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# Study Abroad Programs: The Cure-All Medicine of

# Instructed Second Language Acquisition?

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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**Abstract**

Study Abroad (SA) programs have grown in popularity over the past few years. Conceptualised within the Instructed Second Language Acquisition field of study, these programs develop in a country where learners' L2 is (one of) the L1(s). The assumption of SA programs being the elixir of language learning is not only generally accepted these days but also one of the reasons for their praised esteem. Nevertheless, research conducted on this subject has shown mixed findings regarding the effects of SA. The aim of the present study is to examine which aspects of language learning benefit from SA and up to which extent. Concurrently, the diverse factors that have an influence on SA are brought into analysis to complete the general picture. A proposal for the improvement of SA programs is also presented. For this study, a revision of part of the literature about SA is carried through. This analysis found that oral skills, rather than written skills are the most meaningfully improved competence after a SA program, provided that the right motivational and interactional students' profiles meet the appropriate setting characteristics. Additionally, at least seven factors, namely motivation, interaction, type of housing, identity, gender, proficiency level at the beginning of the sojourn and length of stay, shape the SA experience. Lastly, measures for improvement in SA programs will be explored in relation to students' beliefs and the provision of pre-stay specific training.

**Keywords:** ISLA, Study Abroad, language learning, individual differences

## 1. Introduction

Study Abroad (SA) programs have become more and more popular among students in recent times. Stays abroad are believed to increase learners' proficiency level in a variety of aspects of language learning (Briggs, 2015; Surtees, 2016). Nevertheless, there is still not a consensus regarding the effectiveness of this type of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA). Over the past 40 years, there has been an increase in the number of people that have learnt a second language by means of instruction. ISLA encompasses three different modalities of learning, namely at home (AH), immersion and SA. We will shed light on the latest, since its growth in popularity and far-reaching beliefs are currently on everyone's lips.

It is extensively agreed that SA does not only affect a) language learning but also b) learners' personal aptitudes (Czerwionka, Artamonova and Barbosa, 2015; Kinginger, 2013). Considering the former, while some scholars have found that learners improve their oral skills the most, an improvement regarding written skills and vocabulary acquisition is also found (Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Serrano, Tragant and Llanes, 2014). Nevertheless, evidence about no gains in vocabulary acquisition has also been described (Briggs, 2015). (Lack of) interaction and motivation to interact are two crucial aspects that make these programs remarkable and undoubtedly play a role in the effects of SA programs (Hernández, 2010b). Sociolinguistic variables, such as identity and gender, together with learners' individual differences, including age, proficiency level and attitude, shape interaction as one of the pillars of a successful SA programs (Hernández, 2010a; Kinginger, 2011: Llanes and Muñoz, 2013). The type of program and learners' beliefs about L2 learning also modify the experience (Tanaka and Ellis, 2003).

Suggestions about improving the nature of SA programs and therefore attempts to maximise their post-stay gains have already been made. These recommendations include preparing both hosts and learners with a pre-stay course that highlights the key aspects of SA, namely interaction and its quality, as well as the running and development of the L2 learning process (Briggs, 2015; Kinginger, 2011; Loewen, 2015).

The aim of the present study is to explore which aspects of L2 learning are meaningfully improved after a SA program alongside the individual differences that are intertwined with them. We will also analyse how SA is conditioned by external factors such as the opportunities to interact and the quality of these interactions. Additionally, the study will also touch upon the concerns that relate to the improvement of SA programs.

## 2. Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA)

The field of interest of ISLA is conceptualized within a wider domain, which is Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Loewen, 2015). SLA has gained a greater amount of attention in the past 40 years. Traditionally, society and cultural knowledge were not included in its scope. However, nowadays nearly every L2 learner has acquired the non-native language by means of instruction which besides being central and helpful for language learning, is encompassed in a social and cultural setting. Moreover, instruction is not a fixed aspect of language learning, i.e. it can be presented differently depending on who the instructor is, and its learning outcomes undoubtedly vary across learners (Han and Nassaji, 2018). In order to encompass these new changes, Han (2016) foresees the future of SLA by proposing that this field comprises three disciplines: a) fundamental

SLA, b) instructed SLA and c) applied SLA. Research on fundamental SLA would focus on SLA's particular and proper aspects, without considering in depth the practical implementations. Instructed SLA would be more empirically focused since pedagogically related concerns would be hypothesized and tested. Regarding applied SLA, its focus would be real life educational matters and their setting characteristics.

In the past few years, ISLA has been in the spotlight due to the increased and remarkable importance given to language learning and teaching. According to a definition provided by Han and Nassaji, the definition of ISLA is:

> "an area of SLA that investigates … [any] processes and mechanisms [social and cognitive] involved in any form-focused intervention (explicit or implicit)" (Nassaji, 2016b. p. 13), with instruction loosely constructed as staged not just by human participants (e.g. the teacher and the student) but also by the social context (Han and Nassaji 2018: 3).

In other words, ISLA explores the relationship between intervention and language learning within a social context. It is not possible to completely understand ISLA in isolation. Following the shared and widespread idea that instruction does benefit language learning, ISLA takes under consideration every type of manipulation of the learning process. In such manner, it aims to recognise how this guidance, or the learning conditions promote and ease L2 acquisition. Loewen (2015) specifically touches upon each defining term. Firstly, the term *second* makes reference to a language that is different from one's first. It is an additional language other than the mother tongue(s), regardless if it is the second, third, or fourth language that a person is learning. The term *language* is defined as "a system of form-meaning mappings that is used for communication" (Loewen, 2015: 3). Lastly, *acquisition* refers to the course of L2 development. The author claims that in order for ISLA to take place both instruction on the one hand and attempted acquisition by the learner on the other hand need to happen. The learning that results from ISLA is

made possible thanks to teaching, i.e. it occurs as a result of it. Moreover, the guidance that takes place throughout the L2 learning process is an essential feature of ISLA too.

Although L2 learning is the shared aim, ISLA does not always happen in the same context. Context determines the opportunities that learners have regarding L2 input and output characteristics. Not all contexts offer the same quantity or quality of input; neither the possibilities for interaction in the L2 are the same (Serrano, Llanes and Tragant, 2011). The three most widely spread contexts are at-home, immersion, and SA. The difference in these contexts resides in the type of input and output, the exposure to the L1 and the opportunities to practice the L2. The at-home context provides fewer opportunities for the last two characteristics than the immersion and study abroad contexts (Loewen, 2015).

Bringing into focus SA, its distinctive features are the high amount of authentic exposure that learners will get abroad as well as the plenty of opportunities to interact, since the learners are out of the classroom setting. However, the reliability of SA being the most advantageous context for developing and bettering every L2 competence has been questioned in the literature (Loewen, 2015). The purpose of the following sections will be to explore the SA context in detail in order to unearth the questionable assumption of SA being the cure-all medicine for L2 learning by paying attention to its effects on language learning and the factors that influence the experience.

## 3. Study Abroad

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify here what is meant by SA. According to Briggs (2015), SA:

> "describes the act of travelling to a foreign country for the purpose of study. In common usage the term encompasses both cultural and exchange programmes designed to promote language acquisition, such as tertiary-level academic exchanges for university language majors" (Briggs, 2015: 129).

In the literature, SA refers to programs that include L2 instruction. Therefore, SA should not be confused with "residence abroad" or "stay abroad". Contrary to SA, these terms may not consider ISLA for the discussion (Serrano, Llanes and Tragant, 2016).

What makes SA special for language learning are the characteristics of its context. Following Loewen's (2015) claim, going on SA on its own is already considered to be an attempt to manipulate the conditions for learning. One of the central benefits of SA is that learners are exposed to a wider variety of social settings from the moment they are moved from the traditional classroom setting (Loewen, 2015). Furthermore, in a SA environment, learners' exposure to the L2 has the potential to be higher than in at home (AH) or in immersion contexts (Briggs, 2015). Moreover, the opportunities to interact with native speakers of the L2 and have access to authentic input increase since the learners' L2 is (one of) the country's L1(s) (Hernández, 2010b). Notwithstanding, the experience greatly varies across learners, since there are as many experiences as learners are. In this line, L2 learning outcomes after SA that are not as high as expected can still have had a beneficial influence for learning (Kinginger, 2011).

Loewen (2015) states that "in sum, SA can be a powerful opportunity for development; however, numerous factors may determine the extent of its effectiveness" (Loewen, 2015: 149). The factors that he mentions include: a) the amount and type of preparation, both on the learner and the host's side, since interaction is twofold, b) the proficiency level, c) the age of learner and d) Internet usage. Regarding the length of stay, the author positions the quality of interaction above the duration of the program. Only little of the literature published on SA has reported no effects after SA. The great majority of studies have described positive or mixed effects; mixed meaning that learners'

improvement on language learning was not significant or noticeable in all competences (Loewen, 2015). These last studies may contribute to the dismantling of the belief that SA is a guarantee for language learning in all aspects. In order to explore the beliefs that surround SA in more detail, these will be presented in the following subsection.

### 3.1 Beliefs about Study Abroad

The belief of SA programs being the cure-all medicine for ISLA has been in everyone's lips in recent times. The reason for their growing and widespread current popularity may be due to this presumably unquestionable assumption. Moreover, companies and institutions use this idea to attract people's attention and insist on the thought that SA programs are the essential element to successfully achieve native-like proficiency (Briggs, 2015). The previously referenced author uses the example of Eurolingua's (2015) message published in its website: "No matter what your level, you will soon be speaking fluently, with understanding, ease and confidence. By taking part in one of our study abroad programs … you will be armed with an authentic accent". In the same light, an article published in Study International's (2018) webpage highlights language acquisition as one of the top 25 biggest benefits of SA by claiming that "Immersion in another country is the quickest way to master the local language". Both examples let the belief grow.

Beliefs about language learning in a SA context are worth being analysed for two major reasons. Firstly, because they contribute to the actual acquisition of the language and secondly, because they shape the entire experience. Not to forget that there is sometimes a mismatch between the two (Surtees, 2016). Moreover, it has also been

reported that students' beliefs about how a language is best learned change after the SA experience (Tanaka and Ellis, 2003).

There is not a general consensus on how to classify beliefs about language learning in the literature. On the one hand, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) distinguish between two dimensions of beliefs: a) beliefs that concern how a person identifies as a language learner (involving aptitude, motivation, confidence and self-efficacy) and b) beliefs about the different methodologies that can be used for language learning. On the other hand, Surtees' (2016) classification identifies four different types of beliefs and classifies them as follows: a) attitudes in relation to the target language, b) presuppositions about homestay, c) motivations for enrolling in a SA program, and d) changes in perceptions about how learners think they learn. In the end, however, the difference between these two classifications is that Surtees separates Tanaka and Ellis' first type of belief in three parts.

The belief that SA programs are the cure-all medicine for ISLA has instigated researchers to analyse up to which extent SA programs are the miraculous remedy for L2 learning. This line of research has been going on over the last twenty years (Surtees, 2016). The opportunities for practicing non-fictional everyday situations are higher in a second language environment than in a foreign language environment. Consequently, L2 skills are automated (DeKeyser, 2007b). Therefore, an improvement in all aspects of language proficiency is expected. Lafford (2006) plainly mentions all the expected outcomes of SA that were (and are) recurrent in instructors' speech, especially in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup>C. Enjoying a SA experience:

> "would not only broaden students' cultural horizons, but also help them to become
> "fluent" speakers of the language, with more improvement in their target language
> (L2) pronunciation, grammar (morphosyntactic) usage, vocabulary knowledge and

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discursive abilities than those learners who stayed at home and acquired the target language in the classroom" (Lafford, 2006: 3).

In the following section, the effects of SA that have been reported in the literature from the 2000s onwards will be discussed.


## 4. Effects of Study Abroad

One of the first prominent studies about SA is Carroll's *Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors near Graduation from College* (1967). In his research, Carrol claims that a SA experience is what mostly influences language learning. Following studies on this area state that the effects of SA are influenced by different factors, such as the context in which they take place, the amount of L2 use and the intensity of L2 exposure. Context has a relevant importance since it determines the other two factors, the quantity and the quality of both L2 use and L2 exposure (Serrano et al., 2011). In the same line, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) point out that "the extent to which learners gain from a study-abroad experience will depend to a considerable extent on the nature of the program" (Tanaka and Ellis, 2003: 81). The length of the program and the type of housing that learners have in the SA experience are among the factors that shape the program and its outcomes.

The vast majority of studies that examine the effects of SA use a pre-test and post-test methodology to identify the outcomes of the experience. Similarly, in order to confirm or dismantle the popular myth, a comparison between ISLA in different contexts is used. In other words, research studies compare language learning outcomes of SA with those of AH with a view to ascertain whether the SA ones are significantly different.

On a parallel line, the outcomes of the SA experience have also been analysed with regard to individual differences, with a special focus on motivation and aptitude. It

is important to consider the effect of individual differences on SA so as to understand both the variation across different learners regarding learning outcomes and the diverse insights of a same program (Kinginger, 2011).

## 4.1 Language learning

Research studies found in the literature report mixed findings regarding the effects of SA on language learning. Taking a closer look into vocabulary knowledge, Briggs (2015) explained that research studies have indicated that the SA context may be more beneficial for acquiring vocabulary knowledge than AH contexts. Nevertheless, L2 immersion contexts might also improve this knowledge. It is true, however, that a solid statement that reports the "relationship between out-of-class contact and vocabulary knowledge gain has yet to be established" (Briggs, 2015: 132).

The two subsections that follow explore in more detail the relationship between language learning and both written and oral skills. However, it can already be stated that oral skills, rather than written skills, seem to be the most benefited after a SA program. SA improves language learning by proceduralizing and automatizing L2 knowledge. The rationale behind this statement may fall in Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT*) theory (Anderson, 1992), backed by DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007a), which affirms that "participants first need to have some declarative knowledge of the L2 rules; next, this knowledge is proceduralized by practicing it, and after massive hours of practice, they are able to automatize the L2, or certain aspects of it" (Llanes, 2012: 185). The vast majority of students, if not all, that enrol in a SA program have already had contact with the L2 in the AH context. This contact takes place at school

and in other settings, which include AH immersion and semi-intensive courses. Therefore, this reality strengthens Anderson's ACT* theory.

### 4.1.1 Written skills

It is interesting to note here that SA studies are generally more concerned with oral skills, rather than written skills. This being said, three studies that have compared the development of written skills of AH with SA groups are presented in the following paragraphs.

Fluency, syntactic complexity, lexical complexity and accuracy were the four variables under study that Serrano et al. (2011) took into consideration to analyse and compare the changes in written performance between AH intensive and SA programs. Their results showed that none of the groups improved significantly higher than the other once the pre-test results for each group were considered. Nevertheless, there were significant differences regarding lexical complexity and fluency in the post-test between AH semi-intensive and SA students. A following study by the same authors investigated by means of a written task whether the improvement of English language proficiency was higher in the case of SA students, in contrast with non-intensive AH students (Serrano et al., 2014). Their results showed that although SA students did better both in the pre- and post-test, their improvement was not significantly higher than that of AH students. Nevertheless, in a later study, Serrano et al. (2016) compared a SA group of students with an AH intensive one. These researchers stated that the AH immersion context was more favourable than the SA context for the development of grammar, as their grammaticality judgment test reflected. The higher tendency for focus on forms in the AH context and

the absence of explicit grammar instruction in the SA context may be the reason that accounts for this difference.

### 4.1.2. Oral skills

Studies in the literature show that oral skills are the ones that are further developed after a SA program on many occasions. The results presented by Hernández (2010a) indicate that students' proficiency level regarding oral skills was at least maintained, if not improved. This improvement ranged from intermediate low to intermediate mid, from intermediate mid to intermediate high and from intermediate high to advanced low. Furthermore, as it will be discussed in later sections of the present study, a strong predictor of oral proficiency improvement is the amount of interaction with the L2 culture. The aforementioned author compared the speaking proficiency of an AH group of students with that of a SA group both before and after the program. While the scores in the pre-test did not show significant differences between the two groups, the post-test results revealed that SA students' oral proficiency level had undergone a greater improvement than that of AH students (Hernández, 2010b). As it was in the case of Serrano et al.'s (2011) results for written skills, there were no significant differences between the SA and AH intensive programs. This finding suggests that both SA and AH intensive programs are favourable for improving L2 proficiency in the same manner. When SA participants were compared with AH semi-intensive participants, however, meaningful differences were found regarding fluency and lexical complexity, which were higher for the SA group. Lack of opportunities to interact with the L2 outside the classroom setting may be the reason for this contrast. The results of a more recent study by the same researchers (Serrano et al., 2016), which compared students who had enrolled

in AH immersion program with those of a SA program, showed that SA participants exhibited higher gains in lexical diversity during the oral production task than their counterparts.

Still within the study of acquisition of oral skills, Muñoz and Llanes (2014) placed the focus on the development and changes of learners' foreign accent. Their results showed that SA participants' degree of foreign accent (FA) had decreased more than AH participants' FA after a three months study. The explanation for this difference may be the limited amount of exposure to the L2 and the not very high input quality together with the absence of phonetic instruction within the classroom walls.

## 4.2 Individual differences (aptitude and motivation)

SA also has a notable influence on students' individual differences (IDs), which help to explain and understand the diversity of SA outcomes. IDs in SLA include motivation, personality, age, learning styles, learning strategies, aptitude and intelligence, beliefs and preferences, L1 skills and language disabilities. The two IDs that are believed to be more important for SLA are motivation and aptitude. Moreover, they are the two IDs that most distinctively foretell the success of second language learning (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003). That is the reason why this section mainly focuses on them.

The definition on what constitutes *aptitude* is not crystal-clear. Snow (1992) states that aptitude has several meanings. Firstly, aptitude is not a continuous and inherent intellectual ability. Secondly, it refers to the willingness, appropriateness and sensitivity for learning. Lastly, diverse characteristics present in the language learning context constitute aptitude. These are learning strategies, self-regulatory capacity, motivational orientation and other personality traits. Along similar lines, Carroll (1981) proposed that

phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning ability and inductive learning ability are the four constituents of language aptitude.

For what it concerns SLA, there is a relationship between the cognitive characteristics of the individual and aptitude. Sparks and Ganshow (1993) found another correlation between language aptitude, L1 learning and SLA. It is usually the case that what creates learning difficulties in L1 learning is also responsible for lack of success in SLA.

Kinginger (2013) undertook a detailed analysis of the effects of SA on the domains of communicative competence reported in the literature. In relation to actional competence, SA programs may be advantageous for students' expansion of knowledge of speech acts like requesting or apologising. With respect to discourse competence, SA programs enhance students' knowledge and use of address forms in context (Kinginger, 2008, cited in Kinginger, 2013).

Although *motivation* is a commonly-used notion when it comes to language learning, it does not have a clear-cut definition since many scholars have attempted to define it. The two most prominent researchers in the literature about motivation are Robert C. Gardner and Zoltán Dörnyei. On the one hand, Gardner and Lambert (1959) distinguish two different types of motivation on the basis of a student's purpose when learning a second language. The aims of *integrative motivation* in language study are "to learn more about the language group, or to meet more and different people" (Gardner and Lambert, 1959: 267). In the case of *instrumental motivation*, the aims of language study "reflect the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement" (Gardner and Lambert, 1959: 267). On the other hand, Dörnyei (2001) makes motivation responsible for three aspects:

a) the reason why people make the decision of doing something, b) how long they wish to continue the activity, and c) how hard they will pursue it.

As will be stated in later sections, motivation influences SA programs. However, language learning, which takes place during a SA program, can also affect motivation. In other words, "motivation may cause L2 achievement; however, it is also possible that motivation is a result of learning" (Isabelli-García, 2006: 233). Learners' experience throughout the learning process has both low and high achievements. Students' personal handling of these situations can determine the amount and quality of their motivation.

## 4.3 Intercultural Competence

SA also has remarkable effects on students' intercultural competence. It is necessary here to clarify exactly was is meant by *intercultural communicative competence* (ICC) and *intercultural communication*. ICC is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, cited in Czerwionka et al., 2015: 80). Similarly, *intercultural communication* is defined as "a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures" (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984: 19). In other words, when people from at least two different cultures are engaged in the same conversation, intercultural communication takes place. The knowledge they have about the other's culture and how they make use of it will determine the efficiency and suitability of their interaction. If the interlocutors want to communicate meaning adequately and competently, their knowledge and understanding about the other are crucial. This claim is brought further with the following statement: "Developing intercultural competence is a necessity in this global community

where it is imperative to gain respect for, knowledge of and understanding of other cultures" (Maharaja, 2018: 37).

Although SA programs contribute to the development of a student's intercultural competence, the solely act of enrolling in a SA program does not directly mean that this type of students' competence will undergo changes. Furthermore, the nature of the SA program and the distinctive aspects of the host country have an influence on intercultural competence too (Behrnd and Porzelt, 2012). Nevertheless, the person's distinctive and individual way of being, compared with the characteristics of the program, has a major importance for ICC (Terzuolo, 2018). Terzuolo (2018) sheds light on the uncharted idea that cultural identity and gender might be of considerable relevance in encounters where ICC is involved.

Czerwionka et al. (2015) conducted research in order to examine how students' intercultural knowledge developed, grew and changed from pre-program to post-program. Their participants were US students who took a summer study abroad program in Spain. It is important to mention here that their general collective results may not be representative of all students, since intercultural knowledge is very person-specific. Nevertheless, their results showed that students experience knowledge growth after having spent some time abroad. Moreover, there was a change regarding the cultural topics that were of their interest pre and post program. While they were mostly concerned about city life and schedule at the beginning, their interest shifted to *big C* (big culture) and daily life as well as values and politics after their stay. In the same line, it has been claimed that while students' concerns are mainly language-focused at first, they become socially-focused at the end (Stephenson, 1999, cited in Behrnd and Porzelt, 2012: 214).

There is not a consensus among scholars regarding the relationship between the length of the SA program and the development of intercultural competence. On the one hand, it has been claimed that a 6-week stay abroad is enough for ICC to grow (Czerwionka et al., 2015). On the other hand, the idea of 6 months not being enough for developing ICC has been put forward too (Behrnd and Porzelt, 2012). Further research is needed in order to reach an agreement on how long it is necessary for a SA program to take place in order for it to be meaningful for ICC.

## 5. Influence of different factors on Study Abroad

SA programs are twofold. The previous section explores the side that relates to the effects of SA on language learning, individual differences and intercultural competence. The following one focuses on the role that different factors play on SA. On the one hand, this influence is determined by learners' individual differences and personal characteristics, such as motivation, interaction and proficiency level at the beginning of the stay. On the other hand, the different options that the characteristics of SA programs allow, such as the different types of housing and the length of stay, have an influence over the experience too.

Motivation has an impact on language learning and consequently influences language proficiency, especially speaking skills. Students who are motivated to learn the language do not miss the opportunities they have to interact with others. Moreover, they may also seek for opportunities to interact due to their willingness to learn. Hernández (2010b) compared students with similar motivation characteristics both in SA and AH settings. Results showed that SA students' speaking improvement was higher with respect to AH students as well as that this improvement made them capable of talking about a

wider variety of situations using different structures. Another important aspect concerning motivation and language learning has a direct bearing with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The former type involves those learners that want to learn an L2 because it is their wish. The later type concerns those learners that study an L2 because someone else, such as parents or institutions, have asked them to. Serrano et al. (2014) compared two groups of students, one in a SA program and the other one in an AH program. Among the differences they found between the two, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were present. Students who had enrolled in a SA program had a more intrinsic motivation to learn English. On the other hand, students at the AH program had a more extrinsic motivation. This difference may be seen as relevant for L2 learning since intrinsic motivation favours learners' positive attitudes towards it. In the case of SA students, it also contributes to their feeling of having a favourable and enriching stay.

Motivation and interaction are intertwined. These two factors influence SA as much as they influence each other. Hernández (2010b) points out that both SA and AH learners have integrative and instrumental reasons for studying an L2. However, those students whose integrative motivation was higher sought for more opportunities to be in contact with the L2 in out-of-class time than those whose integrative motivation was lower. This out-of-class contact with the L2 means more interaction with the L2, which consequently clearly had an impact on the target language's gains, especially speaking proficiency. This is only considered to be true for SA programs and not AH programs, since the number of hours that students reported to have been in contact with native speakers of the target language was higher in the SA group than in the AH group (Hernández, 2010b).

Interaction is one of the most important factors, if not the most important one, that influences SA. Many research studies have claimed that interaction is key for making a SA program meaningful. It undoubtedly has an influence on language gains as well as on other skills, such as intercultural competence. This is the reason why some scholars have pointed out that being surrounded by native speakers of learners' L2 in out-of-class hours is essential for the improvement of L2 learning. Briggs (2015) explains that living with L2 native speakers during the SA program facilitates students' engagement with the target language. Students who live alone or with their L1 peers will less easily be surrounded by the L2 during out-of-class time. Therefore, they will have fewer opportunities for practising as well as less variety of contexts to take part in. Hernández's (2010a) research study is in line with this explanation since some of its participants claimed that it was the time they had spent with their host families, with which they used the L2, what mainly caused their speaking proficiency to improve. Similarly, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) suggest that it is when SA students spend their residence abroad with host families whose native language is the students' L2, that more significant gains may occur. These researchers believe this to be the reason why a homogeneous group, linguistically and culturally speaking, which did not have the necessity of using the L2 out-of-class, did not show great proficiency gains after SA.

The amount and quality of learners' interaction with the L2 community can be shaped by the role institutions play. Briggs claims that "curricular intervention results in increased engagement in out-of-class L2 contact" (Briggs, 2015: 138). If the right guidance is provided, learners will not only seek for more opportunities to interact in out-of-class setting but also get involved in a wider variety of situations that require using the L2. While Briggs (2015) puts in the spotlight SA institutions, Hernández (2010a) also

includes AH institutions in the general picture. Students' instructors should prepare and make students enhance in activities that encourage both integrative motivation and interaction during pre-departure class hours. Afterwards, SA instructors can continue to have this type of activities while students are abroad to try to make sure that students use and practice the target language out-of-class. It would be distinctly positive for students to have the opportunity to work with authentic materials in-class. In the same line, Hernández maintains that if SA instructors explain students how important interaction with NSs is for developing greater speaking skills, students will be aware of the language learning process and value interaction more.

Among all the different factors that have an influence on SA, learners' proficiency level at the beginning of the sojourn abroad is also present. It is necessary to note here that age on its own is not a significant variable that shapes gains in SA, given that age is related to proficiency level (Llanes and Muñoz, 2009). This being said, it is not a compulsory requirement for enrolling in a SA program to have a specific proficiency level, although some institutions or programs ask for it. Since this difference may influence the experience, some researchers have studied whether and how it shapes the SA adventure. Results showed that low proficiency level students benefit more than higher proficiency level students (Llanes and Muñoz, 2009). These authors compared two groups with different proficiency levels pre-departure. The low proficiency level group showed a greater improvement in fluency than the high proficiency level one. Similarly, the ratio of both words in L1 and lexical errors fell notably more in the case of low proficiency level students. These results do not mean that learners with a high proficiency level at the beginning of the sojourn do not benefit from a SA program. This type of students can also enrich their L2 learning after SA, but they would ideally have to enrol

in a program that lasts longer for their improvements to be meaningfully noticeable. According to Briggs (2015), when the SA program takes longer, it is more possible for the learner to encounter himself/herself in situations in which specific or newly acquired vocabulary items need to be used. Hence, high proficiency level students, whose vocabulary is richer and deeper, may have a greater chance of using all their lexicon when the SA program takes longer.

Briggs (2015) analysed the development of vocabulary knowledge in three different SA groups. SA programs with a length of 6-10 were considered short; 11-15 weeks stays were treated as medium; and 16-20 weeks programs were studied as long. Briggs (2015) reports that length of stay may have an influence on vocabulary knowledge since the group that stayed the longest abroad was the one that showed a higher improvement on receptive, productive and overall vocabulary gains. Furthermore, Serrano et al. (2016) affirm that length of stay is also a relevant variable for the analysis of the amount and type of interaction that takes place during the SA program.

## 6. Improving Study Abroad programs

Improving different factors of SA programs would lead to an increase of their outcomes and would also make time spent abroad more meaningful. Some authors have done some proposals regarding this issue. These are of different nature and touch upon diverse aspects, varying from putting beliefs in the spotlight and critically analysing them (Surtees, 2016) to making students aware of the importance of interaction and engagement with the L2 community (Kinginger, 2011).

According to Kinginger (2011), not only participants of SA programs have the responsibility of having the will to interact, but also all the other people involved in the

development of the program, such as instructors, host families and company workers. These should encourage them to enhance language learning. The author identifies three areas of improvement. Firstly, language educators should prepare students before they embark on a SA program by encouraging them to take part in host communities' activities and guiding them in the knowledge of the development and characteristics of these practices too. Moreover, using technology resources such as online journals and blogs would be a good instrument for enlarging students' knowledge of the L2 community (Hernández, 2010b). Secondly, students could enrol in a language awareness course before departure. This would provide them with a grasp of how language learning develops. Consequently, they would know how to make the most of the time spent abroad because of their increased awareness of what the process of language acquisition involves. Thirdly, SA could be made part of the curriculum, although this is a still not very established practice.

Hernández's (2010b) study revealed a close relationship between motivation, interaction and improvement of proficiency level in SA context. Therefore, an improvement that involves integrating activities that foster students' integrative and instrumental motivation is opted for. Moreover, AH and SA instructors could work together so as to foster the development of speaking proficiency by touching upon the language learning process. Following Loewen's (2015) claim regarding interaction opportunities: "these opportunities may happen on their own if learners are left to their own devices, but they are more likely to occur if they are structured into the program" (Loewen, 2015: 159).

In relation to students' own beliefs about language learning and personal abilities, they can have an influence over all the SA experience. Furthermore, since the

expectations do not always match the real outcomes, feelings of frustration and a sense of failure may appear. This is the reason why it is important to adjust the expectations of the outcomes with the context. If beliefs are critically assessed and students can talk about their internal feelings, it will be easier to avoid disappointment after the SA program. (Surtees, 2016).

Lastly, Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) suggested that giving students intercultural competence training would further develop SA students' intercultural knowledge, resulting in improvement. Conversely to the other types of training mentioned above, which should ideally take place before a SA program, "the experience of having been abroad seems to have created the optimal precondition to benefit from intercultural training" (Behrnd and Porzelt, 2012: 220). In other words, intercultural competence training would be more beneficial, useful and effective if it happened after the SA program, from which this training would grow.

## 7. Conclusion

This study began by wondering which aspects of L2 learning are meaningfully improved after the SA program alongside the individual differences that are intertwined with them. After analysing how internal and external factors condition SA programs, we conclude that they are not the cure-all medicine for ISLA. It is true that oral skills are the most meaningfully improved competence after a SA program, provided that the right motivational and interactional students' profiles meet the appropriate setting characteristics.

Beliefs in the beneficial effects of SA on all aspects of language learning have rapidly spread without being questioned. Research studies show that SA programs

contribute to the students' a) improvement of certain language learning competences, b) evolution of individual differences, viz aptitude and motivation, and c) progress of intercultural knowledge. The improvement of language learning competences is seen with the increase in oral skills, especially fluency and lexical complexity, rather than written skills. The progress of intercultural knowledge and the change in students' interests takes place if they are engaged in the L2 community.

The whole SA program is shaped by internal and external factors, which include motivation, interaction, type of housing, identity, gender, proficiency level at the beginning of the sojourn and length of stay. Students with integrative motivation for language learning who not only do not miss any opportunity to interact but also look for any excuse to communicate with L2 speakers will be the most favoured ones. If prejudgements are set aside, both on the part of the student and the host family, identity and gender should not be an issue. While an improvement in students with a low proficiency level at the beginning of the stay can be seen after a short stay, it may take longer to see it in the case of initially high-proficiency level students. Lastly, there still exist opportunities for continued development in SA programs. On the one hand, these include critically analysing beliefs and adjusting expectations as well as preparing students and the host community by explaining how language acquisition works before departure. On the other hand, the SA experience could be further developed by commenting on intercultural knowledge after the SA program.

While the current study includes a section on the influence of different factors on SA, it is true that there may be other unexplored aspects that influence SA programs, such as identity, which are not described here. Moreover, the improvement section mainly

focuses on the development of oral skills regarding language learning. Suggestions about the changes that could be made on SA programs in order to make them meaningful for the expansion of written skills, could have been included too. A common agreement extracted from many research studies is the need for a more detailed investigation of factors under analysis.

One of the main lines of further research would be analysing the long-term effects of SA programs and comparing them with the results of the short-term effects. This comparison would show whether SA programs' learnings are long-lasting and if not, up to which moment in time they hold. Similarly, more research is still needed to establish a clear general picture between the relationship of different effects of SA with the factors that influence it. Lastly, research that aims to bring SA programs closer to everyone or designs more individualised programs could also be done provided that improvement measures are accomplished.

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