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Secondary school students' perceptions of language-learning experiences from participation in short *Erasmus+* mobilities with non-native speakers of English

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a small-scale qualitative case study where the purpose was to examine a group of Norwegian upper secondary students' reflections around own language-learning experiences when participating in three very short transnational *Erasmus+* project mobilities. Data were collected through interviews, observations and reflection logs, and the constant, comparative method was used to analyse the material. An overall finding can be related to a sense of raised metacognitive awareness in the group of students, as a result of their participation in the *Erasmus+* project. Their perceived raised metacognitive awareness was, amongst others, attributed to the extended learning arena, to the social setting and the sense of agency in group tasks. The latter was perceived as important because it allowed for more opportunities for learner-learner interaction with other non-native speakers of English. Exposure to non-native language users as well as increased intercultural awareness were seen as important for students' willingness to communicate, and hence an important element of their language-building identity.

Introduction

There seems to be a general agreement among scholars that stays abroad benefit second or foreign language development. Much of the research carried out within this area explores longer stays abroad and in particular the benefits related to language immersion in native-speaking contexts. Llanes et al. (2016) observe, however, a lack of research on the impact of studying English in non-anglophone countries, an impression which is additionally emphasised when the focus area is narrowed even further, as when focusing on short, transnational school mobilities in non-anglophone countries. The current article will contribute to filling that gap and reports on a study where communication took place between non-native speakers of English, linked to three short *Erasmus+* transnational mobilities in non-anglophone countries. The participants in the study were a group of upper secondary school students from Norway, who took part in the mobilities. The study''s overall purpose was to find out what aspects related to participation in these mobilities the students pointed to as important language experiences when engaged in face-to-face interactions in lingua-franca contexts.

Background and research questions

Authentic, or 'real' communication in the target language is not always possible in a traditional classroom context. It is well-known, however, that use of new technology has increased the opportunities

for authentic communication and opened up possibilities for genuine interaction with both native and non-native speakers of English. The eTwinning online community (www.etwinning.net) is a good example of the latter. In contrast to the online community offered through e.g. the eTwinning platform, the *Erasmus+* programmes for education, training, sport and youths offer opportunities for transnational, strategic partnerships and mobility activities supported through grants (European Commission 2017), with physical meetings, known as mobilities, as one of the added values. Participation in *Erasmus+* projects gives learners opportunities to interact face-to-face during shorter (typically 5 days) transnational mobilities set in the different host countries participating in the project.

The current study was carried out in 2016–2017, in relation to the *Erasmus+* KA2 project; 'English through entrepreneurship'. The *Erasmus+* project partners were students and teachers from five upper secondary schools in five European countries. In agreement with the Norwegian delegation of the project, and given the limitations in time and economy, the present study is limited to the upper secondary school students from the Norwegian participating school.

The following research question will be addressed in this article: what aspects related to participation in very short transnational *Erasmus+* mobilities do Norwegian upper secondary school students point to as important language experiences when they are involved in very short term mobilities involving task-based group discussions and social interaction with other users of English as a lingua franca in various settings across Europe? The analysis and discussion will also be guided by how these experiences contribute to building the students' identity as English language users.

Language learning (although incidentally), language use and content learning worked in tandem during the mobilities organised in the *Erasmus+* project, and the communication between the participating students was built on the use of English as a lingua franca. The main focus of the current article hence lies within students' reflections around various language experiences in a lingua franca context, and how this specific context influenced their use of English as a common language for all communication during the mobilities. A more detailed description of the study's context is shared in the Methods and material section, below, and gives the reader the necessary insight into the specific surroundings in which the case study took place.

The Norwegian context

A wide understanding of the term 'language-learning experiences' is used in the study, and is linked to terms and structures used in the English subject curriculum of the Norwegian national curriculum for primary and secondary education and teaching. The *Purpose* of the school subject English underlines the use of the target language as a means for international communication, along with having 'knowledge of how it is used in different contexts' (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013: 2). In addition to looking at the use of English as a tool for communication, it is also explicitly stated in the *Purpose* section of the subject curriculum that English as a school subject is a way of 'gaining knowledge and personal insight' (ibid.). The four *Main subject areas* of the subject curriculum for English, as described below, complement each other and should hence be considered together (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013). *Language learning* focuses on what is involved in learning a new language, and on seeing relationships between students' L1, L2 and L3. Insight into one's own language learning is an important aspect of this main subject area, as well as is the ability to evaluate one's own language use and learning needs, and to select suitable strategies. Communication is organised in two different main subject areas in the subject curriculum: *Oral communication* and *Written communication*. In the current study, it is primarily the *Oral communication* area which is relevant. This main subject area focuses on various aspects around practical language use related to listening, speaking and conversing in English. Equally important elements of *Oral communication* relate to politeness, awareness of certain norms and different situations or contexts, adapting language to recipient and developing a linguistic repertoire (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013: 3). The relevance of the main area *Culture, society*

and literature for the current study can primarily be found in key words such as cultural understanding, cultural forms and expressions and respect for the lives and cultures of other people (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013: 4). In the next section I present the central concepts and ideas on which the study is built.

Theoretical framing

The present study is framed primarily within the concepts of English as a lingua franca and metacognition. Additionally, and within the broad concept of metacognition, the relevance of the concepts awareness, appropriateness, language attitudes and identities for the present study will also be touched upon.

English as a lingua franca

None of the project partner students from the five European countries were native speakers of English. For the participants from the Norwegian delegation, English was their second or third language. Communication between all the Erasmus+ project participants took place in English, and primarily within two domains: (1) the professional, academic domain, related to students' work with their entrepreneurial project tasks, and (2) the social domain, related to students' non-academic activities during mobilities. English was hence used as a lingua franca in the project.

The term *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) has come to describe the role of English as a means of communication between speakers who do not share the same mother-tongue (Krulatz et al. 2018). This indicates that English is used as a contact language for speakers of English with different first languages and who come from different cultural backgrounds (Jenkins 2009: 200). Hülmbauer et al. (2008: 27) underline that 'English as a lingua franca is defined functionally by its use in intercultural communication, rather than formally'. The authors also argue that ELF speakers should primarily be considered as *users* of the language, as opposed to EFL *learners* (Hülmbauer et al. 2008: 28). The latter is still mainly associated with English in school contexts. Even though using and learning are interrelated, Hülmbauer et al. (2008: 28) point to learning within an ELF context as incidental. This is in opposition to the more explicit teaching of English that takes place in many (or perhaps most?) school contexts.

As emphasised by Jenkins (2015: 56), who presents three definitions of what she refers to as 'ELF 2', 'nothing in these definitions suggests that native English speakers are excluded'. The role of English as a lingua franca in the current study was, however, restricted to communication between non-native speakers of English. As opposed to a situation where varieties of English are defined by what is commonly referred to as target-culture countries, this is different for most ELF contexts. In all latter situations, one specific characteristic is that English is typically used and developed in a multilingual, as opposed to a monolingual context. This is an aspect which may lead to more diversity in what is understood as 'accepted' varieties of English. This is also a point made by Borghetti and Beaven (2017: 223), who underline the role of a language franca as a lingua 'when used and shaped in context by non-native interlocutors, whatever language variety they use in that moment'. Practical use of the language in a multilingual context may additionally affect the language users' more or less built-in performance expectations relating to norms and standards for correctness.

Metacognition

Different terms, such as learner autonomy, awareness, beliefs and cognition are often referred to when addressing the concept of metacognition. In the current article, I lean on Haukås (2018: 13), who defines metacognition within the contexts of language learning and teaching as 'an awareness of and reflections about one's knowledge, experiences, emotions and learning'. Included in this definition are:

all aspects of thinking about language, language learning and teaching; for example what learners and teachers know or do not know about languages and language learning, what they think about own abilities to learn and/or teach languages, reflections on emotions concerning experiences related to language learning and/or teaching and how to learn and teach as well as monitor one's own learning and/or teaching (Haukås 2018)

The focus of the current study is, as previously mentioned, primarily on the students and not on the teachers. Access to language learners' metacognitive awareness happens mainly through self-reporting. In the current study, this was realised through interviews and reflection logs. The specific context, characterised by a large degree of learner autonomy within a transnational, intercultural setting, was the backdrop of students' self-reported language-learning experiences. Learner autonomy was hence an important aspect of metacognition in the study reported here.

In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001), learner autonomy is introduced as the 'ability to learn'; an ability which enables learners to 'deal more effectively and independently with new language-learning challenges, to see what options exist and to make better use of opportunities' (p. 106). *Communication and language awareness*, such as sensitivity to language and language use; *study skills*, including ability to make effective use of learning opportunities; and *heuristic skills*, e.g. the ability to come to terms with new experiences regarding the language-learning context (Council of Europe 2001: 107–108), are some of the components of 'ability to learn' seen as particularly relevant for the current study. The Norwegian national curriculum is heavily influenced by the CEFR, and competence aims linked to learner autonomy can e.g. be found in the main area *Language learning* in the English subject curriculum, for after year 1, in general studies in upper secondary level:

- evaluate and use different situations, working methods and learning strategies to further develop one's English-language skills
- evaluate own progress in learning English
- evaluate different digital resources and other aids critically and independently, and use them in own language learning (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2013)

Fenner (2018) argues that the first bullet point above is linked precisely to learner autonomy, due to the element relating to learners' use of methods and progression in the learning process. The second bullet point underlines the reflection aspect of learner autonomy, related to metacognition around own language development. Reflections around planning and monitoring own learning are closely associated with evaluating own language learning progress. Another important aspect of learner autonomy is seen in the third point above, which reflects learners' independent selection and use of aids and material in the learning process. In the present study, all of the above-mentioned elements are relevant when exploring the upper secondary school students' perceptions of own language-learning experiences in the lingua-franca context offered through the *Erasmus+* transnational project.

It is a well-known fact that knowledge about language structures is not enough to communicate in a language. Practical language use and speakers' choices and reflections around incidents of communication also require other abilities. Appropriateness of language comprises precisely of 'rules' related to practical language use. According to Rindal (2019), this includes 'speakers' attitudes and values related to language features and uses'. In line with this follows that appropriate language use relates to how the language is actually used in a specific context, more than to the system of linguistic forms. Rindal (2019: 37) additionally reminds us that this is also related to who the actual speakers of the language are. With today's status of English as a lingua franca, using only native speakers and the concept of target culture as references for practical actual language use is hence problematic. Related to this, Borghetti and Beaven (2017: 223), citing Canagarajah (2007), write that English used as a lingua franca should not be conceptualised as a linguistic phenomenon, but rather as a 'fluid, contextual, intersubjective conceptual construct'. When speakers across different

cultures and lingua franca use meet, like in the current study, they are likely to have to relate to several levels of variation in language use.

Kalocsai (2013) points to the close relation between language, culture and identity. The relevance of this for the present study can be tied to the importance of not seeing culture and language as something fix, but rather as something being created dynamically between the speakers within each communication context, in this study represented by the various mobilities. Gil (2016) points to the close resemblance between the ideas of third places from Kramsch (1993), and Byram's model of intercultural competence (Byram et al. 2002) when she writes that:

> For Byram, to have an 'intercultural attitude' means being able to reflect upon one's own values and beliefs and understand that they are not the only 'correct' ones, and also be able to see how these values and beliefs might look from an outsider's point of view, someone who has different values, beliefs and behaviours (Gil 2016: 338).

Beliefs and behaviours are closely related to language attitudes and language identities. From my own experience as a language teacher as well as from various bodies of research, we know that our language learners in the classrooms very often prefer British and American native speaker varieties of English. In a study from 2013, exploring Norwegian secondary school students' choice of English accent, Rindal (2013) found that other people's language attitudes had an effect on which accent the students aimed for. In other words, how people perceived them, based on their English accent, influenced the accent they targeted. It is also interesting to see, from Rindal's study, that a British English accent was, among the secondary school students, allocated a more formal function than an American English accent. The latter was perceived as more casual. Rindal argues that the awareness the Norwegian secondary school students in her material demonstrated towards this matter, shows their awareness of different contexts with different degrees of formality, as well as the fact that choice of language form can depend on what you want the English language to do for you (Rindal 2019). The latter is linked to the importance of building a language identity. The material of the present study does not aim at exploring students' choice of accent, but rather learn about their meta-reflections around language learning experiences, where choice of perceived accent is one such type of experience. Following this, an interesting question is how the participants' need to adjust the language according to the specific transnational context and the interlocutors of the communication incidents is balanced with their identity-building as English language users.

Materials and methods

The study reported in this article was designed as a small-scale qualitative case-study (Cresswell 2013), being limited both in time and space. The researcher's focused attention was directed towards the group of Norwegian participants in the specific contexts, and which aspects from this context they defined as important for their own, perceived language learning and active language use. In a case-study like the one described here, there is often a high degree of internal validity. This implies that the study's participants, their teachers, as well as the other students and teachers taking part in the *Erasmus+* project are able to recognise the knowledge being produced in the study and described in the current article, and to perceive the knowledge as correct and relevant for themselves. In a qualitative perspective, generalisation is often linked to whether or not the reader is able to recognise the context and the situations described. If this is the case, the reader may experience what they read as parallel experiences which they are later able to adapt and transfer to their own contexts and settings. In this perspective, the current article, even though it relates to a specific and clearly defined context, can nonetheless function as a tool for thinking and further development for the readers. External validity, i.e. how the knowledge produced is of relevance also for others, can in this study therefore be linked to the term naturalistic generalisation (Stake and Trumbull 1982).

Participants

The group representing the Norwegian student delegation consisted of six 17-year-old students chosen by their Norwegian teachers. Selection was based on a written application (a motivation letter) and an interview. As a researcher, I was hence not involved in the selection of the study's participants, which in this case can be referred to as a purposeful sampling (Cresswell 2013), where the aim was to develop a detailed understanding of all six participants' experiences. They participants were alike in the sense that they were internally motivated and had specifically applied to be selected. This was also an aspect that had to be kept in mind when analysing the material and discussing the findings. At the same time, the students' local school is one of the most multicultural upper secondary schools in the area, and this is also represented in the study's participants. Four of the six participants were children of immigrant parents from Europe, Asia and Africa. In respect of privacy and to protect the participants' anonymity, no further details about country of origin and number of years in Norway related to single participants will be shared.

All six students were in their 2nd year of upper secondary school when the study took place, and described themselves, at the outset of the study, as comfortable speakers of English. Informed consent was obtained and the parents were also informed about the research taking place in relation to the students' participation in the *Erasmus+* project.

Context and tasks

During the mobilities, the students were divided into three transnational groups, each of which were given an open, entrepreneurial task to work with. The three group tasks had been developed by the teachers, across countries, in unison, and were to be followed up during all mobilities:

- *The Entrepreneurship group* decided to create a new trip advisor app for young travellers. The app was created as an Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/permetior.mapp/?hl=nb)
- *The Newspaper Agency group's* task was to create an online newspaper, presented as a blog (https://newsforyouth.org/). The group members worked together with setting up the blog, choosing design and structure for the presentation of the content, creating a logo, and of course working as journalists and creating blog entries with the aim of expressing the voice of the youth. They additionally worked on their Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram accounts used to advertise themselves and to 'show the backstage fun', as the group members themselves commented.
- *The Tourist Guide group* had to agree on which and how many sights to include in their guide, how the sights were to be presented in the tourist guide, and of course the format of the guide. They eventually ended up deciding that they wanted to create a digitally available tourist guide, in the form of an Instagram account, with other services embedded, like e.g. Google maps and Trip Advisor.

The teachers' role during the mobilities were to assist the groups when needed, but mainly to allow the students to work independently with their tasks, hence encouraging autonomous language use.

Material

The empirical material of the study consists of interview transcripts and various written documents from the respondents. *Individual interviews* as well as *focus group interviews* were carried out with the study's participants prior to, during and after the short term mobilities in Antwerp (Netherlands), Varaždin (Croatia) and Trondheim (Norway). During all three mobilities, *field notes* were taken. These notes contained descriptive observations made by the researcher, as well as more reflective notes

and comments on the students' participation, effort and incidents of observed language use in the transnational groups within the professional, academic domain. *Written documents* from the study's participants were collected at various intervals during the data collection period, and consist of three types of documents: (1) *Expectation logs* written prior to the partnership meetings, focussing on the participants' expectations for the upcoming mobility as well as on their perception of own communicative competence in English. (2) *Short reflection logs* written by students during the mobilities, focussing on the use of communication strategies during their professional group work, in addition to concrete incidents of language use. (3) Students' *final reflections* written after all three mobilities, summarising their perceptions of own language learning experiences and language use. The material was collected in 2016 and 2017, and took place both at their local, Norwegian school prior to project meetings, during project meetings in the hosts' local schools and also after project meetings, upon returning to their local school in Norway.

Procedures

The following research question guided the study: What aspects related to participation in very short transnational Erasmus+ mobilities do Norwegian upper secondary school students point to as important language experiences when they are involved in very short term 'mobilities' involving task-based group discussions and social interaction with other users of English as a lingua franca in various settings across Europe? With this question in mind, the interviews were transcribed, and together with the other text material, the data material were analysed through a process of alternation between the three steps of the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis; open, axial and selective coding. In an abductive process alternating between the material and theoretical concepts, the following core categories were established as relevant for the research question guiding this specific article: *extended learning arena*, *raised awareness*, *social setting and agency*, *the importance of context for own language use* and finally; *overcoming tendencies towards 'native-speakerism'*. In the next section, the findings are presented and discussed according to their relation to the previously presented theoretical concepts.

Findings and discussion

The importance of the extended learning arena

At the outset of the first mobility, the six Norwegian secondary school students were excited about the cross-cultural communication they were going to take part in, how it would affect the decision-making in the transnational working groups, and also how discussing opposing viewpoints within their transnational entrepreneurial working groups would unfold. The mobilities represented a less formal setting compared to ordinary class contexts for the students, and was hence experienced as an extended learning arena for them. Compared to an ordinary in-class learning context, the mobilities offered what can be described as alternative and authentic opportunities for various pedagogical practices, where use of English as a lingua-franca was central in both domains, i.e. the formal, academic domain and informal, social domain.

Not surprisingly, the material shows that participation in the project increased the participants' motivation, not only for using English as a means of communication, but also for the work within the professional, academic domain itself. Offering students opportunities for language immersion through transnational projects, like in this current project, therefore seemed to be a motivation booster for the participants, despite the hard work they needed to put into their group tasks, both before, during, after and between the project mobilities.

Being required to use English during the mobilities was apparently an eye-opener to many of the participants, as this excerpt from the material shows: 'During the first mobility, I realised that my English was actually much better than I had thought'. This utterance can be seen as signs of

metacognition around own language development. Increased self-confidence often leads to self-efficacy; believing in own ability to achieve goals (Bandura 1997). This becomes a positive spiral where experienced success in own language use reinforces the willingness and inclination to use the language even more.

Interestingly, some of the Norwegian students also commented on their own choice of English as a preferred language for communication between themselves, as Norwegians, when present in a room with foreigners. This was done, they said, out of respect for the others present, but also because they enjoyed practicing their use of English whenever possible. 'It seemed natural, since we used English so much already', one of them mentioned. Their use of English hence extended beyond using it as a lingua franca within the academic and the social domain when communicating with peers from other countries. This indicates that the students saw themselves as users of the language, more than as primarily learners of English (Hülmbauer et al. 2008: 28). The finding can additionally be interpreted as a sign of learner autonomy, at least if we link it to the ability to deal effectively and independently with new language learning challenges as well as take advantage of the opportunities framed by the specific context (Council of Europe 2001). Finally, it can also be argued that speaking English between themselves, even when communicating explicitly with peers from Norway, is a sign of the students' language awareness. They did not want to leave the other students present in the room with a feeling of being kept outside. Rindal (2019) writes about two sets of rules in sociolinguistic competence, one of them being tied to what she refers to as the sociocultural rules of the language (p. 40). These rules also embrace a sense of understanding of politeness in a given context. I will argue that this does not only relate to how politeness is expressed, linguistically, but also implies to which degree the speakers are aware of how politeness can embrace other aspects, such as which language to use in which contexts. In other words, I argue that sociocultural rules can also be tied to awareness around language use.

Raised meta-cognitive awareness

Being required to use English for communicative purposes in a professional domain, the students realised how listening was an equally important component of successful communication as speaking, and the degree to which an authentic conversation also depends on an active listener who is interested in following up what has been said.

Awareness of how their own oral output impacted the language intake of their peer students was hence another interesting finding of the study. 'I tend to speak too fast when I speak English and realised that this became a challenge for the others', one of the study's participants commented in her reflection log. She continued by saying that in the situation, she apologised and 'started speaking slower and hopefully more understandable'. Other comments of the same kind also indicated a development towards a higher level of meta-reflection around own language use. One of the students for instance shared the following written reflection:

> The social and cultural events I have taken part in during the mobilities have taught me how important it is to distinguish between formal and informal English in various situations. I cannot use the same form of English when speaking to peer students my own age as when speaking to grown-ups. The same goes for choice of language style for our presentations. This project has therefore been motivational, and the work has made me realize that I have yet much more to learn in English, even though I used to look at myself as a high-proficient speaker of English.

The student is here clearly thinking about language and language use, which, as previously mentioned, are two elements included in Haukås' definition of meta cognitive awareness (Haukås 2018). Other examples from the material show how students see the necessity of adjusting their own language level to peer students who do not have the same proficiency level of English as they themselves have.

Hopfenbeck (2014: 163) links metacognition both to self-regulated learning and to learner autonomy. While the former is mainly related to use of learning strategies, both terms deal with controlling and supervising own learning and the ability to change strategy use according to experienced needs in the actual language learning situation. The material in this study consist of several examples of how the students' meta-cognitive awareness was linked to a perceived increased language awareness, as in the examples cited above. The participants experienced and reflected around the need of switching between formal and informal language style, as well as adapting to the language level of their interlocutor, depending on the experienced needs in the actual learning situation.

The importance of social setting and agency

After the second mobility, the participants reflected around how much easier it was to use English as a lingua franca once they had learned to know each other better personally, across borders and in spite of different first languages. There was, however, no consensus as to which setting or domain influenced their perceived language development most positively. The majority of the respondents in the study pointed nonetheless to the social domain's events and activities during mobilities as important aspects in this respect. Activities within this domain helped all students connect deeper, at a social level. Students found that they were more relaxed during events taking place in the social domain of the mobilities. These events often allowed them to decide the seating and to mingle, more than what was the case when they were working in the professional domain. This, however, also seemed to impact positively on their cooperation also within the professional domain positively.

Another aspect was related to the choice of conversational topics. 'During social events, we could talk about anything, and the conversation was hence not restricted to the tasks in the transnational group work', one of the students commented during an interview. This aspect obviously helped their conversation flow more easily. They reported increased willingness to take risks in their own language production, since no formal, professional agenda framed the conversations taking place in the social domain. It seems as if this situation facilitated both the language output and input, as well as enhanced the process of converting input to comprehensible intake. It is precisely the latter aspect of second language acquisition, where input is processed, which helps students develop their linguistic systems.

Interestingly, however, two of the participants also pointed to the more formal settings, experienced primarily in the professional academic domain during the mobilities, as the context contributing most to their own perceived language development. Arguments used here relate to these settings as being more challenging, language-wise, but at the same time also more rewarding, as long as linguistic success; for the participants understood as effective communication, was achieved. 'These settings were more challenging in terms of having to use specific terminology and correct vocabulary, but at the same time I found it more informative when I succeeded', one of the Norwegian students commented. An interesting added dimension relating to the conversation flow within the professional domain during mobilities is tied to the following citation from one of the participants: 'We talk more, and also more freely while working with the formal group tasks, when the teachers leave the groups and stop supervising our oral communication within the transnational groups'. In the latter case, it seems as if the cognitive effort experienced through having conversations related to professional topics, in combination with a feeling of agency experienced in situations when teachers allowed students to discuss alone, facilitated and encouraged the participants' language use. This can be interpreted as another example of learner autonomy, in line with the definitions given in the European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe 2001: 106).

The importance of context for students' own language use'

Findings from the present study confirmed what we, as teachers, teacher educators and researchers already know, related to the importance of context when communicating and interpreting meaning, both in the roles as speakers and as listeners. It was nonetheless interesting to see that also the adolescent participants in the study pointed to contexts that could give them linguistic support, as for instance in situations where they would lean on what was said immediately before and / or right after the word or sentence in order to interpret what was said. Sometimes they also referred to the importance of transparent words as a help to understand what peers said. The context could additionally be situational, as in situations where they were already familiar with the topic being discussed, and hence knew many of the typical English terms used. Using context was therefore clearly understood as one type of support for them in their own perceived language learning. Another interesting finding is that in neither of the two domains did the Norwegian participants opt for using Norwegian among themselves, in situations when they had trouble either understanding or expressing themselves. Despite the fact that the level of mastery of English differed quite a lot between participating students from the five different countries, the data nonetheless show that the participants in the study acknowledged their international peers' competence, as this excerpt shows: 'Not everyone is at the same level of English, but everyone has something to teach others and contribute with'. This can be linked to students' reflections around their own and peers' language learning. When asked to argue for why they avoided using Norwegian to get and give language help, the participants commented that this was the only polite way to behave in the situation. It therefore seems that the specific situational context could, on the one hand, support them in their own language learning use and language development. On the other hand, however, the material also points to how they imposed restrictions on themselves regarding use of L1, precisely because of the contextual situation.

Other findings show how intercultural awareness also affected their language learning in a wider sense, as the quote below, taken from one of the reflection logs the students wrote, demonstrates:

> It's quite ok that we had to use Mr., Ms. or Mrs., even though we're not used to that in Norway. I actually liked it! I also noticed that the use of slang was a little reduced when the teachers from the other countries were around us … .

Another student commented on how she thought that cultural differences could explain how the students carried out their work within the transnational groups:

> Even though we all have the same goals in our group, we have different ways of getting there. I think this relates to cultural differences. It was fascinating to see how people from the same countries had the same thoughts and the same ideas.

It can be argued that the participants' increased intercultural awareness also functioned as a type of support for their language use and language learning, albeit in a wider sense. This is closely linked to the importance of developing learners as intercultural speakers (Byram et al. 2002), where knowledge, skills and attitudes are equally important components.

Overcoming tendencies towards 'native-speakerism'

'Native-speakerism' is defined by Holliday (2018) as the ideology that native speakers are the best language models and teachers because they represent a Western culture. This is closely related to the native speaker ideal. In a context with so many varieties of English spoken and the consequent exposure to non-native language models, the Norwegian participants in the present study seemed to find, however, some kind of perceived encouragement and self-esteem in the fact that their language identity did not rely solely on them using a particular, native-like English accent. Using English as a lingua franca with peers from other countries, and hence with different first languages, was on the contrary an element that seemed to lessen the expectations that the Norwegian students put on

themselves. Expectations towards wanting to sound native-like or living up to a native standard in their own practical use of the target language is linked to the concept of language identity and very often comes from within the students themselves, hence the reference above to 'built-in performance expectations'. With 30 years of experience as an English teacher in lower secondary schools in Norway, I have realised this first hand with my own previous school students. The unfortunate result has sometimes been a lack of willingness, from some students, to speak English out loud in class. Reluctance from school students towards using oral English actively in the classroom is also often experienced as the main classroom challenge among my group of aspiring, future English teachers.

Speakers of English need to choose and use language forms which are seen as appropriate for the specific context, the purpose of the communication, as well as the language and culture of the other speakers within the same context. Within transnational incidents of communication, such as in the present study, acting in accordance with the above is even more challenging. When speakers across different cultures and lingua franca use meet, like in the current study, they are likely to have to relate to several levels of variation in language use. Could it therefore be that the specific context represented opportunities for the Norwegian secondary school students to increase their awareness around the fact that people do speak English differently, and as Rindal (2019: 37) points to, did they realise that there is no one right way of speaking English? So, when Holliday (2018) speaks in favour of a broader educational approach and how this will 'serve to accommodate a broader richness of cultural experience and classroom behaviours', one implication could perhaps be to allow more students to take part in transnational mobilities, whether these are organised as online meetings through platforms like e.g. eTwinning, or as face-to-face mobilities, like within the Erasmus programme.

Conclusion

The participants' voices were central in this study and the overall focus was on students' own perceptions of language learning experiences from participation in *Erasmus+* mobilities with non-native speakers of English. The findings indicate that the project participation has contributed to various competencies in students' second language development. The participants' socio-linguistic competence seems to have been developed. This is reflected in, for example, their ability to adapt own language use to various situations and contexts in which the language is used. It also relates to appropriateness and various norms for accepted formal and informal language use. Finally, the project participation seems to have influenced the respondents' metalinguistic competence and the development of metalinguistic awareness, i.e. to think and talk about language and language use. When language learners are conscious of how they use the language and how they learn, they are also able to identify effective ways of learning. The latter is a typical characteristic of an autonomous language learner. This study has shown several examples of language users on the path of becoming highly autonomous language learners.

Disclosure statement

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