

Qualitative Analysis and Promotion the Language Acquisition of International Students at Universities in Germany: Opportunities and Challenges

Marc Beutner*, Helene M Lindenthal, and Jan-Phillip Lüttke

University Paderborn, Universität Paderborn, Warburger Straße 100, 33098 Paderborn, Germany

Submission: March 05, 2024; Published: March 20, 2024

*Corresponding author: Marc Beutner, University Paderborn, Universität Paderborn, Warburger Straße 100, 33098 Paderborn, Germany.

Abstract

This research examines the prospects, difficulties, language learning experiences and language acquisition encountered by foreign students while pursuing their studies at a university in Germany. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study delves into the firsthand experiences of international students, aiming to extract insights and formulate recommendations and support initiatives.

The data was collected through guided individual interviews with foreign students from various disciplines who are currently enrolled at a German university, the University of Paderborn, and were neither born in Germany nor have learnt German as their mother tongue.

The results underline the positive effect of increased contact with the German language and emphasize the beneficial role of integration into German culture [1] for a successful language learning process. Challenges encompass the intricate structure of the German language, social impediments, and obstacles in assimilating into the higher education system.

Recommendations and suggestions for prospective international students include entail enhancing their proficiency in the German language prior to commencing their studies enabling them to actively engage in the study program and successfully cope with everyday life. The introduction of intercultural courses, preparation, and follow-up workshops as well as continuous support through language courses and online tools are suggested as action steps.

The outlook for further research endeavors focuses on understanding the reasons for low participation in support services and aims to comprehensively integrate the perspectives of teachers and university resources.

Keywords: Language Learning; Study Abroad; Opportunities and Obstacles

Introduction

Learning the German language is crucial for international students coming to Germany from abroad [2]. This is since many academic programs in Germany are conducted in German. Proficiency in the language is essential for understanding lectures, participating in discussions, and completing assignments effectively. Beyond academic settings, knowledge of German is indispensable for managing everyday tasks such as grocery shopping, navigating public transportation, and communicating with locals. It enhances students' independence and overall quality of life during their stay in Germany. Moreover, proficiency in German facilitates social integration within the university community and broader society. International students face

differences in educational systems and expectations. Listening skills are becoming important in lectures and maybe the professors' use of humor and of the implemented examples is different as at home [3-5]. Also, the quantity of reading in seminars, the writing styles, class participation and communication styles as well as the needed vocabulary can lead to challenges [3-5].

The number of students from abroad has risen continuously over the last ten years in Germany [6]. In the winter semester 2022/2023, students from abroad accounted for around 16% of all students at universities in Germany [6]. This increase can be observed not only in Germany but throughout Europe [7]. This increases the relevance of the attention paid to this group

of students [8]. There are numerous and varied reasons for students to study abroad, such as political and economic reasons. As countries around the world are working increasingly closely together at all levels, such as business, politics and education, the relevance of preparing the upcoming generations for this interconnected world is growing [8-10]. By studying abroad, students hope to improve their career opportunities [8, 11] or plan to transition into the labor market of the host country to live there long-term [8]. This is also linked to academic reasons. Students take the opportunity to study at a highly regarded university abroad [11] to have a positive effect on their career and labor market opportunities. However, a period abroad during their studies can not only increase labor market opportunities but also strengthen students' motivation to pursue further academic paths in their home country [12]. This implies that it also students' motivation to pursue additional academic endeavors.

Another frequently cited reason for studying abroad is to develop and grow as a person [8,12]. The mere decision to live abroad for a period to study can boost young people's self-confidence as they make their own decision to embark on this experience [12]. By dealing with the confrontation of unfamiliar circumstances, students often gain confidence and independence during their time abroad [13]. Students learn to deal with uncertainties, not to be afraid of them and develop a healthy curiosity [14]. They get to know themselves better because they are on their own a lot during this time [12]. They must navigate decisions independently, free from the influence of friends or family, leading to potentially dramatic shifts in their previous lifestyle. Students even expect to change their lifestyle, i.e. their eating and drinking habits as well as their everyday life and adapt to the new circumstances abroad [15].

Furthermore, a pivotal aspect involves learning across various domains of life. Students assume that they will learn a lot, as a longer stay abroad is seen as something special [13]. The nature of the learning experience is unique and cannot be experienced in any other way [12]. Study abroad programs also increase an individual's cognition and cultural networking [13]. Familiarization with the culture of the host country is a key factor [11]. According to Agar [16], culture is not something that people have, but something that is between them; it differs between individuals and groups. Students look forward to the new culture, its festivals, and special occasions [17]. The development of intercultural competencies is seen as necessary by both students and university staff [9], as it is necessary in such an interconnected world as we experience today. Studying abroad inevitably provides exposure to other cultures, languages, and people. Already in Kinginger [18] pointed out that "Research demonstrates that study abroad can have a positive impact on every domain of language competence, and that it is particularly helpful for the development of abilities related to social interaction." [18].

Many students also hope to make new friends [9,19]. However, these encounters are different from those they are used to in their

home country. Intercultural competence is about dealing with these new encounters, recognizing the differences to one's background and at the same time understanding and acknowledging them [20]. It enables people to better perceive their environment and to be open and curious about the circumstances and differences [7,17].

Language is closely linked to the culture of a country and language serves as a vehicle for expressing cultural values, beliefs, and norms. This is since language contains unique cultural concepts, idioms, and expressions and that it evolves within specific historical and social contexts. Language and culture are deeply intertwined. Learning a foreign language inevitably requires a direct or indirect engagement with the associated culture [21]. Many students hope to improve their language skills in the host country [13,14,19,22]. Despite the increasing number of courses offered in English, around 27% of students from abroad were enrolled on a purely German-language degree program in the 2020/2021 winter semester in Germany [23].

Language acquisition is seen as one of the key elements for successful study abroad, as it enables communication with locals, establishes a connection to the culture [13] and ultimately ensures that students pass their university courses [8]. Studies usually focus on the development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills [24]. Students employ various strategies to develop and hone these skills, including watching films or series in the local language or listening to music, memorizing words from dictionaries, contacting locals, living with locals, reading newspapers, or summarizing lecture content [25]. In 2009 Kinginger also stated that learning a language in the country where the language is spoken ensures faster acquisition of speaking speed, formal expressions, and fluency [24]. Reasons for this can be the immersive environment in a foreign country, the authentic practice in combination with immediate feedback as well as the exposure of the learners to the cultural context. Indeed, all these factors are directly linked to experiential learning.

The same applies to the development of their communication skills. Language learning is a complex process, as it takes place both consciously and unconsciously [13]. Students at a university abroad develop communicative competence better than in a pure teaching-learning setting in their home country, as they learn the ability to adapt their language style to environments and interlocutors [24]. Even if there can be several language styles in situations these must first be understood and learnt [26]. During their time abroad, students encounter a multitude of situations, including university activities, leisure pursuits, events both within and outside the university, living arrangements, and often, employment and experiences at a workplace. These diverse scenarios expose them to a range of people and topics, enriching their cultural and educational experiences. The environment in which the language is learnt has a significant influence on language learning. The language learning process depends on the learner's social environment [13]. If the social environment is open and

constructive towards the learners, this has a positive effect on the language learning process. In addition, any opportunity to speak the local language has a motivating effect and strengthens the bond with the host country [13]. On the contrary, the switch by locals to English as a lingua franca can have a demotivating effect, as students from abroad want to practice their language skills in the local language [27]. Over time, such ups and downs are to be expected; progress and regression will be recognizable, as these are part of the process [13].

When learning a language, not only cognitive abilities change but also the identity characteristics of the person [19,13,27,16,28]. Thus, speaking the language being learnt can feel foreign, whereas speaking the mother tongue can feel like a return to the original identity [13].

This is one of the many challenges faced by students abroad [8]. Although students gain a lot during this time, they lose habits, security, friends, family, food, drink, and hobbies, which can be perceived as a loss of identity [19]. They must first learn to deal with this loss. Students from abroad often have difficulties integrating into the host country and familiarizing themselves with the new culture [27]. Foreign languages, dealing with foreign culture and building a social network are among the greatest challenges [13]. This may be due to a lack of language skills. Language seems to be the key element of these three variables, as language acquisition is also part of the culture, and this can be understood more deeply with language skills from the host country ([13]. An essential part of culture is food [13]. The culinary culture of a country reveals a lot about the people, their traditions, preferences, and origins. In Germany for example culinary and food culture is characterized by its rich diversity, hearty dishes, and regional specialties. Traditional German cuisine varies significantly across different regions, reflecting the country's diverse history and cultural influences. It becomes difficult for students from abroad if the food culture of the host country is contrary to that of their home country. Then the daily intake of food can become an additional stress factor [13,14]. However, the more they discuss and understand food culture, the easier cultural integration becomes [13]. The same applies to building social relationships with students from the host country, because if the local language is understood and spoken, communication is easier, barriers can be overcome, and friendships can be made [13]. Fostering social connections with local students becomes easier when one understands and speaks the local language.

However, especially at the beginning, students from abroad are often isolated, which can have a negative impact on their well-being and mental state [19]. Not only are they alone in a foreign environment, but they also must take care of organizational matters such as accommodation, facilities, and course registrations in another language [19]. They are under additional pressure as they want to maintain social contacts at home and at the same time make new contacts, which can continue throughout

their stay [19]. In addition, homesickness increases the further away the home country is from the host country and tends to persist throughout the stay [19]. This emphasizes the relevance of building a social network. It can often be observed that strong and close friendships tend to form between students of the same foreign origin and not between students from abroad and local students. Bochner et al. [19] already established this in 1985. [20] and [13] came to similar conclusions. Particularly at the beginning, students cling to the familiar [12,30,31]. If there are no positive experiences with local people, students from abroad remain alone or take refuge in groups of the same origin [28]. However, it has been proven that contact with local students is a decisive factor for language acquisition and thus also for successful study abroad [31]. As soon as cultural differences are overcome and students find common ground, a social network can be established [31]. Contacts are most easily made outside the university, such as in bars, clubs, at sports or at various events, as these places are less formal and therefore less pressure is exerted by students from abroad [23]. If integration into the new social environment is successful, the study program is more likely to be successful [32].

In terms of studying, the local language can be particularly challenging in university courses, as these usually require a higher linguistic level to be understood [32]. The language level required by the host university is usually not sufficient to be able to follow the courses adequately [8]. Students from abroad are initially unfamiliar with the German higher education system, which makes their study requirements less favorable than those of German students [32]. They neither know about formal aspects, such as management systems or student organizations, nor about informal aspects, such as the interaction between teaching staff and students [32]. These information gaps lead to confusion, especially at the beginning of the stay abroad.

It has become evident that that while there are numerous opportunities for students who decided to study abroad is offset by at least as many challenges that they are confronted with in the host country. Consequently, an increasing number of students are dropping out of their degree programs. Around half of the students on a bachelor's program abroad who were unable to overcome the challenges decided to drop out of their studies in Germany in the 2020 graduation year [33]. Since language acquisition ensures both social integration within and outside the university as well as success in the degree program and success in the degree program leads to graduation [8], it seems important to review the language acquisition of students from abroad as well as possible support services offered by host universities in Germany.

Against this background, this article addresses the following questions:

- *What are the opportunities, challenges and obstacles to language acquisition that arise for international students while they are studying at a university in Germany?*

- *How should support measures for language acquisition at universities in Germany be organised and structured so that both future and current international students can successfully complete their studies?*

This article presents a study that analyzed the opportunities and obstacles and the language acquisition of students from abroad during their studies at a university in Germany. This analysis serves as a basis for deriving specific support programs. The students participating in the study have a migration background, which means “[...] they themselves or at least one parent [was] not born with German citizenship [...]” [34]. As the article focuses on their individual experiences, the opportunities, obstacles, and support services are derived from the perspective of this group of students themselves. After presenting the study’s methodology and key findings, the research questions are finally answered. This is followed by a discussion section, an outlook, and a summary.

Methodology

In this text qualitative research is understood according to the focus of Tenny / Brannan and Brannan who state about Moser / Korstjens “Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems” [35] and add “Qualitative research gathers participants’ experiences, perceptions, and behavior. It answers the how’s and whys instead of how many or how much. [36]. Qualitative Research an evaluation can be used regarding acceptance research, implementation, and impact related research [37] and can focus on tasks, projects, measures as well as on inputs, processes, outputs outcomes [37]. In this study we focus on attitude measurement concerning the acceptance and implementation of studies for international students and how this is related to the acquisition of German language.

Flick et al. [38] point out that “Qualitative research aims to describe the world’s ‘from the inside out,’ from the perspective of the acting individuals. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of social realities and to draw attention

to processes, patterns of interpretation, and structural characteristics.” [38] In this study qualitative interviews were utilized as a methodological instrument to delve deeply into the context of the formulated research questions. Specifically, guided interviews were conducted in which the interviewer asked the participants structured questions. The interviews were conducted in German. This methodological decision was made to facilitate personal communication, which enabled in-depth insights into the individual experiences of the interviewees and crystallized different student perspectives. A total of eight interviews were undertaken, six of which were conducted in person and two online via video call. Qualitative research does not focus on representative numbers but on deep insights into specific cases, individual experiences, and ideas [39].

The interview participants represented a balanced gender distribution, consisting of four female and four male participants. The age range was from 21 to 30 years old. The geographical origin of the interviewees included Germany (4), Iran (1), Cameroon (2) and Turkey (1). The diversity of mother tongues is reflected in Bosnian (1), German (2), French (2), Croatian (1), Persian (1) and Turkish (1). In terms of their academic orientation, the students surveyed are enrolled at the University of Paderborn (Germany) and learn various languages such as German (4), English (1) and Spanish (3). The respondents are spread across bachelor’s degree programs, including Computer Science (1) and International Business Studies (3), as well as various master’s degree programs such as Management Information Systems (1), Industrial Engineering Mechanical Engineering (1) and Business Education (1).

This article centers on the acquisition of the German language by students who were neither born in Germany nor learnt German as a native language. As a result, the definition of migration background (as outlined above) is narrowed in this instance. Consequently, the findings of the study are confined to the interviews of four individuals who were not born in Germany and are learning German as a second language while studying at a university in Germany or because of these studies (Illustration 1).



Illustration 1: Origin of the interviewees [Iran (1), Cameroon (2), Turkey (1)].

Measuring instruments

The questionnaire serves as a written instrument for systematic data collection and consists of two main parts. The first part contains seven closed questions aimed at collecting basic data and information about the study background of the interviewees. These questions serve as an introduction to the interview. The second part of the questionnaire comprises 21 open questions specifically aimed at language acquisition during the study abroad programme, which were derived from the theory presented in the introduction. Among other things, participants were asked the questions *“What do you see as opportunities and obstacles in the ‘language learning’ process?”*, *“What are the biggest challenges for you when learning German?”*, *“What advice would you give to students from abroad who are planning to study in Germany?”* and *“What language support would you have liked to receive at the start of your studies?”*.

The combination of the first part with the closed questions and the second part with narrative elements leads us to semi-structured interviews, which usually have a set of core questions but allow flexibility for follow-up questions and exploration of specific topics in more depth. They strike a balance between standardization and flexibility. The narrative elements focus on the participants’ individual experiences, allowing them to narrate in their own words and providing rich, detailed data.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted in February / March 2024. The participants were invited by means of individual emails containing both the topic and the organisational details of the interview (such as date, time, location). The participants were chosen for this qualitative interview study based on criteria relevant to the research questions and objectives. These criteria include factors such as their personal experiences, perspectives, or backgrounds related to the topic under investigation. Additionally, participants are selected to ensure diversity and representativeness within the sample. Face-to-face interviews were assigned specific room numbers, while online participants received dial-in links for the virtual session.

In the face-to-face interviews, the participants were welcomed at the door of the prepared room, with an interviewer and a recorder present. After taking a seat, the interviewer began the interview by first introducing the background and the objective. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, and they were given the opportunity to stop the interview at any time. Finally, it was pointed out that they could ask questions at any time if they did not understand a question correctly. Then the seven questions from the first main part and then the 21 questions from the second part were asked by the person conducting the interview. At the end of the interview, the interviewer thanked them again, emphasised why the answers were so valuable and finally offered to be available at any time for further information regarding the research. The interviews were recorded following

consent, which was recorded in writing on site. The procedure in the online session was similar, but the declarations of consent were sent in advance by email and signed electronically.

Coding

Initially, the interviews underwent meticulous and careful transcription, converting spoken language into written form. Subsequently, after the transcription, the interviews were coded using a pre-existing categorisation system based on the literature research. During the data analysis, the transcribed interviews were read, and the individual quotes were colour-coded accordingly, which made it easier to subsequently assign the quotes to the category system. Further categories were added to the category system during the coding process. Following the categorisation, further independent coding was carried out by a second person.

Results

This results section outlines the primary findings derived from the four individual interviews. The interviews served to gain deeper insights into the interviewees’ individual experiences, perspectives, and attitudes towards language acquisition during their studies in Germany and the associated opportunities, challenges, and obstacles.

What opportunities arise for the ‘language learning’ process?

The participants emphasised the importance and highlighted the significance of engaging directly in the target language, expressing that is provided them with the opportunity to improve their language skills and become more confident in speaking German. Small group work is perceived as an effective method of improving language skills and exchanging ideas in a supportive environment. The interviewees emphasised that the increased contact with the German language, whether through more frequent conversations or participation in events, was perceived as beneficial for their learning process.

Furthermore, it is also described that participation in more events outside of the study programme and beyond the academic curriculum not only enables exposure to the language but also facilitates the integration into German culture and social structures. In this context, it is also emphasised that joint activities between students of foreign and German origin, such as dinners, intercultural evenings, and celebrations, are seen as opportunities to better understand not only the language but also the culture. Respondents generally emphasise and commonly underscore contact with native speakers and involvement in university life as opportunities and beneficial aspects in the language learning process.

To make it easier to start using the language, the interviewees described the acquisition of prior knowledge, for example, basic language skills, already in their home country as an opportunity. Working with books is seen as a supportive learning method to

reinforce grammar, vocabulary, and cultural aspects. Listening to podcasts, watching films in and/or with subtitles in the target language and memorising phrases are also considered effective methods for improving listening and speaking skills.

If a language course is attended in the host country, breaks between the language course units are recommended to enable in-depth processing of what has been learnt and to prevent possible fatigue in the 'language learning' process. Constructive feedback from teachers and learning partners is also perceived as an opportunity, as this would contribute to the learning success. In addition to that, such constructive feedback from teachers and peers is invaluable for improving and staying motivated while language learning.

What are the biggest challenges in learning German?

The interviewees are grappling with some common challenges encountered when learning German as a second language. The interviewees describe the structure of the German language as difficult. Grammar is very complex, and learners may have difficulties understanding and applying the numerous grammar rules. The perceived complexity of German grammar, especially its abundant rules and exceptions, can indeed be intimidating for learners. The correct formation of sentences according to the rules would be a hurdle. In practice, oral communication in the form of speaking the language is challenging, especially when lecturers speak quickly and colloquially in lectures. This is complex in contrast to the slower and simpler use of language in German courses. Understanding spoken language, especially in lectures, is also a challenge due to the rapid pace and specialised vocabulary. In general, the interviewees describe the understanding of lecture content and following the lecturers as impaired by language barriers or different teaching approaches. Here, the variety of teaching methods can hinder the learning process which contrasts with the discussion in pedagogy to use a broad range and variety of teaching methods [40].

At the outset and a structural perspective, international students find the higher education system particularly perplexing, especially if they are unfamiliar with its structure and expectations. This lack of understanding can lead to confusion and uncertainty as they navigate their academic career.

This would also become apparent in the structures of examinations and written tests. Indeed, differences in the study system and academic culture can present a significant adjustment for students. Adapting to new methods of learning, assessment styles, classroom dynamics, and academic expectations can be a notable change for students transitioning to a new educational environment. Furthermore, from an individual perspective, respondents also described the lack of information about student organisations, such as student councils, which could affect integration into social life, the study environment and finding study partners.

What obstacles arise for the 'language learning' process?

In addition, the interviewees also described obstacles and outlined various hurdles stemming from emotional barriers, social dynamics, a perceived lack of interest from German students, limited opportunities for interaction and negative associations with the German language. Emotional barriers, such as the shame of speaking German, the feeling of not being comfortable and dissatisfaction in the host country is crucial for the international students. Within social interaction and group dynamics, too many group members lead to a loss of motivation. In the beginning, the interviewees were mainly in contact with students who were also learning German for the first time, which hindered their language-learning process. In addition, there was initially a subjective feeling that German students did not enjoy communicating with foreign students. The international students recognised a reluctance among German students to engage with foreigners resulting in little contact. Furthermore, the absence of extracurricular courses for foreign students outside their degree program restricted opportunities to engage with native speakers, making it challenging to gauge language proficiency. It is therefore difficult to get feedback on one's own language level. From an individual perspective, consciously deciding against a language can also lead to additional demotivation. This means that individually, opting out of language use due to feelings of isolation or discomfort further dampened motivation of some of the international students. What advice would you give to students from abroad who are planning to study in Germany about language acquisition?

The students surveyed strongly recommend improving their German language proficiency in their home country and raising them to an adequate sufficient level. This is proposed to reduce potential obstacles and enable a seamless transition to university. A minimum level of B2 or C1 should be aimed to ensure an efficient start to the degree programme and prevent potential problems. This is not only regarding the successful completion of German courses at German universities but also to enable unrestricted participation in everyday activities such as shopping and the use of public transport. A more advanced language proficiency ensures that students grasp complex processes more effectively and can pose precise questions when needed. Furthermore, this also facilitates integration through the opportunity to socialise and make friends. For international students it is essential to be part of social activities, to build relationships with others, as well as to form connections and bonds with people.

What language support would you have liked at the start of your studies?

Students would like to see an increase in the number of extra-curricular events, especially interactive ones, to promote personal contact between students and teachers and create a supportive learning environment. Thus, the expansion of cultural and social events could provide an opportunity to assimilate into the local

community more effectively. An introduction to the organisation of the university, information events and training on university platforms would help students to use the systems efficiently. Special events or courses that offer an introduction to the German political system to assist international students in better orienting themselves within the social context were also mentioned by one interviewee as an offer of support.

Discussion

The findings underscore the importance of communication and that speaking directly in the target language is seen as a significant opportunity to improve language skills and enhancing language proficiency. Students eagerly wait for any opportunity to use and practise the local language. In particular, the effectiveness of small group work is highlighted as it creates a supportive environment an atmosphere. It facilitates and encourages language skill exchange. Increased exposure to the German language through conversations and participation in events, is viewed as beneficial and advantageous to the learning process, while integration into German culture and social structures also playing a positive important role.

Participation in events offers benefits for the language learning of international students like increased Exposure to the target language in authentic contexts, practicing of speaking skills by engaging in conversations and interactions, vocabulary expansion and cultural understanding. In addition to that, the networking opportunities at events can foster connections that can support their language learning. Joint collaborative activities among students from different backgrounds are recognized as opportunities to a better understanding of not only the language but also culture. Moreover, the acquisition of prior knowledge in one's home country and the utilisation of various learning methods, including studying with books, listening to podcasts, and watching films, are identified as supporting factors and elements in the language learning process. These strategies within the language learning process, according to Oxford [26], are instrumental in language skill development.

The results describe the structural complexity of the German language as the greatest challenge when learning German, with students describing the demanding grammar as challenging. Difficulties also arise in oral communication, especially when lecturers speak quickly and colloquially in lectures. The speed and specialised vocabulary in lectures make it difficult to understand spoken language. Structural adjustments to the higher education system and academic culture pose further challenges. Individually, the lack of information about student organisations and the lack of integration into social life is perceived as a hindrance. They also experience rejection from locals, which makes it difficult to socialise and build a social network.

The interviewees highlighted emotional barriers such as shame and discomfort as obstacles in the process of language acquisition, especially in the context of using the language. Switching communication from German to English can be disheartening for learners who are eager to use and practice the language. Especially in group work contexts, English often becomes the default language of communication, further impacting motivation. Social dynamics, especially in groups, can lead to demotivation. Initially, students often experience limited interaction with native German speakers, which impairs the language-learning process. Additionally, consciously opting not to use the language due to feelings of isolation or discomfort exacerbates demotivation among learners. As advice for future students from abroad, the interviewees recommend improving their German language skills in their home country to ensure a smooth transition to university. A minimum level of B2 or C1 is considered necessary to participate efficiently in studies and cope with everyday activities. A higher language level not only facilitates academic studies but also promotes social integration.

Students express a desire for expanded extra-curricular events as support programmes at the start of their studies to promote personal contact between students and teaching staff and create a supportive learning environment. The social environment's approach to students' learning processes significantly influences this dynamic [13]. An open and constructive atmosphere is therefore essential. An introduction to the university organisation and training on university platforms are considered helpful. Additionally, special events or courses to introduce students to the German political system could provide international students with a better orientation in the social context.

These findings can be categorised in the literature and describe the need for action strategies. The implementation of cultural courses could serve as possible action steps. The previous results emphasise the importance of joint activities and cultural exchange and agree with [20] recommendation to create a joint offer for intercultural courses for international and local students. This is in line with the wishes of the respondents in this study, as they recognise the direct link between people and culture. Both student groups would benefit from this. International students would learn how to navigate social interactions in the host country while local students would learn how to interact with students from abroad. This could help alleviate feelings of isolation or rejection, as reported by the participants. Both groups of students will frequently meet other cultures in their professional lives, which is why taking part in such a course makes sense in the short and long term. Moreover, aside from intercultural interaction, students could deepen their understanding of each other and forge friendships. In terms of content and by coordinating topics of interest, the participants could enhance their motivation, as highlighted by one study participant. The course leader, lecturer, should always ensure a positive atmosphere which significantly impacts language acquisition, as evidenced by both literature and

studies. The course could also offer non-university events, such as going out together to bars, clubs, sporting events or other cultural venues, as the inhibition thresholds can be lowered in informal situations.

Dehmel et al. [10] usually highlight the lack of support programmes before, during and after a student placement. However, the provision of preparatory and follow-up workshops based on [13] idea of self-reflection and workshops before and after the sojourn could be seen as a valuable addition. Personal development occurs abroad due to special circumstances, which is seen as an opportunity [12,13]. Preparatory workshops could incorporate key elements and include the essential needs identified by the students from the study presented here, such as essential cultural aspects that could facilitate their integration, or preparation for the German higher education system so that students can experience an easier transition to studying abroad. Language preparation is also an essential aspect. The suggestion by Doyle et al. [11] for alternative language courses covering topics such as colloquial language, safety and cultural nuances could be considered as a suggestion for diversifying language learning programmes. For example, proverbs, insults, important terms relating to safety and catcalling for protection could be used to create new incentives to learn the language [28]. Familiarisation with different language styles would also make the language learning process easier and could prevent irritation [27]. Such language courses should not only be offered before but also after and especially during studies abroad to ensure continuous support [6]. Breaks between courses should be taken regularly, as one person from the study emphasised, as breaks counteract exhaustion. This aligns with the suggestions of the participants, who would like to see regular applications and exercises throughout the course. Methods could be introduced in the language courses that students could use in the language learning process outside of their studies. Furthermore, online tools and exchanges with alumni can also be included as ideas in the discussion of effective resources for preparing to study abroad [11]. Providing information about university systems, organisations, and the dynamics of student-faculty interactions is essential to reduce initial challenges faced by students abroad. There is a need to focus on the interaction between students and teaching staff so that students are confronted with fewer irritations at the beginning of their stay abroad. This could also emphasise the role of mentoring and faculty members in providing support, as mentioned by Goldoni [28]. The relevance of this suggestion is reflected in the results of this study, as respondents would both like more contact with German speakers and would be happy to have a specific contact person to whom they could come with questions and problems at any time. In a small setting, barriers of shame due to low language confidence could be overcome, as emphasised by the participants in this study.

Follow-up workshops could be used for accompanying self-reflection by the students. Their experiences, such as their

favourite and most stressful moments, could be shared and reflected on together. They could share their perseverance strategies, motivational aspects, and best practice examples, thus providing prevention for future students. It could also help with the transition into the German labour market, which the study by Jungbauer-Gans & Gottburgsen [32] emphasised and the study by Pineda et al. [8] highlighted as a realistic project. This could be further linked to the findings on structural barriers and integration into social life during studies and provide an opportunity for students to assert themselves in the German labour market after graduation.

Outlook

This article has shown that despite existing support programmes for students from abroad at universities in Germany, there is a need to review, supplement and restructure these programmes because several challenges still occur for international students. There is an urgent need for action, particularly in view of the steadily increasing numbers of international students. It is essential to provide widespread information about these programmes and to create incentives for students to take advantage of them on an ongoing basis. The findings of Pineda et al. [8] on the low utilisation of support services by international students and the findings from the interviews in this study that students would like more support services through events represent new research potential. The reasons for the low willingness to participate and the possibilities for improvement could be researched further. It could also be considered to what extent such events need to be organised, communicated, and supported to provide the greatest added value for international students. It would be interesting to explore how such workshops could help students overcome challenges, including language barriers. Here the elements of non-formal language learning can be considered for language acquisition. Such non-formal learning occurs outside of traditional educational settings, such as classrooms or structured language courses and is here initiated by the events. At this point, it would also be interesting to see how a combination of non-formal and formal learning could be created and if this would lead to improvements in language acquisition. For example, such event could be combined with an accompanying language course. During the semester this course may affect the perceived opportunities, the actual language acquisition, and the motivation of the students. It would also be worth investigating whether digital solution formats such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) or learning platforms would be accepted as an accompanying support programme and would contribute to students' language acquisition.

There is also a need to review the necessary competencies of lecturers, tutors and mentors who offer support services. Be it intercultural courses, language, preparatory, accompanying or follow-up courses, they all require competent teachers so that students can successfully complete language learning processes

and remain motivated throughout. Motivation appears to be one of the key factors for students and their language acquisition, both from the literature and from the interviews in the study presented here. Further research is needed to better understand this factor and to consciously utilise it in the future to counteract demotivation in the language learning process. The teacher's perspective must also be considered for a holistic view of the teaching-learning interaction in the language learning process. Further research projects could work out this perspective and compare it with the students' perspective to broaden the perspective on the topic.

As a third instance, the university and its possibilities for improving support services for students from abroad could be analysed. In particular, the expansion of monetary and human resources should be considered.

Finally, it should be noted that this study only considered the perspective of a small group of students and that further research could reveal new perspectives.

Conclusion

Conducting qualitative interviews proved to be an effective methodological tool for gaining detailed insights into the language acquisition process of international students. The guideline-based interviews enabled personal communication, which in turn revealed the students' diverse perspectives. The finding from the interviews highlights the importance of direct interaction with the German language, with small group work and increased participation in events being particularly emphasised as beneficial for language acquisition. The importance of cultural integration was also emphasised, with joint activities seen as the key to better understanding and integration. The biggest challenges lay in the structural complexity of the German language and the difficulties in adapting to the German university system. Above all, emotional barriers such as shame and discomfort, coupled with a lack of social interaction, were also identified as an obstacle to language acquisition. The students recommended that future international students acquire German language skills in their home country and aim for a higher language level. According to the participants, support programmes should focus more on interactive events, cultural exchange, and more effective integration into the university system at the start of their studies. The discussion of the results led to recommendations for action, including the introduction of cultural courses, the organisation of preparatory and follow-up workshops and the diversification of language learning opportunities. These measures could potentially improve integration, social interaction, and language acquisition. The involvement of teachers and the study of the university as a third instance were suggested as potential approaches for future research projects. The insights gained in this study form a basis for the further development of customised support services for international students to sustainably improve their experience in the context of language acquisition and integration into the

German higher education system.

References

1. Beutner M (2007) Die Förderung interkulturellen Verständnis in der beruflichen Bildung. In Antor, H.: Fremde Kulturen verstehen – fremde Kulturen lehren. Theorie und Praxis der Vermittlung interkultureller Kompetenz. pp: 20-235
2. Fintiba (2024) Why you should know German when you are in Germany.
3. Berman R, Cheng L (2001) English academic language skills: Perceived difficulties by undergraduate and graduate students, and their academic achievement. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 4(1): 25-40.
4. Holmes P (2004) Negotiating differences in learning and intercultural communication: Ethnic Chinese students in a New Zealand university. *Business Communication Quarterly* 67: 294-307.
5. Lee DS (1997) What teachers can do to relieve problems identified by international students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 70: 93-100.
6. Janson M (2023) How high is the proportion of foreign students? Statista.
7. OECD (2024) Students - International student mobility - OECD Data.
8. Pineda J, Kercher J, Falk S, Thies T, Hilmi Yildirim H, et al. (2022) Guiding international students in Germany to academic success: Results and recommendations for action from the SeSaBa project.
9. Anderson PH, Lawton L, Rexeisen R, Hubbard AC (2006) Short-term study abroad and intercultural sensitivity: A pilot study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30(4): 457-469.
10. Dehmel A, Li A, Sloane PFE (2011) Intercultural competence development in higher education study abroad programmes: A good practice example. *Intercultural Journal* 10(15): 11-36.
11. Doyle S, Gendall P, Tait C, Meyer L, Hoek J, et al. (2008) Research project on International Student Exchanges - Sending our Students Overseas. Victoria University of Wellington.
12. Alred G, Byram M (2006) British Students in France: 10 Years On. In M Byram & A Feng (Ed.) *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice. Multilingual Matters* Pp: 210-231.
13. Pearson-Evans A (2006) Recording the Journey: Diaries of Irish Students in Japan. In M. Byram & A. Feng (Ed.), *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice. Multilingual Matters* pp: 38-63.
14. Jackson J (2006) Ethnographic Pedagogy and Evaluation in Short-Term Study Abroad. In M. Byram & A. Feng (Ed.), *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice, Multilingual Matters* pp: 134-156.
15. Byram M, Feng A (2006) Introduction. In M Byram, A Feng (Ed) *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice* pp: 1-10.
16. Agar M (1994) The Intercultural Frame. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 18(2): 221-237.
17. Glavee-Geo R, Mørkeset Å (2016) Going Global: Factors Influencing Norwegian Students' Intention to Study Abroad. In T Wu & V Naidoo (Ed) *International Marketing of Higher Education* pp: 191-229.
18. Kinginger C (2011) Enhancing Language Learning in Study Abroad. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 31: 58-73.
19. Bochner S, Hutnik N, Furnham A (1985) The Friendship Patterns of Overseas and Host Students in an Oxford Student Residence. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 125(6): 689-694.

20. Ayano M (2006) Japanese Students in Britain. In M Byram & A Feng (Ed.) *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice*, pp: 11-37.
21. Grosch C, Hany E (2009) Development of cognitive components of intercultural understanding. In A Hu, M Byram (Ed.), *Intercultural competence and foreign language learning. Models, empiricism, assessment* pp: 87-103.
22. Witte A (2009) Reflections on an (inter)cultural progression in the development of intercultural competence in the foreign language learning process. In A Hu, M Byram (Ed) *Intercultural competence and foreign language learning. Models, empiricism, assessment* pp: 49-66.
23. Tarp G (2006) Student Perspectives in Short-Term Study Programmes Abroad: A Grounded Theory Study. In M. Byram & A. Feng (Ed.), *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice, Multilingual Matters* pp: 157-187.
24. Reifenberg D, Philipps V (2023) International student mobility in Germany: Report on the results of the first Benchmark International University (BintHo) in the winter semester 2020/21.
25. Kinginger C (2009) *Language Learning and Study Abroad. A Critical Reading of Research*. Palgrave Macmillan.
26. Oxford RL (2002) Language Learning Strategies in a Nutshell: Update and ESL Suggestions. In JC Richards & WA Renandya (Ed) *Methodology in Language Teaching. An Anthology of Current Practice* pp: 124-132.
27. Taguchi N (2016) Learning Speech Style in Japanese Study Abroad: Learners' Knowledge of Normative Use and Actual Use. In RA van Compernelle & J McGregor (Ed) *Authenticity, Language, and Interaction in Second Language Contexts* pp: 62-108.
28. Goldoni F (2015) Preparing Students for Studying Abroad. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 15(4): 1-20.
29. Compernelle RA van (2016) Sociolinguistic Authenticity and Classroom L2 Learners: Production, Perception and Metapragmatics. In RA van Compernelle & JMc Gregor (Ed) *Authenticity, Language, and Interaction in Second Language Contexts* pp: 61-81. *Multilingual Matters*.
30. Burnett C, Gardner J (2006) The One Less Travelled By...: The Experience of Chinese Students in a UK University. In M Byram, A Feng (Ed) *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice, Multilingual Matters Ltd*. pp: 64-90.
31. Papatsiba V (2006) Study Abroad and Experiences of Cultural Distance and Proximity: French Erasmus Students. In M. Byram & A. Feng (Ed.), *Living and Studying Abroad. Research and Practice, Multilingual Matters Ltd* pp: 108-133.
32. Jungbauer-Gans M, Gottburgsen A (2021) Migration, mobility, and social inequality in higher education. In M Jungbauer-Gans & A. Gottburgsen (Ed) *Higher Education Research and Science Studies. Migration, mobility, and social inequality in higher education* pp: 1-26. Springer VS.
33. Heublein U, Hutzsch C, Schmelzer R (2022) The development of student drop-out rates in Germany. DZHW Brief. Preliminary online publication.
34. Federal Statistical Office (2020) Migration background: Definition.
35. Moser A, Korstjens I (2017) Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 1: Introduction *Eur J Gen Pract* 23(1): 271-273.
36. Tenny S, Brannan JM, Brannan GD (2022) *Qualitative Study*. In: StatPearls. Treasure Island (FL): Stat Pearls Publishing.
37. Beutner M (2018). *Berufsbildungsevaluation. Ein Lehrbuch für Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogen, Studierende des Lehramts an berufsbildenden Schulen sowie Theorie und Praxis*. 2. Aufl. Köln 2018.
38. Flick U, Von Kardorff E, Steinke I (2000) *Qualitative Forschung - Ein Handbuch*. Reinbeck.
39. Beutner M (2024) *Qualitative Sozialforschung. In: Methoden qualitativer Sozialforschung. Evaluation und qualitative Forschung. Materials*. Paderborn 2024.
40. Cameron L (2017) How learning designs, teaching methods and activities differ by discipline in Australian universities. *Journal of Learning Design* 10(2): 69-84.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: [10.19080/OAJELS.2024.01.555569](https://doi.org/10.19080/OAJELS.2024.01.555569)

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers
will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission

<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>