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Language, Agency, and Intercultural Encounters: The Perspectives of Development Volunteers' Receiving Partners in Jalisco, Mexico

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Abstract

This article examines the involvement of local actors in international volunteering settings, exploring the perspectives of receiving partners of the German weltwärts program in Jalisco, Mexico. It concentrates on local partners' assistance with volunteers' local language learning, which tends to be commonly envisioned as a spontaneously acquired by-product of the volunteering sojourns and overlooked as an intentional and collective effort. The study also provides insight into the significance the respondents attribute to language-related activities in shaping volunteers' and their own positioning during the sojourns. By supporting volunteers' Spanish acquisition and reflecting on this process, the receiving partners acknowledge themselves as active organizers of volunteering spaces; they exert agency in a context of postcolonial assumptions that still shape the institutional architecture of development volunteering programs and tend to portray the local hosts as passive aid receivers. Their agentive perspective enables a nuanced quotidian reflection on volunteering as an intercultural encounter, highlighting the essential role of language in it.

Keywords

agency, intercultural encounter, international volunteering,
local language learning, receiving partners

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1. Introduction

International development volunteering programs, also known as volunteering for development (V4D), provide government-sponsored volunteer placements in the Global South, mostly to young adults from the Global North. The German *weltwärts* program, founded in 2007 by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), focuses on young adults aged 18 to 28—with average sojourns of 12 months. Civil society organizations in Germany arrange such assignments in partnership with organizations in the Global South, with the support of a governmental coordination office. While rooted in the tradition of development aid, the program emphasizes the value of intercultural encounters and mutuality as part of its institutional discourse and practice (Haas, 2020). In contrast to the growing trend of voluntourism, characterized by privately organized, mostly short-term assignments with little or no educational support (Geis & Lipsch, 2020), the program claims to promote global learning and exchange "which involves volunteers being integrated into an organized, educational framework and living and working with local people" (*weltwärts,* 2024:1).

In this article, I focus on the *weltwärts* program's presence in the state of Jalisco, located in western Mexico, examining the contributions of the program's local partners. In the V4D context, the local (or receiving) partners encompass a diverse array of actors, including the staff of the organizations that host volunteers, the organizations' beneficiaries, community members, as well as volunteers' mentors and host families. Despite these stakeholders' decisive role, empirical research on their contributions remains scarce, as V4D literature has traditionally focused on volunteers and their motivations, experiences, and learning outcomes (Haas, 2020). Only recently has local partners' participation begun gaining attention (e.g., Boylan et al., 2020; Repenning, 2016; Tiessen, 2018), though many studies prioritize their motivations, experiences, and perceptions over a deeper analysis of their agency, practices, and efforts (e.g., Chen, 2021; Tiessen et al., 2018; Vorstermans & McDonald, 2022).

I examine the role of *weltwärts*' local partners as facilitators of volunteers' intercultural learning experiences, focusing on local language acquisition. I explore how they actively design and promote informal language-learning environments. Their engagement as resourceful Spanish language facilitators challenges persistent postcolonial notions that tend to position local actors as passive aid recipients and

envision local language learning as an automatically acquired by-product of the volunteering experience. The notions of receiving organizations as "stage settings", where the volunteering unfolds on its own (Kontzi, 2015; Haas, 2020), and of local language learning as spontaneous "immersion" into a foreign culture (Doerr, 2014; Ryan & Mercer, 2011; Schedel, 2022) still influence the understanding of volunteering experiences and obscure the proactive role of local actors.

The article also sheds light on the local stakeholders' reflexivity related to language and identity. They share the insight that the transformative potential of volunteering spaces is strongly connected to the process of local language learning, both as a practical tool and as an element of cultural expression. Thus, language becomes central to their quotidian examination of difference and belonging, which offers the possibility of intercultural openness (Baker, 2012), as they delve into the apparent certainty of boundaries and positions (Holliday, 2022; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

The study draws on qualitative data collected as part of a larger investigation into the role of the *weltwärts* program's receiving partners in Jalisco, Mexico. Between April and July 2021, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with employees and beneficiaries of partner organizations, volunteer mentors, and host families. The collected transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes related to local stakeholders' volunteer-related activities. During the initial thematic analysis, language-related issues emerged as a prominent theme, enabling an inductive exploration of language as a central category, highlighting identity issues, volunteer language-learning processes, and the complexities of power relations among stakeholders. These three deeply interrelated themes are at the center of this inquiry.

I begin by outlining the previous research on the role and agency of local partners in international development volunteering spaces. Next, I introduce the research participants, outline the data collection process, and describe the analysis method. The results section is organized into three subsections, each addressing a key theme of this study: 1) the language-learning support practices and insights of local partners; 2) the quotidian negotiation of stakeholders' positioning in language-related situations; 3) the local partners' reflections on the significance of language for the volunteers' and their own evolving sense of belonging and self-understanding in the context of volunteering as an intercultural encounter. The article concludes with a discussion of the local partners' agency as reflexive participants and active organizers of volunteering environments.

2. Local partners in volunteering for development programs: an underexplored agency

Volunteering for development (V4D) programs, such as *Norec* (Norway), *ICS* (Great Britain), or *weltwärts* (Germany), is typically organized by NGOs from the Global North in partnership with organizations in the Global South, frequently with public funding support (Fischer & Haas, 2020). They offer a wide range of assignments—from short-term placements lasting a few weeks, to commitments extending up to two years. While many of these programs cater to skilled participants, others are designed for young people with no specialized skills (Lough & Tiessen, 2018). The term "volunteering for development" encompasses such activities, as nearly all North-South programs—in some way—reference development as a discourse and practice (Crewe & Axelby, 2013).

During the last few decades, volunteering for development has faced growing criticism for being embedded in ongoing relations of post- or neo-colonialism (Crush, 1995; Eriksson Baaz, 2005; Kapoor, 2008; Ziai, 2015). In response, several programs have emphasized cultural exchange, mutuality, and the educational aspects of volunteering. For *weltwärts*, "in addition to the contribution to the project, global learning and encounters stand in the foreground" (*weltwärts*, 2024:1). The program's *encounters at eye level* motto seeks to encapsulate *weltwärts*' egalitarian aspirations and interest in fostering volunteers' intercultural competence.

Nonetheless, asymmetric power structures remain prevalent throughout various dimensions of the program. A notable issue, often criticized as a manifestation of postcolonial power imbalance, is the systematic exclusion of Southern stakeholders from key decision-making processes (Haas, 2020). Actors from the Global North are predominantly institutionalized in roles such as program designers, educators, or helpers, while partner organizations in the Global South are largely confined to the passive roles of receiving and implementing directives (Kontzi, 2015).

Empirical V4D research has tended to mirror the structural asymmetries. Most inquiries into international volunteering spaces have traditionally centered on the motivations and experiences of the volunteers themselves, implicitly presenting the receiving organizations as "stage settings" for volunteering (Haas, 2020). Only recently has there been a growing interest in the perspectives of receiving partners, though many studies prioritize their experiences and perceptions over a deeper analysis of their agency, practices, and efforts (Boylan et al., 2020; Repenning, 2016;

Tiessen, 2018). Several inquiries have made important strides toward recognizing the hosts' role by focusing on the relationship between hosts and volunteers (Tiessen et al., 2018; Vorstermans & McDonald, 2022) and on the hosts' practical contributions (Fuchs, 2020; Jabłońska-Bayro & Haas, 2024). However, we still fall short of thoroughly exploring the hosts' agency, both as reflexive participants and active organizers of volunteering environments.

Drawing on classical articulations of the structure-agency debate (Giddens, 1984), agency can be broadly defined as the capacity to act, make choices, and influence one's circumstances, even when constrained by institutional norms, power dynamics, or cultural hierarchies. Individuals and groups negotiate their agency through fine-grained, situated meaning-making practices embedded in a broader context of power asymmetries (Hall, 1997). Such is the case for the subjects of this study, who interact in specific everyday scenarios that, nevertheless, can only be fully understood by considering the far-reaching cultural, political, and economic repercussions of European colonialism (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000) that still define the institutional framework of V4D programs.

The reconceptualization of V4D experiences as venues for global learning and encounters has shifted the research focus onto learning processes. Again, the volunteers' perspective has prevailed (Fee & Gray, 2013; Mueller, 2020; Scheinert et al., 2019; Tiessen et al., 2021), but recent attention has turned to the learning opportunities of local stakeholders (Viquez, 2018; Chen, 2021). Many such studies represent local participants as learners rather than active organizers of learning environments. This article, in contrast, explores the agency of local stakeholders as facilitators of intercultural learning experiences for volunteers, centering on local language acquisition in informal settings (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

Local language learning in the context of sojourns abroad is often linked to the notion of immersion, which suggests firsthand spontaneous contact with the host language (Doerr, 2014; Schedel, 2022). Unlike classroom instruction, immersion is believed to facilitate a quasi-automatic and effortless acquisition of the local language (Ryan & Mercer, 2011). Moreover, the immersion discourse emphasizes the difference between the host society, imagined as homogeneous and immobile, and the cosmopolitan learners who learn about and through the exoticized cultural "other" (Doerr, 2012). Framed as learning-by-doing, it places agency on the learners, obscuring the proactive role of the local actors.

Both the notion of receiving organizations as "stage settings", where volunteering unfolds on its own (Haas, 2020; Kontzi, 2015) and the concept of on-site language learning as immersion, carry the risk of reinforcing postcolonial binaries that divide "enlightened" cosmopolitan doers/givers from "inexpert" provincial receivers. The clear power imbalance presupposed in such notions, as well as their inherent essentialism, hinders the exploration of volunteering contexts as dynamic spaces where the positioning among those involved may be intersubjectively complex and nuanced (Holliday, 2022; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018) and where instances of genuine intercultural communication and mutuality may occur (Everingham, 2015). Examining local partners' perspectives on their language-related efforts and experiences offers a privileged venue for delving into their often-underrated agency as language facilitators and organizers of volunteering spaces, thus allowing for a nuanced view of their role, their relationship with the volunteers, and their understanding of volunteering as an intercultural encounter.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Participants

This investigation is part of a broader qualitative study that explores the role of receiving partners in international volunteering contexts. The involvement of the *weltwärts* program's local partners in Jalisco, Mexico, serves as a case study. *Weltwärts* was launched in 2007 by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Its current institutional framework includes a coordination office, around 160 sending organizations, their partner organizations in approximately 60 countries, and thousands of volunteer placements in the Global South (Haas, 2020). The program is aimed at young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 with no specialized skills. Their assignments range from 6 to 24 months, with an average duration of 12 months. As for language requirements, "basic knowledge of a language spoken in the host country" (*weltwärts*, 2024: 6) is considered desirable.

Mexico is one of the program's top 10 recipient countries. At the time of the study, 1,449 volunteers had been placed in Mexico through 34 German sending organizations, hosted by 175 local organizations nationwide (*weltwärts*, n.d.), dedicated to education, children and youth work, human rights, the environment, and work with disadvantaged populations. Among these, 13 are in the state of Jalisco—a central-western region known for its economic and cultural significance. Most

of Jalisco's receiving organizations are situated in Guadalajara, the state capital and the third-largest metropolitan area in Mexico.

All but one Jalisco-based receiving organization participated in the study, making the sample representative of *weltwärts*' presence in Mexico in terms of both the types of activities and their frequency. Organizations working with vulnerable populations, mainly focused on children, are by far the most frequent. I interviewed social workers in two shelters attending to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (dedicated primarily to organizing their after-school activities) and teachers in three primary schools in Guadalajara's marginalized areas. I also spoke with two teachers, the janitor, and the cook in a primary school for children with visual impairments. I visited a refugee and migrant care center and a shelter for family members of community hospital long-term patients, where I had the chance to interview both workers and beneficiaries. Of Jalisco's environmental organizations, only two collaborate with *weltwärts*; in both cases, an employee responsible for the volunteers was consulted. Finally, representatives from two local human rights and civic education organizations each gave an interview. I refer to these interviewees as *hosts*, as their organizations offer the volunteers a place of assignment where they can complete their service.

I also interviewed three *mentors* from the intermediary organizations active in Jalisco. Such organizations mediate between the sending organizations in Germany and the places of assignment. Mentors provide guidance and support during the stay, looking after volunteers' well-being, safety, and integration. Additionally, I held four interviews with *beneficiaries* in two shelters and organized a focus group with sixth-grade pupils in a primary school for children with visual impairments. I also conducted a focus group with three couples of *host parents*.

The respondents' accounts evidence rich experiences with several volunteer generations. The volunteers they refer to are typically high school graduates or undergraduate students with little to no professional experience. They are German citizens or permanent residents with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Placed at receiving organizations individually or in pairs, they stay mostly for a year. During their sojourns, they reside in the urban area of Guadalajara, either sharing apartments with other volunteers or living with host families. Most speak German as their first language and are proficient in English as a second language, while also speaking basic-level Spanish—which usually improves over the course of their year of volunteering.

3.2. Data collection and method of analysis

As mentioned above, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews and two focus-group sessions with local stakeholders of the *weltwärts* program in Jalisco from April to July 2021. To begin, I reached out to all *weltwärts*-affiliated receiving organizations in Jalisco and conducted interviews with one staff member at 12 organizations. My interviewees were either directly responsible for overseeing volunteers or had extensive experience hosting them. This initial outreach led to further interview opportunities. In one organization, I interviewed three different employees. Additionally, in three instances, I was able to have conversations with beneficiaries, and on one occasion, I was granted permission to organize a focus group with them. Similarly, after completing interviews with the mentors, the idea of conducting a focus group with host families emerged and was subsequently carried out.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish (the interlocutors' first language). Almost all took place at the assignment sites and included a brief guided tour of the installations offered by the interviewees. Only three conversations were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. The interviews lasted 60 to 120 minutes and were digitally recorded and manually transcribed.

The original study applied thematic coding and analysis, as participants' contributions were central to the inquiry (Ayres, 2008). The result was a detailed description of the local stakeholders' volunteer-related contributions, based on decolonial critical theory (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2000) and the perspective of politics and ethics of care (Betthyány, 2020).

During the thematic analysis, language-related issues emerged as a frequent and salient theme, offering the possibility of conducting an inductive study around language as a core category (Hallberg, 2006). I examined the data anew and labeled any language-related entries, which allowed for the development of tentative categories pointing to volunteers' language-learning processes, the complexities of language-related positioning among stakeholders, and issues of identity and interculturality. Such axial coding provided the basis for selective coding and, therefore, the integration of the major categories around the core categories of language and agency (Benaquisto, 2008). As for the coding itself, the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed manually, without the use of any qualitative data analysis software.

4. Results and analysis

This section is divided into three subsections, each focusing on a key theme of this study. The first subsection illustrates how local partners facilitate and reflect on diverse situations and activities related to informal language learning for volunteers. The second subsection examines how stakeholders negotiate their positions in language-related situations and how these interactions can challenge postcolonial binaries. The third subsection explores local partners' reflections on the significance of language in shaping both the volunteers' and their own evolving sense of belonging and self-understanding within the context of volunteering as an intercultural encounter. The findings are then discussed in the final section of the article.

4.1. Language learning assistance: insight and initiative

While requiring that volunteers have a basic understanding of Spanish upon arrival, the *weltwärts* program promises swift, learning-by-doing improvement in their language skills through "living and working with local people" (*weltwärts*, 2024:1). The answer to the question on language requirements in the program's website FAQ section ends with a reassuring phrase: "You'll learn quickly on-site!" (*weltwärts*, n.d.).

However, from the hosts' perspective, the initial language barrier presents a challenge during the training period, which is essential for preparing volunteers to participate in the organization's activities. The complexities of social work, including ethical issues related to engaging with vulnerable populations and important organizational policies and regulations, must be explained and understood. Some interviewees, especially in larger organizations with more extensive volunteer-related experience, report using English as an additional resource, occasionally translating important memos into English or asking English-speaking employees to assist novice volunteers. While tolerating the initial language difficulties, the hosts hope for rapid improvement, especially because there is frequently no alternative to communicating in Spanish with most organizations' beneficiaries—whose vulnerable situations may require immediate and precise responses.

This brings up the necessity of creating suitable language learning environments and opportunities; intuitive everyday strategies for language practice are frequently mentioned and reflected upon. They range from organizing after-work gatherings for volunteers and young employees, to assigning volunteers the responsibility of supervising children's homework—as well as discouraging speaking German during working hours or limiting the use of social media. While some of these vernacular

strategies may appear questionable from the perspective of expert language teaching pedagogies, they challenge the idea of local language learning as taken for granted or as a byproduct of volunteering activities. Rather than being incidental, the volunteers' language-learning processes are consciously and actively assisted by employees of the receiving organizations.

The *weltwärts* program frequently sends volunteers in pairs to their placements. Interviewees assume it is a measure to ensure an easier transition and incorporation. However, their opinions are split on the language-learning implications of the program's strategy. Typically, one of the volunteers arrives with better Spanish, which, according to some informants, allows for smoother integration of those whose language skills are less advanced. Yet, other hosts express frustration that progress is often slower when volunteers come in pairs, as those speaking less advanced Spanish do not strive to learn quickly and tend to depend on those who communicate freely:

> *"[The volunteers] were cutting themselves off and didn't connect. We would say to the quieter one: 'You should take advantage of the opportunity to improve your Spanish. We know you can understand us, but you hardly speak.' The other [volunteer] was much more fluent, so it was almost like: 'Hey, tell your buddy this and that...' Meanwhile, his buddy stands beside him and doesn't try to speak. And he would constantly ask him to translate for us. It didn't help much."* (David, educator in a care center for children from disadvantaged backgrounds)

This repeatedly mentioned and controversial topic shows the respondents' reflexive and proactive attitude toward the volunteers' language learning processes. On the other hand, there is unanimity about the advantages of spontaneous language exposure through organizational everyday activities, especially while working with children and youth. Several interlocutors referred to such "horizontal" language learning with enthusiasm:

> *"It is a year that, for them as young people, must be great if they take advantage of it. Since they are interacting with children all the time, they learn the language, of course. [...] The children here at school are not learning to speak anymore because they are already six or seven years old. And [the volunteers] who are just learning the language can easily ask them, 'Hey, how do I say this?' or 'What does what you are saying mean?' There is a lot of confidence and trust."* (María, educator in a primary school in Guadalajara's marginalized area)

While the hosts understand the local language primarily as a working tool, for the volunteers' mentors, who explicitly identify as "cultural facilitators", Spanish skills

are the crucial first step toward experiencing the Mexican way of life they aim to expose their mentees to, in alignment with the program's overarching goal of promoting global learning and intercultural encounters:

> "*They [weltwärts] were not interested in me speaking German or English because they wanted me to accompany [the volunteers] in learning Spanish. [...] That is the key point of the experience. They need to speak Spanish to get involved with the people, in the culture, and have the security of moving around and being able to distance themselves from their family and country, right?*" (Roberto, volunteers' mentor)

The aspiration of offering cultural immersion through first-hand experience of foreign culture (with the supposedly necessary temporal separation from one's own cultural context), fostered by mentors' dialogue with the program's coordination office and sending organizations, becomes evident not only in the comment cited above, but also in the active design of learning opportunities reported by the mentors. One shared that, initially, "his" volunteers lived and spent most of their free time together, with little interaction with locals. He believed this limited their intercultural learning opportunities, so he decided to make changes; finding host families proved an effective solution. Such interventions occur when mentors observe what they regard as volunteers' reluctance to step out of their comfort zones and engage with the challenges presented by the new circumstances. Long telephone calls to Germany, unwillingness to socialize during lunch at work, or constant refusals of invitations to participate in leisure activities are interpreted as warning signs and acted upon. Potential language and cultural learning scenarios are monitored and reflexively arranged.

Nearly all the interviewees mention their involvement in organizing the volunteers' everyday activities and leisure. Driving the volunteers to work or accompanying them on the bus is a common practice among hosts and hosting parents, as are shopping trips for groceries or clothes. Hosts, host families, and sometimes even beneficiaries invite volunteers to family celebrations, events, and tours that offer rich possibilities for informal language learning and contact with the local culture.

4.2. Decentering postcolonial binaries: language-related negotiation of stakeholders' positioning

While insisting on the importance of Spanish as an essential everyday working tool, the hosts also view Spanish proficiency as a desired long-term outcome of volun-

teering. When asked about the benefits volunteers gain from the assignments, they mention the new language skills as the most "substantial" one. They also interpret the language learning opportunities as "recompense" for volunteers' service and assume they can actively contribute to providing them. This outcome-driven, transactional view of local language learning gains importance in the context of several interviewees' embarrassment about their organization's inability to offer monetary remuneration or other forms of recompense for the volunteers' efforts. The hosts also usually downplay their own volunteer-related contributions, such as preparing the environment for the volunteers' activities or ensuring their well-being and safety during their stay, implicitly positioning themselves as receivers rather than givers, thus reproducing postcolonial assumptions that, to some extent, still shape the common understanding of V4D architecture.

In contrast, comments about facilitating Spanish learning and managing language-learning scenarios are often accompanied by expressions of satisfaction and framed as instances of agency. Not only do the employees of the receiving organizations, but also their beneficiaries, portray themselves as givers and doers in the context of local language learning. While the beneficiaries regard the volunteers as their tutors, they also take pride in their roles as Spanish language experts, valuing their ability to provide meaningful support and highlighting the reciprocal nature of learning:

> "*When they arrive, they have trouble with Spanish, but I think that, just as they help us learn, we also help them with Spanish. We talk to them, and we chat at recess or in class to help them so we can understand each other better.*" (Daniela, a student at a primary school for children with visual impairments)

No other topic receives such a "symmetric" interpretation in the beneficiaries' comments, as they usually assume the role of aid recipients in the context of shelters and educational facilities. Everyday interactions involving the local language hold the potential to decenter the existing power binaries that divide "enlightened" givers from "inexpert" receivers (Everingham, 2015; Sinervo, 2023).

The interviewees repeatedly mentioned another language-related issue that can be associated with the fine-grained power negotiations among the stakeholders. While arriving with mostly basic-level Spanish, *weltwärts* volunteers are typically fluent in English as second language. Some host institutions that include English classes in their curriculum welcome volunteers as occasional English instructors.

However, tensions emerge when volunteers insist on using their English skills, even when these may not align with the organization's needs or could impose a structural burden on the institution:

> *"The girl was upset because she wanted to teach English. We couldn't even offer her a classroom. And we told her, 'Look, you can help us in another way.' Well, she didn't want to. [...] She had this...idea of teaching English. And she was good at it. She brought her materials and everything. If she had stayed longer, maybe it would have made more sense. But at that time, no, it didn't help at all."* (Natalia, educator in a care center for children from disadvantaged backgrounds)

Various interviewees recall similar tensions between the representatives of the organizations and some novice volunteers. These volunteers often view English as a non-negotiable priority skill they can teach, or as a taken-for-granted lingua franca they expect to use during their placements. One interviewee, who works at a children's shelter, shared the story of a psychology student volunteering at his organization. Although the student showed initiative, she did not speak Spanish and expected the organization's English-speaking psychologist to help her prepare and translate a workshop for the staff. Her request was denied, as the psychologist's busy schedule did not allow for additional support in addressing communication barriers, which ultimately meant the workshop could not take place and the volunteer could not share her knowledge.

Several hosts pointed out that there are limits to negotiating volunteers' expectations related to language, particularly when these may compromise the organization's interests and priorities. They insist on the necessity of learning Spanish as quickly as possible and regard volunteers' English proficiency as just another skill that can be utilized if convenient, de-emphasizing the notion of English as a paramount asset and a taken-for-granted universal commodity (Heller & Duchene, 2012; Macias, 2023; Niño-Murcia, 2003). In doing so, they also challenge the implicit divide between volunteers as empowered, English-speaking global citizens and hosts as provincial, non-English-speaking aid recipients, thereby creating space for a more nuanced understanding of the roles and relationships among those involved (Doerr, 2012; Thomas-Maude et al., 2021).

4.3. Volunteering as an intercultural encounter

Holliday's definition of the intercultural as "whenever and wherever we encounter cultural practices and values that cause us to position and reposition ourselves"

(Holliday, 2022, p. 373) provides a lens for understanding both the local partners' language-learning contributions and their language-related negotiation of their own and volunteers' positioning as part of an intercultural experience. The agentive character of such interactions, along with the opportunity for local partners to recognize the value of their language in a context that continues to position them as passive aid receivers, may explain why language-related practices, attitudes, and efforts become central to the local partners' quotidian reflections on issues of identity and mutuality.

When describing what they perceive as successful volunteering experiences, the interviewees highlight the significance of volunteers' willingness to learn the local language as a key aspect of their readiness to engage in (often demanding) incorporation processes into the local community. While insisting on their own commitment to receive all volunteers as well as they can, the respondents frequently contrast "success stories" with experiences where meaningful connections proved unattainable. In their view, such situations may have several explanations, such as the volunteers' immaturity, dissatisfaction with the placement, or homesickness, but they also consistently stress that the willingness to communicate in Spanish is crucial. The interviewees vividly describe volunteers' initial contact with the local language, sometimes portraying the learning process as surprisingly fast and quasi-miraculous, while at other times acknowledging it as time-consuming and strenuous, insisting that it cannot be taken for granted:

> *"We had a girl who barely spoke Spanish, but after a month, she spoke it perfectly. [...] Super-fast! We were surprised, and we were even giving her tongue twisters, and we were, like, 'Wow!"* (Manuel, head of a human rights NGO)

> *"The two girls needed to sleep at noon because they would get tired. So, we had a small library, and they would lie down on the floor because there was no more space. They would get tired in the head; they got so very tired of the [new] language. [...] Then, we had two other girls; they lacked the right disposition. There was something wrong. It didn't work. [...] I would have taken advantage of the opportunity to learn the language at least (Spanish)...but these girls didn't want anything. Neither Spanish nor anything."* (Silvia, director of primary school for children with visual impairments)

From critical remarks about some volunteers' reluctance to learn Spanish, to the admiration for others' newly acquired skills, volunteers' motivation for language

learning is constantly commented on as an important aspect of the intercultural significance of the sojourns. The volunteers' mere willingness to use Spanish in everyday interactions, and more specific practices such as adopting local slang, asking to be called by a Spanish version of a German name, or expressing complex feelings in recently learned words and phrases, is remembered with pride and satisfaction. These moments are framed as indicative of volunteers' transforming sense of belonging that opens the possibility of abandoning fixed identity positions and forging a new understanding of the relationships among those involved:

> *"We had a boy here once. When he arrived at our farewell party, he came with his eyes all swollen. He had to say goodbye to his family the day before... to his brothers, cousins, uncles, and all his Mexican family. [...] So, he arrives with this face... and, laughing, he tells us: 'I have no more crying fluid left in my eyes."* (Edgar, volunteers' mentor)

The recalled volunteer's utterance, descriptively referring to tears as "crying fluid", is significant for several reasons. The interviewee presents this phrase as a direct quotation, emphasizing that it was spoken in Spanish—a language the respondent proudly helped the volunteer learn—to convey a profoundly emotional state. Such expressions of vulnerability are commonly associated with the use of "one's own" language, thus suggesting that Spanish (albeit with insufficient vocabulary) was now an intimate part of the volunteer's sense of self, as is the attachment to "his Mexican family". Another revealing aspect is the genuineness of the phrase, which the interviewee remembers as a spontaneous affirmation of profound engagement.

Most local partners' reflections on their relationship with the volunteers take shape within a dynamic tension between rigid, essentialist notions of belonging and more fluid, inclusive forms of engagement with otherness (Zhou & Pilcher, 2018). Overall, the comments on the initial contact are noticeably less nuanced than the descriptions of the final stages of the volunteering experience, suggesting a process of mutual opening to a meaningful relationship. For example, when remembering their initial encounters with *weltwärts* volunteers, the interviewees choose to emphasize the sense of difference, mentioning language as the most salient marker of it. Foreign speech, accent, and certain paralinguistic elements, such as facial expressions or gestures, are repeatedly interpreted as indicative of the newcomers' strangeness:

> "*Well, sometimes people don't understand them at first. Sometimes I wouldn't, too, and I would catch myself laughing because I'd look at them and say, 'I don't understand you. I don't understand you.' [...] They talk in a way... What can I say? I'm not making fun of their way of speaking. I like their way of speaking, but it's weird.*" (Celia, beneficiary of a shelter for family members of community hospital long-term patients)

> "*We had one girl who worked in customer service and was a little serious. [...] We would leave her little notes saying, 'Smile when you ask for something.' It's very cultural, of course. We explained to her that here in Mexico, everyone always smiles and jokes. And she said, 'Well, I do my job, don't I?' 'Yes, but maybe you can just smile a little more...' It seemed strange to her. [Laughs]*" (Elena, head of an environmental NGO)

However, it would be an oversimplification to view such comments as unambiguously boundary-focused. In both passages, the newcomers' linguistic "weirdness" and "inadequate" non-verbal communication are portrayed as light-hearted anecdotes, remembered with affection and placed within a relativist perspective ("It's very cultural, of course"). Thus, rather than a one-way progression from exclusivist, boundary-focused notions to more non-essentialist ways of thinking—the relationship unfolds within a dynamic tension between exclusionary views on belonging and genuine engagement with otherness. For example, the interlocutors frequently express a stereotypical view of Germans as cold and distant upon arrival but warm and family-oriented by the time of departure. This recurring theme is evident in the following excerpt from a focus group session with hosting parents:

> Mauricio: "*We, the Latinos in general, are very passionate. We are so sensitive; it's almost ridiculous. [...] So, these kids who come to stay with us, they become Latinized. They end up crying, crying, crying...*"
> Edgar: "*When they arrive, you look at them and they are all serious, but then they meet their families and find their sensitive side. It's a discovery, right?*"
> Luisa: "*And they find it so easily...*"
> Mauricio: "*[...] The people who come here from Germany and from the West, in general, leave very humanized by the Latin American feeling, our feeling. (...) It seems they get Latinized [he laughs], and they become more sensitive. They are more open; they are not so cold. It's not that they are like that...*"
> María: "*It's only apparent, right? Deep down, we all have our feelings.*"

The discussion starts with the essentialist imagery of volunteers transitioning from negatively connoted "Germanness" to positively connoted "Latinness" (in other

words, they stop being "them" and start being "us"), but it soon turns into a less divisive picture. The idea of discovering what has already been there suggests the notion of inherent hybridity underlying any form of identity positioning (Holliday, 2022). Remarks about volunteers "easily finding their sensitive side" and the idea that differences are only apparent reflect the possibility of a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of cultural belonging.

While mostly commenting on the volunteers' learning processes, several interviewees view the intercultural encounters as spaces for mutual learning. They see themselves as agents of change in others but also as open to transformation themselves. In another common trope, Germans are stereotyped as honest and direct, while Mexicans are perceived as less candid. Interactions with the volunteers are interpreted as an opportunity to learn frankness and transparency: circumlocution and ambiguity are left behind, while saying things outright becomes a new habit. As a mentor put it:

> *"It's part of what we've learned working with them, communicating, being open, speaking to them directly as they are, you know? Because our culture is not one of speaking directly. It's one of 'Hey, look, how do you find this? What do you think about that?' No, no, no. These years of experience with them have taught us that we must be direct. And they appreciate it. We understand each other better."* (Roberto, volunteers' mentor)

The experience is framed as a long-term trajectory of intercultural communication, allowing for reflexive examination of one's cultural practices. Similarly, in another interviewee's comment, a long-lasting experience with several volunteer generations triggers a process of revisiting, sincerely recognizing, and abandoning deep-rooted prejudice:

> *"I used to say, 'Germans are Hitler.' I'm sorry, but that's what I used to say. Paradigms in one's head, right? And I remember that once [the volunteers] told me, 'We are not all like that.' Well, yes, yes, of course, it's just the nonsense in my head. They are beautiful, sweet, and capable of feeling, crying, and expressing themselves. Not the paradigms that one has, right?"* (Silvia, director of primary school for children with visual impairments).

Once more, rigid, divisive categorizations and attributions give way to a reimagined sense of positioning of self and others. The remark's introspective tone serves as yet another example of interviewees' reflexive attitude toward questions of difference,

belonging, and their own role within volunteering contexts understood as intercultural encounters.

5. Discussion

The reconceptualization of the V4D experiences as global learning venues has shifted the research focus, first centering on the volunteers' education and subsequently exploring the V4D contexts as learning opportunities for local stakeholders (Chen, 2021; Mueller, 2020; Scheinert et al., 2019; Tiessen et al., 2021; Viquez, 2018). This article, however, concentrates on local stakeholders' contributions as facilitators of volunteers' learning experiences, thus underscoring their agency and questioning the persistent notion of receiving organizations as mere "stage settings", where the volunteering unfolds on its own (Haas, 2020; Kontzi, 2015). It also challenges the discourse of local language learning as "immersion" that usually "places mobile students in a position of power in relation to the teachers of the culture—that is, the immobile host people among whom the students are immersed and 'learn by doing'" (Doerr, 2012, p. 2). The analysis shows that, rather than occurring spontaneously, the volunteers' language-learning processes are thoughtfully and actively supported—not only by hosts and mentors, who are commonly understood as receiving partners, but also by less visible contributors, such as host families and beneficiaries of host organizations. The acquisition of the local language appears as a product of a collective endeavor to offer diverse informal learning opportunities.

The analysis further highlights how language-related scenarios create opportunities for the negotiation of roles and relationships among those involved. Hosts' recognition of Spanish as a valuable long-term outcome of the volunteering experience, along with their satisfaction in contributing to its acquisition, or the beneficiaries' pride in their role as Spanish language experts and their emphasis on the reciprocal nature of learning, can be interpreted as quotidian instances of agency that carry the potential to decenter postcolonial binaries that divide "enlightened" cosmopolitan doers/givers from "inexpert" provincial receivers (Everningham, 2014; Sinervo, 2023).

While the local language appears meaningful in many ways throughout the respondents' comments—as a working tool, as a perdurable asset and, therefore, an adequate recompense for volunteers' contributions, as a means of cultural immersion, and as an element of a deeper personal change—no such meanings are attributed to English. The participants mention it in utilitarian terms, mostly as part of a mandated curriculum in educational facilities or as a bothersome last resort for

communicating with novice volunteers. These interpretations de-emphasize, if only implicitly, the common idea of English as an unquestionable asset, a perspective often assumed in development discourse (Jakubiak, 2016; Niño-Murcia, 2003). They also challenge the divide between volunteers, who are empowered English-speaking global citizens, and hosts, who are often non-English-speaking aid recipients. Additionally, they illuminate the complexities of how the social status of linguistic codes changes across intersubjective and institutional scales (Canagarajah, 2013; Heller & Duchene, 2012; Macias, 2023; Thomas-Maude et al., 2021).

By supporting volunteers' Spanish acquisition and reflecting on this process, the receiving partners acknowledge themselves as active organizers of volunteering spaces. Such an agentive perspective fosters a nuanced quotidian reflection on volunteering as an intercultural encounter and on the role of language in it. While the respondents rarely abandon essentialist notions of belonging, they often remain open to more fluid, boundary-crossing forms of engagement with otherness. This openness is particularly evident when they observe volunteers' willingness to learn the local language and integrate into the local community. By seeing themselves as agents of change for others, they view volunteering spaces as opportunities for mutual transformation and learning (Holliday, 2022; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018).

Despite the insight the study offers into volunteering spaces as venues for intercultural encounters, it also has important limitations. The primary one is the absence of volunteers' voices, which would have added depth to the discussion on participants' roles, relationships, and learning processes. This limitation stems from the study's initial design, which focused on the contributions of receiving partners. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis influenced the study's scope, as the program opted to repatriate volunteers to Germany at the onset of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the unexpected prominence of language-related issues during the initial thematic analysis offered rich data for an inductive exploration of local partners' language-related practices and insights.

Examining the often-overlooked language-related agency of receiving partners reveals volunteering contexts as dynamic spaces where participants' roles and relationships are intersubjectively complex, transcending rigid binaries. Recognizing language learning assistance as a valuable contribution can empower local partners, enabling them to critically assess their positionality within the international volunteering framework and to challenge postcolonial assumptions that continue to influence the prevailing understanding of volunteering for development.

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