

On the Interrelated Nature of Study Abroad Learners' Language Contact, Perceptions of Culture, and Personal Outcomes

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Abstract

This study discusses a 5-week study abroad experience in which a group of English-speaking Canadian university students learning Spanish participated in a faculty-led study abroad experience in Spain. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative measurement and qualitative inquiry was used to explore how often and with whom the second language (L2) learners used English and Spanish during their sojourn. At the conclusion of the study abroad program, the learners completed a Language Contact Profile and responded to open-ended questions that encouraged their meta-reflection on language contact, perceptions of culture, and personal outcomes. The findings show that learners relied on situations from their free time abroad to better understand the target culture rather than on required activities such as visits to museums or heritage sites. Students reported an appreciation for the L2 culture, mostly related to the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere and an increase in their L2 confidence. The findings also underscore the importance of constant interaction in the target language with host community members. Future programming and related research should emphasize learners' engagement with the host community, both prior to arrival and throughout their time abroad.

Résumé

Cette étude traite d'une expérience d'études à l'étranger d'une durée de 5 semaines. Un groupe d'étudiants d'une université canadienne de langue anglaise apprenant l'espagnol ont séjourné en Espagne. Cette étude à méthodologie mixte a combiné des mesures quantitatives à une enquête qualitative pour explorer combien souvent et avec qui les apprenants de langue seconde utilisaient l'anglais et l'espagnol durant leur séjour. À la suite de ce séjour, les participants ont complété un profil de contacts linguistiques et ont répondu à des questions ouvertes encourageant la métaréflexion sur les contacts linguistiques, les perceptions de la culture et les résultats personnels. Les résultats ont révélé que les apprenants s'appuyaient sur leurs activités quotidiennes pour mieux comprendre la culture cible au lieu des activités requises comme les visites aux musées ou aux sites patrimoniaux. En outre, les étudiants ont exprimé une appréciation de la langue seconde, surtout par rapport à l'ambiance décontractée et accueillante ainsi qu'à leur confiance accrue dans leur habileté à communiquer dans leur langue seconde. Les résultats ont aussi indiqué l'importance d'une interaction constante avec la langue seconde. La programmation future ainsi que la recherche qui y est reliée devrait favoriser l'interaction avec les étudiants et leurs hôtes, à la fois avant leur arrivée et pendant leur séjour à l'étranger.

On the Interrelated Nature of Study Abroad Learners' Language Contact, Perceptions of Culture, and Personal Outcomes

Introduction

Students from many academic fields can benefit from international experiences (Coleman, 2013; Collentine, 2009; Kinginger, 2011, 2013b; Schwald, 2011) and consequently, in recent years, study abroad (SA) research and programs of student mobility in higher education have become increasingly popular (Dehmel, Li, & Sloane, 2011; Pérez-Vidal, 2014; Sanz, forthcoming). When adult language learners pursue educational opportunities in a country other than their own, they are immersed in a new and exciting linguistic and cultural environment. Many times, it may also be the first situation in which they face the “challenges of self-managed learning, self-conscious strategy selection, and formative self-diagnosis” (Davidson, 2007, p. 277). International ventures have been shown to shape perceptions of global citizenship (Lewin, 2009), improve qualities that are necessary for lifelong learning in a variety of contexts and cultures (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012), and affect important career choices (Davidson & Lehman, 2005; Schwieter & Ferreira, 2014). Key to such positive outcomes can be the use of a second language (L2) in interactions with community members from the host country. Compared to their counterparts who do not study abroad, L2 learners who participate in an SA experience potentially have more opportunities for direct meaningful interaction in the target language along with ample chances to gain understandings of the target culture (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011). Isabelli (2007) explored the extent to which students were engaged in high-quality, meaningful exposure and access to the L2 and its native speakers while abroad. Her study showed a benefit for learners who had just returned from an SA experience compared to learners who had never studied abroad such that the recently-returned SA learners produced significantly more complex structures in their L2.

Some research on SA has shown a general trend toward receptive rather than productive use of the target language while other work has highlighted the considerable amount of variability when it comes to target language use (Ranta & Meckleborg, 2013; for an overview, see Kinginger, 2009). For L2 learners to integrate themselves into a new learning environment such as an SA setting is a challenge that can trigger “culture shock” (see Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2006), especially at the beginning of the SA sojourn. Prior work has identified several issues that explain why integration may be difficult for some learners and also how it is not especially amendable to explicit instruction. For instance, at the beginning of the experience, a low level of target language knowledge might cause distress, affecting other variables important to the adaptation processes, such as interaction with the host community and appreciation for a new culture (Engle & Engle, 1999; Schwieter & Ferreira, 2014). DeKeyser (2010) has maintained that an inadequate level of L2 proficiency prior to studying abroad underscores learners’ “inability to monitor the accuracy of their speech due to limited declarative knowledge of grammar and very little prior practice that might have helped to convert declarative to procedural knowledge” (p. 89). When considering low L2 proficiency level alongside social and cognitive challenges that learners face when studying abroad, they might try to avoid interaction in the L2. For example, many of the Japanese SA learners from Tanaka’s (2007) study confessed that they preferred to construct a “cozy Japanese environment” (p. 50) while abroad instead of interacting with native speakers. The Japanese learners also

expressed insecurities about their L2 proficiency and avoided interaction with their host families. Moreover, Engle and Engle (2003) suggested that “organized and directed forms of cultural interaction or experiential learning are not possible [in short-term study courses] due to duration and language constraints” (p. 11).

Nonetheless, contact and interaction with speakers of the host community are essential and definitive parts of SA (Wilkinson, 1998). If difficulties with the L2 act as a barrier for learners to interact with native speakers while abroad, it will also reduce their ability to acquire a deeper knowledge of the target culture available through L2 interaction. Assuming that “language is the carrier of culture, while culture is the content of language” (Tong, Refeng, & Weizhong, 2004, p. 33), students with weaker L2 skills might find understanding the culture around them more challenging in comparison to peers with stronger L2 abilities. However, L2 proficiency is not the only facilitator of cultural understanding. As we discuss below, an SA experience can lead to enhanced confidence levels among L2 learners. Cultural adaptation (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006) can be facilitated through a unified *learning community*. We define a learning community as an interdependent unit that consists of learners who may be emotionally, educationally, culturally, and linguistically reliant on and responsible to each other (Schwieter, 2013a). The function of the first language (L1) co-national group in facilitating both linguistic confidence and basic intercultural communicative knowledge development among its members raises questions concerning the stages of language socialization during SA.

Below, we provide a brief overview of pertinent literature followed by a presentation of the present study, which includes a description of the participants, the SA program, and the methodology. We then discuss the quantitative findings on learners’ contact with and usage of English and Spanish while abroad. Finally, we present and discuss the qualitative findings organized around: (a) language contact; (b) perceptions of culture, and (c) personal outcomes, along with their implications for future work.

Review of Literature

Research has shown that an SA experience can be an effective way to learn an L2 (Coleman, 1997; DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Isabelli, 2004; Kinginger, 2009, 2013b; Kuntz & Belnap, 2001; Pellegrino, 1998). Scholars in L2 acquisition are increasingly interested in SA and its implications for L2 development (e.g., Barron, 2006; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Isabelli, 2004; Lafford, 1995, 2004; Schwieter & Ferreira, 2014; Schwieter & Kunert, 2012) and political-, cultural-, and identity-related issues (e.g., Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2013a; Plews, 2015). The body of work investigating SA and L2 acquisition has focused on a number of issues including verbal fluency (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsburg, 1995; Davidson, 2010; Freed, 1995; Schwieter, 2013b), writing (e.g., Sasaki, 2009), sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence (e.g., Barron, 2006; Iwasaki, 2010; Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009; Shardakova, 2005); lexical and grammatical development (e.g., Guntermann, 1995; Howard & Schwieter, forthcoming; Isabelli, 2004; Milton & Meara, 1995; Schwieter & Klassen, 2016), phonological development (e.g., Díaz-Campos, 2004), learning perceptions (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009), and learning strategies (e.g., Paige et al., 2006; Schwieter & Klassen, 2016). Other research has shown that an SA experience is not necessarily a magical formula for L2 learning (Kinger, 2011) and that linguistic improvement and cultural understanding is not guaranteed (Jackson, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). Language contact is assumed to be an important factor for L2 development as

pointed out by Schwieter and Ferreira (2014) in which students' self-assessments indicated that L2 abilities improved as a direct result of contact with the host community. Kinginger (2011) underscored the importance of exploring language contact and argued that

language learning in study abroad is a dialogic and situated affair whose success depends on not only the attributes and intentions of the student but also the ways in which the student is received within his or her host community. A student who is mindful of his or her role as a peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991); who actively seeks access to learning opportunities; and who is welcomed as a person of consequence, worthy of the hosts' time and nurture, is likely to succeed. Conversely, achievement may be more modest for a student who interprets study abroad as a parenthetical diversion from serious study (Gore, 2005), who avoids contact with local people (Feinberg, 2002), or who is received with indifference. (p. 60)

Language contact during SA can potentially increase how one values his/her social capital (Schwieter & Ferreira, 2014). Social capital refers to the structure of the relationship between human and economic capitals (Portes, 1998; see Smith, Giraud-Carrier, Dewey, Ring, & Gore, 2011, for an overview of social capital and L2 acquisition in SA contexts). It implies an investment and, as a consequence, there is a conscious or unconscious expectation of return. It can be seen as social wealth accumulation, even though this view still demands more concrete examples of the substance (i.e., the social capital). In simpler terms, social capital refers to one's humanistic value within a society. This work has been significantly informed by Norton and colleagues' (Norton, 2000, 2010; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2004) elaboration of *investment* that "signals the socially- and historically-constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton, 2010, p. 75). When L2 learners invest in their own learning, they do so knowing that they are getting closer to bilingualism, which to them implies an added value to their social capital credentials (Norton & McKinney, 2011; Schwieter, 2013a). Building on Clark's (2006) argument that "human relations are incomprehensible without language [which is] a mode, a form, a concrete reality of relations between people" (p. 33), Schwieter and Ferreira's (2014) analysis of language contact suggested that learners were able to build social capital, even after only 5 weeks abroad.

Research on language socialization during SA experiences examines the social process by which learners use language. These processes are initiated through the target language into the practices of communities and the local meanings of such practices (Ochs, 2002). In other words, language socialization concerns the integration of learners into a host community that permits them to apply and practice an L2 in a context of meaningful social interactions (Wang, 2010). While this complex integration may take an extended amount of time abroad (Magnan & Back, 2007; McGregor, 2012), we ask in the present study if there are any basic steps toward language socialization during an SA program as short as 5 weeks.

If L2 development is related to L2 cultural development (C2), it might be the case that learners rely on their L1 and first culture (C1) to transfer meaning from one context to another (L2 to L1 and C2 to C1 and vice versa). Engle and Engle (1999) explained that the interface of in-class and on-site experience is vital:

Through real-life application, often perceived as more immediate and telling than that of on-campus course work, guided authentic cultural encounters instead tend to confirm the value of objective classroom learning—and vice versa—and all the more so when that learning takes place according to local cultural norms. (p. 4)

Therefore, students are immersed in an experience that provides them opportunities to understand how a society is built and to adjust themselves to the environment and learning from other cultures. Brubaker (2007) observed that during a 6-week summer program, students viewed culture learning as less important than language learning, demonstrating the need for culture to be explicitly integrated into the SA experience. Schwieter and Kunert's (2012) study threaded cultural sessions in the L1 throughout a 3-week SA program. The objective of the sessions was to increase and enrich the comprehension of the subsequent cultural site visits. In the study, students learned about historical, artistic, and cultural elements in the L1 before seeing, visiting, and hearing about them in person in the L2 (e.g., guided tours were in the L2). The results showed that the cultural sessions in the L1 assisted learners' L2 comprehension and development and also helped them to feel "more comfortable and prepared to internalize the information in [the L2]" (Schwieter & Kunert, 2012, p. 595). These cultural sessions as part of the broader SA program were incorporated in Schwieter and Ferreira (2014) as well as in the present study. In the next section, we introduce the study including a description of the participants, methodology, and data analyses.

Present Study

The present study explores the interrelated nature of SA learners' language contact, perceptions of culture, and personal outcomes during a 5-week SA experience in Spain. Previous work using the Language Contact Profile (LCP) has shown correlations between language contact and L2 development in SA (Dewey, 2004; Freed, 1990; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Taguchi, 2008; Yager, 1998) and we also expect to be able to make observations about how language contact may influence and construct learners' perceptions of culture and personal outcomes of the SA experience. The LCP is a questionnaire used to gain an understanding of students' language use while abroad (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004). It was chosen because, as mentioned above, it has reliably elicited qualitative information in prior work concerning learners' contact in their L1 and L2 outside of the SA language course (e.g., with host family members, friends, community members), and the extent to which they take advantage of extracurricular activities and opportunities for L2 learning and interaction with native speakers.

A number of studies have demonstrated support for L2 contact and linguistic gains while abroad by using quantitative data drawn from an LCP (Freed, Dewey, et al., 2004) along with qualitative data. Recent studies have reported compelling results using mixed methods (DeKeyser, 2010; Isabelli-García, 2006; Kinginger, 2008). We interpret L2 contact as meaningful, real-life situations in which students interact in the target language while abroad. We quantitatively measure variables that underlie language contact during the short-term SA experience and use qualitative data to make inferences about how that contact can affect learners' perceptions of culture and personal outcomes.

Participants

The present study reports on the same annual SA program as Schwieter and Ferreira (2014), though each study includes a different sample of participants from different years. In the present study, a group of 17 university-level students participated in a 5-week international field course in Spain. These participants included 13 females and four males aged between 19 and 24 who were enrolled in a medium-sized, English-speaking university in Canada. Six of these participants were majoring and five were minoring in Spanish. The SA experience was the first time that 10 of the participants had travelled outside of Canada. Prior to going abroad, all participants had taken between two and four semester-long Spanish courses. Upon arriving in Spain, a placement test was administered at a host institution to match learners with their appropriate level of Spanish for the language course. All participants placed into levels A2 (waystage/elementary) and B1 (threshold/intermediate) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

To gather additional information on the learners' L2 proficiency level, a language history questionnaire was administered pre- and post-SA in which participants provided self-ratings of language abilities. The scores are based on a 10-point scale (1 = *least proficient*, 10 = *most proficient*) and although all participants reported some knowledge of French, each rated his or her Spanish as more proficient than French. The descriptive statistics of English and Spanish self-ratings for pre- and post-SA can be seen in Table 1. As expected, the participants reported significant improvement in all areas of Spanish ($p < .001$).

Table 1
Self-Ratings of L1 and L2 Abilities Pre- and Post-SA

	Pre-SA	Post-SA	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
<u>English (L1)</u>				
Reading	10.00	10.00	-	1.00
Writing	10.00	9.88	1.46	.160
Speaking	10.00	10.00	-	1.00
Listening	10.00	10.00	-	1.00
Comfort	10.00	9.94	1.00	.330
Overall	10.00	9.96	1.38	.190
<u>Spanish (L2)</u>				
Reading	6.15	7.82	7.03	< .001
Writing	5.68	7.00	4.33	< .001
Speaking	5.38	6.68	3.31	< .001
Listening	6.74	8.29	3.92	< .001
Comfort	5.59	7.15	5.25	< .001
Overall	5.91	7.39	5.49	< .001

Study Abroad Program Overview

The 5-week program in Spain was designed so that students were constantly interacting in Spanish in the classroom, with host families, and with local community members. The official course description for the SA program in which the participants were enrolled is: “This faculty-led study abroad experience focuses on Spanish language learning through contextualized interaction and grammar review. While living in the Spanish-speaking community abroad, students participate in a number of immersion activities and visit several world-renowned cultural sites” (Wilfrid Laurier University Undergraduate Calendar, 2016). As indicated, the course is led by a faculty member who accompanies the learners throughout the immersion experience.

The participants were provided approximately 80 hours of Spanish language instruction by a partner institution in Salamanca, which was designed to improve vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and reading skills, plus 8 hours of cultural sessions in Spanish, which introduced learners to upcoming compulsory visits (e.g., guided tours of heritage sites, cultural events, visits to museums) led by the accompanying faculty member from the home university (see Schwieter & Kunert, 2012). The program also consisted of extracurricular activities such as guided tours and day trips, which complemented themes learned in the classroom. The general schedule of instruction and visits is provided in Table 2. Other extracurricular activities in the afternoons are not listed in the table as there was variation among participants (i.e., some participants went to local museums, parks, and cafés, while others went swimming or took dance or cooking lessons).

Method and Data Analyses

The interpretations from the present study are based on data from an LCP (Freed, Dewey, et al., 2004) and open-ended questions (Schwieter & Ferreira, 2014), both of which were administered on the last day abroad and were completed in the L1. The participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the LCP and answer the open-ended questions, although all participants finished within 60 minutes. We report *t* tests to quantitatively compare data from the LCP.¹ The open-ended questions were designed so that participants could reflect on several issues throughout the SA sojourn. These questions were taken from Schwieter and Ferreira (2014) and were revised to elicit information related to language contact, cultural perspectives, personal outcomes, and the applicability of the experience to learners’ lives back home.

Table 2
Study Abroad Program Overview

	Spanish Language Courses	Spanish Culture Sessions	Extracurricular Guided Tours In Spanish
Day 0 ^a			
Week 1			
Day 1	9:00am-1:00pm		8:00am: Placement test 4:00pm: Walking tour of Salamanca
Day 2	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 3	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 4	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 5	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 6			Day trip to Segovia and Ávila
Day 7			
Week 2			
Day 8	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 9	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 10	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 11	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 12	9:00am-1:00pm		Excursion to Galicia
Day 13			
Day 14			
Week 3			
Day 15	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 16	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 17	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 18	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 19	9:00am-1:00pm		Excursion to Toledo and Madrid
Day 20			
Day 21			
Week 4			
Day 22	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 23	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 24	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 25	9:00am-1:00pm	1:00pm-2:00pm	
Day 26	9:00am-1:00pm		
Day 27			Day trip to La Alberca
Day 28			
Week 5			
Day 29			Excursion to Andalucia begins: Cáceres
Day 30			Sevilla
Day 31			Sevilla
Day 32			Córdoba and Granada
Day 33			Granada
Day 34 ^a			

^aDay 0 and Day 34 mark the arrival and departure days, respectively.

The questions included:

1. What was your experience like interacting in Spanish throughout the SA program?
2. What were your feelings on fitting in and adapting to a new environment? Did you feel a part of the host family, school, and community?
3. With which aspects of Spanish culture do you feel you identified most?
4. Do you think you have changed as a person from this SA experience? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
5. What aspects of this short-term SA experience can you see yourself applying to your social life once home?
6. What was your role as a team member within the social environment of this SA program? Was this learning experience facilitated by peers?
7. How has the social learning environment of this SA experience helped you creatively display and/or explore yourself?
8. Do you feel that this SA experience has increased your *social capital*? By *social capital*, we are referring to your *humanistic value in society*.

Because some of the terminology in the questions may not have been familiar to the participants (e.g., social capital, humanistic value), as they are not commonly used on a daily basis and were not mentioned in the classes in Spain, we read each question aloud and explained what they meant before the participants completed the questionnaire. The responses for each participant were transcribed and systematically examined and compared across participants (Schwieter, 2011) according to the themes relevant to the present study.

Findings

Language Contact Profile

The LCP contextualized participants' speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English and Spanish during their time abroad (see Table 3). Regarding language contact and speaking, the participants reported conversing in English outside of class time on a daily basis (see LCP item 7 in Table 3). However, speaking in English appears to be confined to doing so with English-speakers (item 5e) as compared to speaking in English with Spanish-speakers (item 5c), $t = 2.61, p = .02$.² This finding is validated by a significantly less amount of speaking Spanish with English-speakers (item 5d) than with Spanish-speakers (item 5b), $t = 3.35, p = .01$. Learners reported speaking in Spanish with host family members (item 2e) more than with any other Spanish-speaking person including the instructor (item 2a), $t = 3.45, p = .01$; friends (item 2b), $t = 3.56, p = .01$; classmates (item 2c), $t = 4.37, p < .001$; strangers (item 2d), $t = 2.98, p = .01$; or service personnel (item 2f), $t = 4.20, p < .001$.

Results show that there is a gap in listening, reading, and writing, and basic daily conversation when considering Cummins's (1979) "basic interpersonal communicative system." Baker (2006) argued that "it is said to occur when there are contextual supports and props for a language delivery. Face-to-face 'context embedded' situations provide, for example, non-verbal support to secure understanding" (p. 174). It seems that the idea of belonging to and fitting into the community helped students to develop their basic

interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), even though specific skills were developed more than others. Group cohesion and a sense of belonging helped develop BICS, which in and of itself is a revealing outcome for SA research.

With regard to language contact and listening, it may not be surprising that the participants reported listening to Spanish on a daily basis (item 6g). In what appears to be a primary outlet for improving listening comprehension, learners often tried to understand conversations that were going on around them (item 6k). In fact, the learners reported trying to understand other conversations in Spanish more often than input from TV or radio (item 6h), $t = 2.44, p = .03$; movies or videos (item 6i), $t = 7.03, p < .001$; and only marginally more often than listening to songs in Spanish (item 6j), $t = 1.75, p = .10$.

Regarding reading and writing outside of class time, the learners reported very little use of Spanish. In fact, the little amount of reading in Spanish (item 6a) came only from schedules, announcements, and menus (item 6e), that is, from linguistically- and culturally-simple texts, more than from newspapers (item 6b), $t = 16.26, p < .001$; novels (item 6c), $t = 19.42, p < .001$; magazines (item 6d), $t = 11.66, p < .001$; or email and webpages (item 6f), $t = 4.71, p < .001$; which can be linguistically and culturally more complex. Similarly, writing in Spanish was also infrequent (item 6l) and was concentrated on homework assignments (item 6m), which included creative paragraphs and short essays, rather than personal notes or letters (item 6n), $t = 6.86, p < .001$; or emails (item 6o), $t = 7.91, p < .001$. This finding suggests that students focus on activities for language improvement only when they are requested to do so, such as the writing and reading practice during the homework activities. Yet at the same time, they can be proactive and try to improve other language skills on their own volition (e.g., listening to strangers' conversation, which was common among participants in the present study). In other words, the learners showed instances of proactively taking charge of their own L2 development with certain skills (e.g., listening) but less so with other skills (e.g., reading, writing) unless they formed part of a required activity

Table 3
Language Contact During the SA Sojourn

Language Contact Profile Item	Days per week		Hours per day	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Time spent speaking in Spanish outside of class with native or fluent Spanish speakers.	6.41	1.37	2.41	1.77
2a. Tried to speak Spanish with instructor.	5.06	1.86	1.76	1.89
2b. Tried to speak Spanish with friends who are native or fluent Spanish speakers.	4.65	2.42	1.35	1.80
2c. Tried to speak Spanish with classmates.	5.59	0.97	1.59	1.50
2d. Tried to speak Spanish with strangers.	5.53	1.79	1.29	1.57
2e. Tried to speak Spanish with host family	6.71	0.66	2.24	1.56
2f. Tried to speak Spanish with service personnel	5.06	1.73	0.76	1.30
3a. Used Spanish outside of class to clarify classroom-related work.	4.47	1.68	0.59	1.28
3b. Used Spanish outside of class to obtain directions or information.	5.47	1.68	1.06	1.43
3c. Used Spanish outside of class for superficial or brief exchanges with host family	6.76	0.64	1.82	1.74

Language Contact Profile Item	Days per week		Hours per day	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3d. Used Spanish outside of class for extended conversations with host family	6.18	1.38	2.31	1.58
4a. Tried to use things learned inside the classroom in situations outside of the classroom.	5.76	1.21	1.56	1.90
4b. Took things learned outside the classroom back to class for questions or discussion.	5.06	1.79	1.53	1.62
5a. Spoke a language other than Spanish or English.	1.29	1.87	0.41	1.23
5b. Spoke Spanish to native or fluent speakers of Spanish.	6.29	1.77	2.65	1.73
5c. Spoke English to native or fluent speakers of Spanish.	3.06	2.69	0.76	1.64
5d. Spoke Spanish to nonnative speakers of Spanish.	5.06	1.51	1.71	1.49
5e. Spoke English to nonnative speakers of Spanish.	5.12	1.64	1.65	1.62
6a. Overall reading in Spanish outside of class.	3.12	2.14	0.65	1.22
6b. Reading newspapers in Spanish outside of class.	0.76	1.26	0.18	0.73
6c. Reading novels in Spanish outside of class.	0.35	0.76	0.12	0.49
6d. Reading magazines in Spanish outside of class.	1.18	1.42	0.41	1.00
6e. Reading schedules, announcements, and menus in Spanish outside of class.	6.18	1.10	1.24	1.15
6f. Reading e-mail and webpages in Spanish outside of class.	3.53	1.75	1.00	1.27
6g. Overall listening in Spanish outside of class.	6.71	0.82	3.41	1.58
6h. Listening to television and radio in Spanish outside of class.	4.47	2.47	1.47	1.59
6i. Listening to movies or videos in Spanish outside of class.	2.41	2.00	1.47	1.59
6j. Listening to songs in Spanish outside of class.	5.18	2.50	1.88	1.76
6k. Listening to catch other people's conversations in Spanish outside of class.	6.12	1.41	2.29	1.65
6l. Overall writing in Spanish outside of class.	3.65	2.22	1.00	1.22
6m. Writing homework assignments in Spanish outside of class.	5.18	1.10	1.88	1.11
6n. Writing personal notes or letters in Spanish outside of class.	2.18	1.98	0.53	1.01
6o. Writing e-mail in Spanish outside of class.	1.53	2.00	0.53	1.28
6p. Filling in forms or questionnaires in Spanish outside of class.	0.65	0.76	0.12	0.49
7. Speaking in English outside of class.	6.65	0.76	3.24	1.56
8a. Reading newspapers, magazines, or novels; watching movies, TV, or videos in English outside of class.	2.53	2.52	0.65	0.79
8b. Reading e-mail or webpages in English outside of class.	4.94	1.70	0.88	0.70
8c. Writing e-mail in English outside of class.	3.12	2.37	0.35	0.70
8d. Writing personal notes and letters in in English outside of class.	2.29	2.32	0.53	1.23

Note. The “days per week” scores show participants’ estimate on a 0-7 point scale. The “hours per day” scores refer to the range of the number of hours per day that participants spent in each activity and is estimated on a 0-5 point scale (0 = < 1 hour; 1 = 1-2 hours; 2 = 2-3 hours; 3 = 3-4 hours; 4 = 4-5 hours; and 5 = > 5 hours).

Open-Ended Questions

Interacting in the L2. From the responses to the open-ended questions, learners consistently reported that limited L2 knowledge hindered their ability to interact in the L2 throughout the SA experience. According to Jane,³

interacting in Spanish was much more difficult in the first week . . . I did not know how to express myself very well and I did not have much confidence . . . I still have a long way to go but I feel a lot better now in a social atmosphere because I have better comprehension, a wide range of vocabulary, and I am not as afraid to make mistakes.

Nearly all of the participants reported facing some degree of difficulty when interacting in the L2, especially at the beginning of the experience. In line with DeKeyser (2010) and Tanaka (2007), it is possible that by the time learners began to feel more comfortable with their L2 abilities, it was nearly time to return home:

Just when I was starting to find my groove in Spanish and go up and be able to talk to people in Spain, the program was over. I definitely will be going back and next time I won't need as much time to adjust. (Gina)

This resembles a common limitation found in short sojourns abroad.

Some learners reported that each time they returned to their host families, members of the family would interact with them extensively about school or social activities (e.g., shopping, eating out): “My host mom asked me what I had done during the day and helped me to remember the vocabulary. I love shopping but I could not remember the vocabulary in Spanish, and she helped me” (Gina). The fact that students stayed with host families was decisive in enabling them to practice the L2, as reported by Jenny: “In school we made friends who were living in dormitories and they did not have the interaction we did.” Joyce said: “My roommate and I made sure to take every advantage to talk with our host family, especially before and after meals: I called it our ‘free conversation practice’.” Thomas felt that “it was amazing to go home and have our Spanish family to welcome us every day and talk to us during the meals.” Several participants also believed that engaging with the host families helped them to gain confidence in interacting with Spanish speakers outside the home because they found that it was “always a fun and interesting experience” (Jenny). These feelings corroborated what the LCP revealed regarding host families: Learners spoke in Spanish with host families more than with anyone else during the SA sojourn. These conversations occurred on a daily basis and normally during lunch and dinner.

Students accepted that total immersion was mandatory in the school, at their host families' houses, while on excursions, and during leisure time spent with community members who do not speak English (e.g., Jane, Joyce, Ellie). Although the learners realized the value of maintaining an immersive experience, the results from the LCP suggested that they did not speak Spanish consistently and relied on their English on a daily basis. Some expressed difficulty or self-consciousness when speaking the L2 with other English speakers: “Sometimes it was really hard to express myself in Spanish, especially if the other person was a native English speaker” (Joyce); “I had difficulties understanding my friends when they talked to me in Spanish because they could not speak it very well so we just started to speak in English” (Thomas). Thomas went on to say:

When we went out to the clubs and bars, we hung out with our Canadian friends and with other international students and we spoke in English. We just had small talk [in Spanish] with the waiters and locals who were in the place.

Interestingly, he noted that the nightlife interaction was driven toward cultural differences and the desire to understand the environment in which those students were immersed.

The difficulties that learners expressed with regard to interacting in the L2 diminished slightly once they became familiar with the host community, which was facilitated by the friendly and welcoming atmosphere they found in most places, and particularly at the host school. Eight of the participants reported that they were able to interact in the L2 with other students from different countries and that this seemed to be more comfortable for them when compared to interaction with native speakers from the community. As Jacob reported:

I found it easier to talk to other students studying Spanish than to Spanish speakers. I was less stressed to make a mistake, because I knew they were learning as well. I felt awkward trying to speak with native speakers as I felt that they had less patience.

Gary similarly appreciated the patience of other international students who were learning Spanish at the host institution abroad:

In my free time, I was able to interact with people who were always very patient with my Spanish . . . a lot of them were also international students who were also studying Spanish . . . this has all helped me to use my Spanish in different settings—both formal and informal.

As a consequence, the learners felt more comfortable interacting with unfamiliar people during leisure time, suggesting that L2 proficiency level can directly affect the extent to which L2 learners engage with the host community. The learners also reported being exposed to various ways of communication (e.g., formal, informal) depending on the context (e.g., age, social environment), which “always provided an opportunity to make new friends in many different situations [and] kept us on our toes as to how to address and speak with certain people” (Thomas). At the end of the SA program, students reported that their interaction skills had substantially developed and many described themselves as more open to participating in activities that encourage social interaction in the L2.

While this interaction sounds encouraging, data from the LCP suggested that other interaction during leisure time occurred mostly in the L1. Being able to fall back on their L1 and communicate with each other when necessary was valued and brought up by a number of participants:

Even though we realized that the rules were to only speak in Spanish, I have to admit that it was nice knowing that we could use English to help each other and to avoid meltdowns during already stressful situations like not knowing how to say what you want to order to eat. (Gina)

Jane stated: “We always relied on each other when we went out. We girls always asked each other what the local guys were saying to us so that we made sure we really understood;” while Tara noted: “My roommate was always with me and, because she knows more Spanish than me, she helped me a lot.” Even though these examples show interaction in English, the topic of such interaction was about trying to understand the L2.

Jane also said that, “we probably did not make much sense when we tried to speak in Spanish back to them, but we tried anyway.” It might be that L2 confidence increased as a result of interacting with one another in the L1 although further research is needed to confirm this. These quotations support the emergence and importance of a learning community abroad, which was also reported by SA participants in Schwieter and Kunert (2012).

Perceptions of culture. *Culture* can be interpreted in various ways from one person to another (Levy, 2007). In Spain, as in many countries, there is a diverse set of cultures that have their own distinct values, customs, and lifestyles. The learners in the present study came into contact with many of these cultures when visiting the various regions of the country. When asked to reflect on their perceptions of culture, participants identified several elements that played a role. Spanish lifestyle, understood by students as a “slower pace of life” (Jane) in which “it seems that people really enjoy every moment” (Becca) and “spend more time with friends than we do” (Becca), was a topic of interest among participants. One participant even noted, “coffee to-go is almost unheard of” (Thomas). They also valued “the pleasure of spending time in public spaces” (Stephanie), either eating or just passing time because of their “love for being outside” (Becca), which admittedly can be limited during harsh winter months at home in Canada. Although the time abroad lasted only 5 weeks, the participants appeared to develop a vision of and appreciation for the L2 culture due to what they constantly referred to as “new ways of life.” This appreciation resulted from exposure to a different pace, schedule, and lifestyle in which people would “work to live rather than live to work” (Joyce). As stated by Thomas, “people here make time for their families and friends. They seem to enjoy spending time with them.”

From the reported extracurricular activities (e.g., paddling, shopping, eating out, drinking, dancing, going for walks) in which the learners participated during their free time, it was clear that the activities in which learners chose to participate—rather than those in which they were required to participate—were most influential in their perceptions and construction of culture.⁴ This claim, however, requires further investigation. For learners with low L2 proficiency, understanding L2 culture through L2 input was not that effective and this perhaps explains why deeper cultural learning was not evident. The learners reported difficulties comprehending guided excursions and art and history lectures: “At the beginning, I had to rely on my friends to understand the explanations on the art monuments we were seeing” (Thomas); “Sometimes I could not understand what the teacher was explaining because of my lack of vocabulary” (Jane).

The community members also played a significant role in how learners constructed the notion of culture and how they perceived Spaniards’ behaviour within society. Several of the participants described the native speakers with whom they came into contact as being welcoming and warm-hearted, such as described by Ellie: “I have never met people so kind and accepting and who were so patient with my speech while being inclusive.” Jenny mentioned that she had “a wonderful experience” with the host family and as for the school, “the teachers and students were all lovely and I had no issue adapting.” However, two of the learners did not share these sentiments. Tara seemed unenthusiastic and vague saying “the Spanish community was very different than home.” Moreover, Gary noted that the city “had many people passing through it regularly and at times it felt a little impersonal.” He went on to say that he would have preferred “to stay in a town in Spain where there were fewer international students” because he felt this would have “made it impossible to find

English speakers.” Nonetheless, positive comments toward the community resonated: “The community was an amazing experience. The city was chosen well with many attractions for students” (Molly).

Adapting to the new cultures with which learners came into contact was positive overall, and certain everyday Spanish customs left a particular impression on the Canadian visitors: “The two kisses on the cheeks upon greetings and departures shows that the culture is very affectionate” (Molly). This specific behaviour was mentioned by several other students such as Becca: “The greeting kisses were kind of awkward because we don’t do it with people we just meet, but I feel that it was just a way to demonstrate feelings in Spain.” Another aspect pointed out by almost every participant was their newfound appreciation for music, such as explained by Jessica: “I went out to dance every day! It is fun and a good way to make new friends.” The learners did not mention appreciation for other deeper artistic and/or cultural elements (e.g., painting, architecture, sculpture) even though they visited several museums and historical sites during their sojourn abroad. Nonetheless, many participants did informally report that they enjoyed being able to visit places and see things that they had otherwise only been able to see in books.

Personal outcomes. We asked participants to discuss their personal outcomes from the SA experience because it is through personal outcomes that we may further uncover the factors that shape language contact and perceptions of culture. This can be especially important in gauging the BICS that may form learners’ linguistic and cultural outcomes. Findings on these personal outcomes are consistent across the participants. Many of the learners embraced the SA experience in order to get the most from it: “I definitely feel as though I came to do what I wanted: learn Spanish” (Jane). Ellie went on to state: “I got an in-depth understanding as to what I can do in the future and studying abroad has even clarified my career path.”

Most learners reported feeling more confident about expressing themselves in Spanish and some even felt as though this comfort extended to their L1. For instance, some learners alluded to feeling more empowered to stand up for their beliefs and to be more conscious of their surroundings. Others reported that the experience helped them to become more independent and aware of their L2 language abilities. Molly said:

I normally do not like to talk to people who I don’t know, especially in another language. However, sometimes I pushed myself and I felt really happy when I could say something in Spanish. It took me a while, but I made it!

Likewise, one sentiment echoed by nearly all participants was that the SA experience helped them to be more outgoing and confident and to explore themselves. “I think I learnt a lot about myself . . . I realized I am a lot more mature than I thought I was and I am actually not that shy anymore” (Molly). This mirrors previous work suggesting that an SA experience can lead to significant changes in personal attributes such as identity and social behaviours abroad (Angulo, 2008; Block, 2007; Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2016; Schwieter & Ferreria, 2014).

Many of the participants felt as though the SA experience had changed them positively, partly due to the fact that they had learned from and experienced different situations together. “It was great to count on each other. I made very good friends because of the circumstances. We had to help each other sometimes and it made us feel we were

real friends” (Jessica). Several participants also stated that being part of a group while abroad helped deal with new situations that naturally arise during an SA experience, such as homesickness and culture shock. The learners were able to rely on one another to “learn so many things about social skills, problem solving, communication, culture, history . . . I don’t think it would have been the same without my peers sharing these things with me” (Nathalie).

Conclusion

This study has explored language contact and interaction, perceptions of culture, and reflections on personal outcomes during a 5-week SA experience. An analysis of language contact data showed that there is still a need to encourage L2 learners to interact more in the target language with native speakers. It is a challenge to get learners to replace their daily L1 use with the L2 while abroad—especially for learners with low L2 proficiency. With the exception of formal L2 classes during the sojourn, the reality is that host families are the primary source of L2 input for SA learners. The LCP also showed that the L2 learners read and wrote in the L2 very little. Many SA programs take a holistic approach to L2 learning while abroad so as to not ignore specific areas of language learning (e.g., by also keeping diaries in the target language, reading and reporting on local news, reading literature) [Engle & Engle, 1999; Misfeldt, 2013; Plews & Misfeldt, 2016]. The results from the present study underscore the need to encourage more reading and writing while abroad.

Qualitative data from the open-ended questions emphasized students’ concern with their adaptation and interaction in Spain particularly at the beginning of the sojourn. Many reported that the host family and the school were essential to their successful adaptation and positive learning experience. The conscious effort to integrate into the target culture was echoed by several participants and by the end of the sojourn they felt closer to the target culture. However, this was mostly facilitated by the host families and the host institution and appeared to focus on BICS. It did not appear as though these participants perceived L2 culture in terms of deeper cognitive, academic, critical, or cultural-historical matters. Instead, many mentioned the relaxing, slower-paced lifestyle, food, and *siestas* as integral to their perceptions and appreciation of the culture. Future research and SA programs should consider incorporating ways in which learners can construct L2 culture based on other representations of culture (e.g., art, media, politics, history, music, dance, painting, architecture, cuisine, customs).

Students did not mention history, architecture, media, or art as cultural elements they used to define *culture*. This unexpected finding could be due to the broadness of the questions posed to participants regarding culture. Future work should consider asking participants about the specific extracurricular activities that formed part of the SA program. It is possible that because so many new activities were introduced to the learners during a very short period abroad, there was simply too much to recall and reflect upon in a broad question such as “3. With which aspects of Spanish culture do you feel you identified most?” This possible limitation to extrapolating learners’ perceptions of culture could be reduced in future work by including questions that ask learners to reflect on specific representations of culture.

The participants in the present study also tended to rely on each other (mostly in the L1) to speak and understand the L2 and to navigate a new culture. Moving forward,

preparing learners for an SA experience and promoting engagement with host communities while abroad must be further investigated (Engle & Engle, 1999). Kinginger (2011) brought to light “(a) the need for greater and more qualitatively-meaningful engagement of students in the practices of their host communities; and (b) closer attention to students’ preparation for language learning in an SA context” (p. 59). While we believe that the L2 learners in the present study were sufficiently prepared for an SA experience—mostly because of preparatory efforts from the Canadian institution’s international office and mandatory pre-departure meetings that took place 4 months, 3 months, and 1 month prior to departure—we failed to have the students engage with the host community pre- and post-SA. Programs such as ours ought to take advantage of social media, computer-mediated communication, and virtual visits to facilitate this (Brubaker, 2007; Kinginger & Belz, 2005; Pertusa-Seva & Stewart, 2008; Tudini, 2007). Pre-departure interactions could provide instructors with an opportunity to carefully cultivate learners’ preparedness for SA and their pre-departure L2 proficiency (DeKeyser, 2010).

Our results show that students often needed to fall back on their L1. In a study by Ranta and Meckleborg (2013), L2 learners abroad spent on average only about 11 minutes per day in one-on-one conversation in L2, showing that even in immersion contexts students face limited opportunities for developing L2 language and culture. This suggests that an SA experience does not automatically imply constant interaction in the L2. It is likely that this is related to a lack of procedural and/or declarative knowledge. DeKeyser’s (2010) study showed that at the end of the SA experience, students lacked proceduralized knowledge, making it impossible to demonstrate much progress. DeKeyser argued that “the promise of study abroad remains unfulfilled without adequate preparation in the form of proceduralized or at least declarative knowledge of the second language grammar” (p. 80). Future research is needed to substantiate this possibility although it is probably the most accurate explanation in our study.

We also note a need to incorporate tasks and projects during the abroad sojourn that require learners to actively engage with native speakers beyond the host families. Small group projects that reinforce group cohesion could exploit this quite well. Assignments requiring students to initiate structured conversations (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010) could be very beneficial as they might spark further (impromptu) discussions and ultimately increase interaction with the host community. Other ways of bolstering engagement with the host community while abroad could be through collaborative group work such as service learning and internships (Ducate, 2009; Kurasawa & Nagatomi, 2006) or technology-based assignments such as video projects (Goulah, 2007), e-journals (Stewart, 2010), and blogs (Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, & Valentine, 2009).

In the present study, we have discussed some key issues in L2 acquisition research on SA that include L2 contact and interaction, perceptions of L2 culture, and learner outcomes. While it is likely that learners participating in other SA experiences may have differing views and outcomes, it is also probable that commonalities will emerge from extensive analyses of diverse programs and language backgrounds. Only with more research that explores the issues we have discussed can we better understand how L2 contact (spoken/heard and written/read) can be maximized in SA programs, what cultural representations contribute to learners’ perceptions of L2 culture during an SA experience, and how personal outcomes can be achieved to move learners closer to a multilingual and multicultural future.

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Notes

¹To see the full version of the LCP, please refer to Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, and Halter (2004).

²The *t* tests reported here compare differences between days per week rather than hours per day. Similar patterns emerge when comparing differences between hours per week.

³For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms were used to refer to participants throughout the present study.

⁴We should point out the potential selective and privileged view of the participants in the present study and the fact that their perspectives may not align with their age-matched counterparts in the host community who may be struggling economically. This optimistic view may have been constructed based on the privileged activities in which the L2 learners participated. Many of these activities are simply not accessible for some host community members who may be in a difficult economic situation. This should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

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