speaking country (EG) using German more than twice as much as the students residing outside of Germany (CG). How this difference translates into specific language-related activities and into the share of German speakers in the social network is presented in Table 5. It displays the mean scores on a Likert scale with regard to the amount of language engagement with German. The 13 activities are listed according to frequency in the EG, i.e. from most frequent to least frequent, and then paired with the CG.

<INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written communication through internet (Facebook chat, e-mails, posts</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on social media, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short conversations with unknown persons (passers-by, salespersons in</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bars, restaurants, discos, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer conversations with friends during social activities (bar visits,</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sports activities, city trips, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing assignments for university courses</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.346</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music or radio</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching television or films</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading newspapers, magazines, novels, etc.</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading academic articles</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing for pleasure (blogposts, fan fiction, etc.)</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.787</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone or Skype conversations with family or friends</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.632</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*mean scores on a Likert scale from 0 to 4: 0 = never; 1 = a few times during SA; 2 = a few times per month; 3 = a few times per week; 4 = every day

Not surprisingly, the results show that the overall engagement with German is higher in the EG as opposed to the CG. Independent-samples Mann-Whitney U tests reveal a significantly higher engagement in 9 of the 13 activities. The most frequent activities with significant differences between groups (i.e. the top-6 in the table) reveal that the students in the EG immerse themselves in the German-speaking environment. Engagement with German occurs on a daily to weekly basis and mainly involves speaking activities, ranging from small talk with native speakers and non-native speakers to longer conversations, as well as active communication on the internet. It is noteworthy that the students in the CG also use their L2 German communication skills on a regular basis, supposedly with German-speaking ERASMUS friends.
Looking at the writing activities, the numbers show that German is almost never used when writing for pleasure. In contrast, writing assignments for university courses occur more often. Surprisingly, the students in the CG report writing in German for university courses more often than those in the EG. However, the difference is not significant. Significant differences between the groups only arise with regard to online written communication. The students in the EG used German in social media and e-mails ‘a few times per week’, whereas the students in the CG only did so ‘a few times per month’.

To analyse the social networks of the participants, we calculated five social network measures based on Dewey et al. (2012; 2013): size (number of speakers), dispersion (number of social groups), density (average number of speakers in a social group), durability (amount of contact on a scale from 0 to 5) and intensity (level of friendship on a scale from 0 to 10). Table 6 presents the mean values in both groups and the p-value of the Mann Whitney U-test, comparing those means, including the effect size. The numbers only refer to German speakers in the network.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EG (n = 12)</th>
<th>CG (n = 18)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size (n)</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispersion (n)</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density (n)</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability (0…5)</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity (0…10)</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results yield, again, a clear difference between both groups, with the students residing in a German-speaking country showing higher scores on all German-speaking social network measures. The difference is significant for three measures and marginally
significant for the two remaining measures. With an average of five German speakers in
the overall network and an average close to three German speakers in three distinct social
groups, the social network of the students in Germany is relatively broad. Moreover, the
students in German-speaking countries also have more and closer contact with German
speakers than their peers studying abroad in other countries, although the difference is only
approaching significance.

3.3 RQ3 – Language use, social networks and writing development

The results presented in Tables 4 and 6 show that the EG and the CG differ in terms of use
of German during SA and in share of German speakers in the social network. With respect
to writing gains, we observed similarities, but also a few differences, based on a number of
objective measures of written language proficiency (Tables 2 and 3). To investigate a
potential relationship between language use and writing gains, we ran correlational analyses
between the two parameters (i.e., language contact with German and writing development).
These analyses yielded non-significant results (see Appendix A). This means that a larger
proportion of German use and a larger network of German speakers in our study does not
relate to development in objective measures of L2 writing. However, positive significant
correlations do exist between language contact with German and the students’ own
perception of writing development, as shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Correlations Between Language Contact With German (Use and Social Network, SN) and
Self-Perceived Writing Development After SA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE>
Self-perceived writing development is related to proportion of use of German in general and more specifically also to written communication on the internet or on social media. In addition, the number of German speakers in the overall network as well as their (larger) dispersion across social groups positively correlate with self-perceived writing development. Interestingly, these four variables all correlate with each other, which suggests that the larger the size of German speakers in the network, the more German speakers will appear in different social groups, and the more German will be used in general and in written online communication, which in turn, relates to the students perceiving higher writing gains.

Discussion

The present study was set up to investigate writing development during SA (RQ1), on the one hand, and language use and social network formation during SA (RQ2), on the other, comparing two groups of SA students based on their host country of residence. According
to previous studies, writing is the skill where improvement is most difficult to register, and, probably as a consequence, it is also the least investigated skill in SA research. In order to shed light on a hitherto neglected factor, we investigated a potential relationship between L2 social network formation and writing development (RQ3).

In terms of writing development (RQ1), both groups showed limited progress overall. We found significant gains only in the texts of the EG, in one CAF measure out of six (lexical sophistication) and in one FA dimension out of three (coherence and cohesion). As such, our findings are in line with prior research in which the SA context was not found to be particularly beneficial for the development of written production (Freed et al., 2003). One semester abroad does not seem long and sustainable enough to achieve measurable gains in writing. Indeed, the studies that report advantages in written production for SA students usually have analysed longer periods of time (Sasaki, 2004, 2007, 2009; Serrano et al., 2012). These studies also employed a different task type to test writing development. Typically, persuasive or decision-making tasks are chosen for this aim, whereas in our study, a narrative task was chosen. The lower cognitive demands of this task type causes a higher risk of encountering a ceiling effect (Rifkin, 2005). The participants in our study already had a high command of the target language and had received intensive writing instruction in the target language before their SA sojourn. This means that they might already have reached a so-called ‘language-learning plateau’ at the moment of departure to their SA destination (Richards, 2008), and/or that they had reached a ceiling with respect to the requirements of the narrative task. This is in line with Sanz (2014, p. 3) who suggests that the task chosen to detect linguistic development during SA might in many cases not be suited “to detect subtle changes in development” and therefore might be a possible reason for “disappointing and contradictory findings” (for an in-depth discussion of the effect of task in research on writing development during SA, see also Strobl & Baten, forthcoming).
There are prior studies that have shown significant improvement in some aspects of written production after a relatively short experience abroad (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014). Interestingly, one of the areas that seems to improve the most in these studies, lexical complexity, coincides with one of the areas showing positive development in the present study. However, the measure for which significant findings were attained in Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014), Guiraud’s TTR index, did not change significantly in our study. Instead, significant gains were measured for MWL in the writing of the EG. At the same time, one of the measures for syntactic complexity, MPL, showed a significant decrease in the EG. This is in line with Verspoor, Lowie, and Dijk (2008) who described a competitive interaction between lexical complexity and syntactic complexity, stating that often an increase in one area is accompanied by a decrease in the other. According to Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014), this partition is perfectly normal CAF behaviour. Yet, this variety of possible interactions raises questions on the use and interpretation of CAF results. Several authors have argued that it is highly problematic to conflate L2 proficiency based on CAF with L2 development, both epistemologically and methodologically (Baten & Håkansson, 2015; Ortega, 2012; Pallotti, 2009, 2015).

To remedy the shortcomings of single analytic CAF measures for the assessment of writing development, recent research has looked into writing performance from a more task-oriented perspective. In this respect, the results of the present study show that the scores of functional adequacy increase in both groups of SA students. This finding is in line with previous research suggesting an increased functional ability of students after SA (Godfrey et al., 2014). However, it should be noted that the change in functional adequacy is not significant, except for the dimension ‘cohesion and coherence’ in the EG group. The lack of significant change in the other FA dimensions might relate to the fact that the pre-
departure FA scores were already high in both groups, pointing towards the potential ceiling effect already mentioned.

In answer to RQ2, our results indicate that the SA students in a German-speaking country had extended contact with the target language, German. The students reported weekly to daily engagement with the target language, ranging from small talk with native speakers and non-native speakers of the target language to longer conversations. Interestingly, short conversations with unknown people were also reported, which suggests the participants’ immersion in the local environment. Furthermore, free-time reading and writing in the target language also happened on a regular basis, which is indicative of present-day internet/mobile communication, and which can be assumed to be equally interactive. In addition to the language contact data, the results of the social network analysis reveal that the EG students have built a relatively broad social network of German speakers. The students in this group report having gained, on average, five new German-speaking friends or acquaintances, who are dispersed over almost three separate social groups with each group consisting of at least three German speakers. These numbers are largely similar to previous studies on social network formation of both ERASMUS (Baten, 2020) and US students (Dewey et al., 2013).

Our findings differ from previous SA research reporting that SA students often have less intense and frequent contact with (native) speakers of the target language than one would assume (for an overview, see Baten, 2020). A possible reason why SA students have been shown to avoid interactions in the target language can be insufficient proficiency in the target language (DeKeyser, 2010; Trentman, 2013). DeKeyser (2007) pointed out that learners indeed need a certain linguistic ability to be able to participate in L2 interactions, which Lafford and Collentine (2006) referred to as the threshold
hypothesis. The ERASMUS students in the present study are advanced users of German and clearly have surpassed this threshold, feeling confident enough to engage in the target language and to build new social networks of people and to interact with these new people. Noticeably, these interactions do not only occur in the target language German, but also in L1 Dutch and L2 English, which shows that the ERASMUS experience is in fact neither monolingual nor immersive. This is in line with previous research on ERASMUS students that has shown that they make use of their entire linguistic repertoire, including their L1, English as a lingua franca, their target language and possible other foreign languages (Baten, 2020), putting into practice what has been described as the ‘multilingual turn’ (May, 2013).

Looking at the two SA groups based on country of residence, our results show significant differences in the use of the target language German. This is especially true for oral communication. Also with regard to writing, the students in a German-speaking country use German significantly more in their online written communication than the students outside of Germany. However, it is important to keep in mind that online written communication often bears characteristics of informal language use, which rather belongs to the oral than to the written register. In addition, the social networks in German of the students in the EG differed from students in the CG in size, durability, and intensity. However, the use of German in a formal writing context, i.e., the written assignments at the university, is not significantly different between both groups. This is reminiscent of the observation made by Barquin (2012) that translation students typically made less progress in writing during SA than literature students because they attended courses in two different foreign languages during their SA, which is compulsory in their curricula, and therefore had to write assignments in two foreign languages. This fact might account for the rather small difference between both groups in terms of writing gains measured in a formal task.
Finally, in answer to RQ3, the present study found that language engagement and social network variables do not appear to have a direct relation with objective measures of written language development. This is in line with the results of studies on L2 engagement and speaking development (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Briggs, 2015; Dewey, 2004; Ginsburg & Miller, 2000; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). However, some of the L2 engagement and social network variables do have positive correlations with the students’ own perception of progress in writing. Badstübner and Ecke (2009, 42) noted that students’ perceptions may be more informative than objective measures, when it comes to determining the success of SA. Following their view, the measured correlations actually provide crucial information about programme effectiveness and skill acquisition. Given that self-assessments describe “change as experienced subjectively by […] participants” (Hill & Betz, 2005: 514), the SA students who reported to have perceived progress in writing will probably also attribute this to their own efforts in terms of reaching out to German speakers and using the language (also in writing). As a result, this self-attributed sense of achievement might stimulate them to continue seizing all opportunities to use the target language. However, this long-term effect remains hitherto speculative, seeing that the potential effects of positive emotions and experiences are only starting to receive due attention in SLA research (witness the Perspectives section of the Modern Language Journal 2019, vol. 2).

Conclusion

This study investigated the writing gains of 30 Belgian students of L2 German during SA. To this aim, recent methodologies in SA research (social network analysis) and writing quality measures (functional adequacy) were combined with other established measures of writing quality analysis (CAF). In addition, we compared the results of students who spent
their SA in a German-speaking country (EG) with students who spent their SA in another country (CG). In doing so, we aimed to shed light on the relationship between language use and social network formation in the target language during SA and writing development.

The results with regard to actual writing development during SA revealed only a few significant changes between pre- and post-test writing in the EG. This might be related to the low number of participants in this study and the short narrative writing task used for the pre-/post-analysis, which might have caused a ceiling effect. Together with the evidence of rather low engagement in formal writing in the target language during SA, this suggests that writing gains during a one-semester ERASMUS sojourn are difficult to achieve, or at least that they are difficult to measure using one narrative task. Future research should therefore consider employing a range of varying writing tasks and tests.

Our in-depth social network analysis yielded interesting findings about the multilingual character of SA within the European ERASMUS exchange programme. The participants frequently used the target language and established a broad social network of German speakers, particularly in the EG. At the same time, they also used their multilingual repertoire, including the two foreign languages of their study programme at home, English as a lingua franca, and their L1 Dutch, as they saw fit. Another interesting finding is that students used the target language German for university assignments, irrespective of the country of residence. This is important in light of the quality assurance of the ERASMUS programme for students majoring in two foreign languages, because it means that both L2s are covered in their SA curriculum, irrespective of the country of residence. Since the focus of the present study concerns the impact of social networks in general, we did not collect qualitative data about the nature of, and support for the written
assignments during SA. Given the importance of sustained writing practice for writing development, a qualitative approach to writing support during SA is a promising avenue for future research. An innovative way to foster written language development together with intercultural awareness during SA was proposed by Moreno Bruna and Goethals (2020) who studied the effect of continued online support by the home institution through additional writing tasks in the target language, allowing SA students to gain additional credits.

Finally yet importantly, we could not establish a relationship between writing gains and social network formation data. However, we found a positive correlation between students’ self-perceived writing gains in L2 German during SA and the size and dispersion of their social network in German, together with the frequency of use of German for online written communication. The probable ceiling effect on the chosen task actually gives further weight to participants’ subjective self-reports. Possibly, the larger gains in writing reported by the stronger networkers are real, but were simply not required for the narrative task and are therefore not reflected in their performance on this task. Furthermore, these positive self-images resulting from a social network in the target language may actually bode well for the students’ future selves as language professionals and for their future language learning behaviour.

Our primary concern in this study was with the expansion of the methodological framework to gauge language gains through SA. Our broad methodological approach, combining linguistic and task-oriented measures for writing and self-reported data of different types, enabled us to gain insight into the multilingual nature of SA in the context of the ERASMUS programme. Limitations of the present study notwithstanding, we suggest that future studies on SA and language development embrace this combined methodology,
creating a large base of rich data that will enable the research community to compare results across settings, skills, and languages.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers and the journal editor for the highly valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. We also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Research Foundation Flanders (fwo).

NOTES

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i The intended learning outcome of the second year, i.e., before SA departure, is a minimum proficiency level of B2.

ii Punctuation errors were excluded for the error count, because the rules for commas are very different between German and the L1 Dutch, which causes a high error rate. Including these errors in the broad accuracy measure EFC/C would, thus, lead to distorted data.

iii The scales are independent for the argumentative writing task (for which they were intended in the first place). For this study they were collapsed, since the linguistic and cognitive requirements of a narrative task are more limited than those of an argumentative task.

iv Since the focus of this study was the impact of social networks in general, and not the impact of formal writing instruction during SA, and since all participants had different conditions with regard to the latter, no qualitative data with regard to the latter was collected. We decided to rely exclusively on the self-reported quantitative data about L2 use in different contexts that was gathered in the questionnaire.

v Obviously, this means that some of the new friends belong to multiple social groups.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Correlations between L2 Contact, Social Network Variables and Objective Measures of Writing Development (n = 30, except for connectors: n = 28; measures are difference scores)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proportion of L2 Use</th>
<th>Use of German in Writing I</th>
<th>Use of German in Writing II</th>
<th>Use of German in Writing III</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Durability</th>
<th>Dispersion</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FA1 Value r</td>
<td>.273</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.029</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>-.050</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>-.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA1 p</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>.827</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.879</td>
<td>.852</td>
<td>.580</td>
<td>.793</td>
<td>.925</td>
<td>.846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA2 Value r</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>-.117</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>-.088</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>-.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA2 p</td>
<td>.610</td>
<td>.444</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.950</td>
<td>.540</td>
<td>.454</td>
<td>.645</td>
<td>.854</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA3 Value r</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>-.077</td>
<td>-.139</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>-.043</td>
<td>.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA3 p</td>
<td>.453</td>
<td>.793</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>.462</td>
<td>.633</td>
<td>.853</td>
<td>.939</td>
<td>.822</td>
<td>.471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DiffA45 r</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>-.108</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>-.124</td>
<td>-.220</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DiffA45 p</td>
<td>.966</td>
<td>.318</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>.606</td>
<td>.855</td>
<td>.515</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DiffF45 r</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>-.108</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>-.077</td>
<td>-.137</td>
<td>-.138</td>
<td>-.203</td>
<td>-.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DiffF45 p</td>
<td>.930</td>
<td>.569</td>
<td>.805</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>.686</td>
<td>.470</td>
<td>.467</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPL r</td>
<td>-.201</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>-.269</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>-.196</td>
<td>-.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPL p</td>
<td>.286</td>
<td>.787</td>
<td>.917</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>.754</td>
<td>.976</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWL r</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWL p</td>
<td>.955</td>
<td>.925</td>
<td>.684</td>
<td>.481</td>
<td>.656</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td>.914</td>
<td>.993</td>
<td>.635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/P r</td>
<td>-.145</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>-.159</td>
<td>-.206</td>
<td>-.303</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>-.195</td>
<td>-.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/P p</td>
<td>.446</td>
<td>.738</td>
<td>.402</td>
<td>.275</td>
<td>.573</td>
<td>.862</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RootTTR r</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>-.048</td>
<td>-.147</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>-.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RootTTR p</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>.437</td>
<td>.778</td>
<td>.702</td>
<td>.995</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>.830</td>
<td>.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectors r</td>
<td>.231</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectors p</td>
<td>.238</td>
<td>.920</td>
<td>.240</td>
<td>.687</td>
<td>.242</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td>.591</td>
<td>.866</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### B.1 Content (FA1)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mit dieser Rubrik werden gedanklicher Reichtum und inhaltliche Deutlichkeit bewertet. Im Zentrum steht dabei, ob die einzelnen Gedanken angemessen (im Verhältnis zur Textlänge und Schreibzeit) entwickelt sind. Leitfrage: Ist der Inhalt deutlich, oder hätte ich noch zusätzliche Verständnisfragen zu den angesprochenen Punkten / fehlen wichtige Inhalte in Bezug auf den Schreibanlass?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet nur einen oder wenige Gedanken, der/die nicht in erkennbarem Zusammenhang mit dem Schreibanlass(^1) steht/-en. Die Gedanken sind nicht entwickelt und es gibt keine ersichtliche Themenentfaltung.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet einen oder wenige Gedanken, der/die nur lose mit dem Schreibanlass zusammenhängt/-en. Die Gedanken sind wenig entwickelt und eine Themenentfaltung ist nur schwer erkennbar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet ein paar Gedanken, die erkennbar mit dem Schreibanlass zusammenhängen. Die Gedanken sind einigermaßen entwickelt und ein Ansatz zur Themenentfaltung ist erkennbar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet mehrere Gedanken, die erkennbar mit dem Schreibanlass zusammenhängen. Die Gedanken sind recht gut entwickelt und die Themenentfaltung ist erkennbar, wenngleich noch einzelne Gedankensprünge möglich sind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet mehrere vielfältige Gedanken, die erkennbar mit dem Schreibanlass zusammenhängen. Die Gedanken sind gut entwickelt und die Themenentfaltung ist deutlich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Der Text beinhaltet äußerst vielfältige und stichhaltige Gedanken zum Schreibanlass und hat eine sehr deutliche und logische Themenentfaltung.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^1\) Der Schreibanlass war in diesem Projekt jeweils ein offen formulierter Titel für einen persönlichen Bericht (also kein argumentativer Text)
B.2 Comprehensibility (FA2)

Mit dieser Rubrik wird die sprachliche Verständlichkeit bewertet. Im Zentrum steht dabei, ob die einzelnen Sätze beim ersten Lesen flüssig verstanden werden, ohne dass der Leser aufgrund von Kenntnissen der L1 der Schreiber Bedeutung inferieren muss. Es werden also im Sinne von „Korrektheit“ nur solche Fehler beachtet, die den Lesefluss beeinträchtigen. Leitfrage: Bin ich beim Lesen an einzelnen Wörtern / Konstruktionen hängengeblieben und musste eventuell nochmals nachlesen?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Verständlichkeit</th>
<th>Der Text ist überhaupt nicht verständlich. Gedanken und Intention sind nicht eindeutig formuliert und die Bemühungen des Lesers, den Text zu verstehen, erweisen sich als unwirksam.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Der Text ist kaum verständlich. Textintentionen sind nicht eindeutig formuliert und der Leser hat Schwierigkeiten, die Gedanken des Schreibers zu verstehen. Der Leser muss die meisten Gedanken und die Intention erraten.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Der Text ist leicht verständlich und liest sich problemlos. Verständlichkeit ist kein Problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Der Text ist sehr leicht verständlich und liest sich flüssig. Gedanken und Intention sind klar formuliert.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### B.3 Cohesion and coherence (FA3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Kohärenz und Kohäsion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mit dieser Rubrik wird der Textzusammenhang, sowohl zwischen einzelnen Sätzen als auch zwischen Gedanken, bewertet. Im Zentrum steht dabei, ob der Gedankengang logisch aufgebaut und nachvollziehbar ist und ob diese Logik durch sprachliche Mittel gekennzeichnet ist. Leitfrage: Gibt es Gedankensprüinge oder Sätze, die unverbunden nebeneinander stehen?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1 | Der Text ist *überhaupt nicht kohärent*. Die Übergänge zwischen einzelnen Abschnitten / Gedanken sind völlig unzusammenhängend. Der Text ist *überhaupt nicht kohäsiv*. Der Schreiber benutzt keine anaphorischen Sprachmittel\(^2\), bzw. nur Wortwiederholung, und so gut wie keine Konnektoren\(^3\). |


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\(^2\) Anaphorische Sprachmittel verweisen auf ein vorgenanntes Element im Text zurück: Pronomina, Demonstrativa, Komparative, Pronominaladverbien, Synonyme, Oberbegriffe,...

\(^3\) Konnektoren verbinden Sätze / Satzteile logisch miteinander: Konjunktionen, Adverben, Adverbiale Konstruktionen, Präposition mit Nominalisierung (z.B. "aufgrund der Zugverspätung (kam ich zu spät)...")
APPENDIX C

Post-SA Questionnaire

Sprachkontakt und soziale Netzwerke

Profil
In diesem Teil des Fragebogens geht es um allgemeine Informationen über Ihre Sprachkenntnisse.
[1] Was ist Ihre Muttersprache? (Wenn Sie mehrsprachig aufgewachsen sind, können Sie mehrere Sprachen angeben)
[3] Wie würden Sie Ihre aktive Sprachbeherrschung für jede dieser Fremdsprachen auf einer Skala von 1 bis 5 einschätzen?
(1 = Basiskenntnisse / 5 = (fast) muttersprachliche Beherrschung)
    SPRECHEN  SCHREIBEN
    1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5
[4] Wie würden Sie Ihre passive Sprachbeherrschung für jede dieser Fremdsprachen auf einer Skala von 1 bis 5 einschätzen?
(1 = Basiskenntnisse / 5 = (fast) muttersprachliche Beherrschung)
    HÖREN  LESEN
    1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5

Erasmus
In diesem Teil des Fragebogens geht es um allgemeine Informationen über Ihr Erasmussemester.
[8] In welchen Sprachen haben Sie hauptsächlich mit Ihren MitbewohnerInnen kommuniziert?
[9] Wie bewerten Sie im Allgemeinen das Sprachniveau der Dozenten auf einer Skala von 1 (unzureichend) bis 5 (hervorragend)? *
[12] Haben Sie während des Auslandssemesters einen Sprachkurs belegt? *

Sprachgebrauch im letzten Semester
In diesem Teil des Fragebogens geht es um Ihren Sprachgebrauch im letzten Semester. Es werden Situationen vorgegeben, aber wenn Sie noch Situationen hinzufügen möchten, dann können Sie das ganz unten machen.
[14] Was war, grob geschätzt, die prozentuale Verteilung Ihres Sprachgebrauchs im letzten Semester?
Zum Beispiel: "Ich habe ziemlich viel Niederländisch gesprochen und von meinen beiden Fremdsprachen habe ich mehr Deutsch als Spanisch gesprochen" --> NL: 50%; Deutsch: 30%; Spanisch: 20%)

[15] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen DEUTSCH benutzt?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>nie</th>
<th>ein paar Mal im Semester</th>
<th>ein paar Mal im Monat</th>
<th>ein paar Mal in der Woche</th>
<th>täglich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>small Talk mit Freunden bzw. Kommilitonen, die Muttersprachler des Deutschen sind</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small Talk mit Freunden bzw. Kommilitonen, die NICHT Muttersprachler des Deutschen sind</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurze Gespräche mit Unbekannten (Passanten, Ladenangestellten, in Kneipen, Restaurants, Diskotheken, ...)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>längere Gespräche mit Freunden während sozialer Freizeitaktivitäten (Kneipe, Sportaktivitäten, Stadtausflüge, ...)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telefon- oder Skype-Gespräche mit Familie oder Freunden geschriebene Kommunikation über Internet (E-mails, Facebook-chat, posts, ...)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schreiben zum Spaß (Blogposts, Fanfiction, ...)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hausarbeiten für die Uni schreiben</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernsehen oder Film</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio oder Musik hören</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Soziale Netzwerke

In diesem Teil des Fragebogens geht es um Ihren Sprachgebrauch in den verschiedenen sozialen Netzwerken.

| --- | --- |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>nie</th>
<th>ein paar Mal im Semester</th>
<th>ein paar Mal im Monat</th>
<th>ein paar Mal in der Woche</th>
<th>täglich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>im Internet lesen (Nachrichten-Sites, E-mails, ...)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeitungen, Zeitschriften, Romane, ... lesen</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wissenschaftliche Artikel lesen</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[16] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen ENGLISCH benutzt?
[17] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen FRANZÖSISCH benutzt?
[18] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen SPANISCH benutzt?
[19] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen ITALIENISCH benutzt?
[20] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen RUSSISCH benutzt?
[21] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen TÜRKISCH benutzt?
[22] Wie oft haben Sie im letzten Semester in den unten stehenden Situationen Ihre sonstige Fremdsprache benutzt?

[23] Gab es noch andere Situationen bzw. Aktivitäten, in denen Sie eine oder mehrere Ihrer Fremdsprachen benutzt haben?
[28] Wie würden Sie Ihre Beziehung zu jeder dieser Personen auf einer Skala von 1 bis 10 bewerten?
1 = oberflächliche Unterhaltung
10 = tief gehende Unterhaltung, wobei persönliche und vertrauliche Informationen sowie Emotionen ausgetauscht werden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wohnsituation</th>
<th>Universität</th>
<th>organisierte Freizeit</th>
<th>allgemeine Freizeit</th>
<th>virtuelle soziale Aktivitäten</th>
<th>andere Bereiche</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(z.B: organisierte Freizeit = 'alle Mittwochabende baden gehen')
[31] Wie oft haben Sie Situationen erlebt, in denen Ihre sprachlichen Kenntnisse eine Barriere für problemlose Kommunikation waren?

Fortschritte
In diesem Teil des Fragebogens geht es um Ihre Fortschritte nach dem letzten Semester
[33] Welche Fortschritte haben Sie in Bezug auf SPRECHEN und SCHREIBEN im letzten Semester gemacht?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPRECHEN</th>
<th>SCHREIBEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>keine kleine mittlere große</td>
<td>keine kleine mittlere große</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[34] Welche Fortschritte haben Sie in Bezug auf HÖREN und LESEN im letzten Semester gemacht?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HÖREN</th>
<th>LESEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>keine kleine mittlere große</td>
<td>keine kleine mittlere große</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[35] Wie bewerten Sie Ihre Fortschritte im Allgemeinen? *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>weniger als erwartet</th>
<th>wie erwartet</th>
<th>mehr als erwartet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

[36] Haben Sie Vorschläge, wie der Fachbereich vor und während des Erasmussemesters helfen könnte, Ihre Kontakte zur örtlichen Bevölkerung zu intensivieren?
[37] Im Nachhinein betrachtet, hätten Sie Dinge anders machen können, um während des Auslandssemesters den Kontakt zur örtlichen Bevölkerung zu intensivieren?

Vielen Dank für die Beantwortung des Fragebogens.