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This is the **published version** of the bachelor thesis:

Solé Cosialls, Neus; Codó, Eva , dir. Analyzing Study Abroad Experiences through the Narratives of Adolescent English Learners. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024. 37 pag. (Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

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**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

**Analyzing Study Abroad Experiences through the  
Narratives of Adolescent English Learners**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2024

## **Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

**Your name:** Neus Solé Cosials

**Title of Assignment:** Analyzing Study Abroad Experiences through the Narratives of Adolescent English Learners

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neus', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

12<sup>th</sup> June 2024

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Eva Codó, for her invaluable mentorship, encouragement, and patience throughout this whole process. I owe the completion of this dissertation to her guidance and dedication. I am also utterly grateful to Maria Rosa Garrido, my internship tutor, for introducing me to the field of sociolinguistics and inspiring me to write this TFG. I also wish to extend my appreciation to my teachers, David Owen and Hortènsia Curell, for their constant support and kind words, as well as their commitment to creating a safe place for the students.

Last but not least, I want to infinitely thank my mother, for her unconditional love and help, and my father, for showing me the importance of following one's passions, always being supportive of my life choices, and believing in me during all the times when I did not even believe in myself.

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## **Abstract**

Early Study Abroad (ESA) experiences are increasingly becoming more popular in today's society due to the fact that they are perceived as meaningful learning opportunities. This perception emerges from the fact that immersion is currently being marketed as the only effective approach for improving and mastering one's English language skills. This BA thesis focuses on the narratives of four adolescent English learners that have taken part in one of the aforementioned experiences in order to unveil their core elements, processes, and effects as perceived through the participants' lived experiences. More specifically, it aims to uncover the ways in which the adolescents describe their study abroad experiences and how do these shape their socialization opportunities, linguistic experiences, and adjustment as they return home. The analysis reveals that, although foreign students must make an additional effort in order to interact with locals, the type of accommodation significantly affects their socialization opportunities. The adolescents also report that their English proficiency improves after living abroad, but they still face linguistic challenges during their stay. Returning home also proves to be a complex process for the students, as it involves personal development, changes in their social lives, and academic challenges.

**Keywords:** study abroad, ESA, immersion, English language skills, educational mobility, language learning.

## **1. Introduction**

Study abroad experiences consist of contexts in which students spend a designated amount of time in a foreign country and engage in formal and informal language instruction and learning (Llanes and Muñoz, 2013). In the case of early study abroad, the students who take part in it are usually children and adolescents. As Choi (2021) discusses, educational mobility overseas is becoming more popular nowadays due to factors such as the rise of neoliberalism (in which education is seen as a method to enhance human capital) and the progression of globalization (a factor that increases the chances for the movement of capital, labor, and information). While the specifics of immersion experiences abroad depend on the chosen location and accommodation arrangements, the pursuit of achieving high English proficiency remains a common objective (Lee, 2016). Furthermore, these immersion experiences are perceived as meaningful learning opportunities because of factors that are not specifically tied to language learning, such as the experience of living in a new destination and its environment, culture, and population (Duerden et al., 2018). Another successful outcome of study abroad experiences is related to the fact that its benefits go beyond the acquisition of language proficiency, as they also positively influence the teenagers' attitudes towards English (Codó and Sunyol, in press). Nonetheless, Schecter and Bell (2021) also report that students usually face challenges in the areas of academic, social, and cultural integration.

This thesis aims to examine several key dimensions of immersion stays abroad. The aim of this dissertation is to identify the experiences and impacts of ESA as they are narrated by the adolescents. Given that this topic is a highly under-examined area from a



sociolinguistics perspective, both globally and in Spain, this thesis will try to fill this research gap by focusing on immersion experiences abroad as they are recounted by Catalan adolescent English learners. It aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) How do the students describe their study abroad experiences?
- 2) How does ESA influence the teenage learners' socialization opportunities, perceived language development, and processes of return to their home environments?

It is worth noting that the three dimensions of the second research question arise from the observation that they were the most topicalized aspects in the adolescents' narratives, considering that they emerged frequently and were significant across all interviews (as opposed to certain subjects discussed by some teenagers but absent in the narratives of others).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Early Study Abroad (ESA)**

There has been a significant growth in transnational educational mobility during the past decades, especially regarding the quantity of students and the variety of both their origins and chosen destinations (Choi, 2021). Immersion experiences abroad are one of the contexts in which young learners (both children and teenagers) can acquire and/or improve their English language skills. Although this trend of education across borders is growing (Ihm and Choi, 2015), it still is an understudied area of research. It is worth noting that, as Llanes and Muñoz argue, “most published research on SA has appeared

within the last two decades” (2013, p. 64). Furthermore, Llanes also affirms that children are “a population previously ignored with respect to the SA context” (2012, p. 180).

ESA is particularly prominent in South Korea; hence, a large amount of the existing studies based on the phenomenon of ESA are focused on South Korean students (Kang and Abelmann, 2011; Lee, 2016; Song, 2018). ESA is highly widespread socially and its popularity is somewhat unparalleled in other countries (Lo et al., 2015). In the chapter *Early Study Abroad: A Survey and Demographic Portrait*, Ihm and Choi (2015) present a detailed overview in regard to the importance and role of ESA in the aforementioned country. This chapter belongs to the book *South Korea's Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Early Study Abroad*, a collection that is particularly notable due to the fact that it presents a variety of chapters on topics such as the connection between ESA and broader sociopolitical factors, namely multiculturalism, global citizenship, cultural studies, and language ideologies. The aforementioned chapter examines ESA trends in South Korea, such as the number of students engaged in it and how they adopt this form of transnational education. It also addresses themes such as several beliefs held by different South Korean adults (not necessarily involved in ESA) in regard to the main purposes of said experience. Most research participants “thought that the primary purpose of ESA was to learn English or other foreign languages” (Ihm and Choi., 2015, p. 31). Other respondents state that other key purposes are “a competitive edge for securing jobs” or “exiting the South Korean education system and its singular focus on the college entrance exam, bypassing the exorbitant costs of the private after-school education market, and improving one's chances for college admission” (Ihm and Choi., 2015, p. 31). Moreover, Ihm and Choi also claim that some factors that have

increased the importance of ESA are the extreme job competition that exists in the country and the dissatisfaction with the national school system.

The existing trend in South Korea of young learners being sent overseas actually represents the parents' views on both the ideal age for second and third language acquisition and the value of early socialization (Ihm and Choi, 2015). Another finding that is present in the aforementioned chapter is the fact that English-speaking countries are perceived as the top choice for ESA destinations because they reflect "how English has become valued as the hallmark of the hardworking, cosmopolitan, neoliberal self in South Korea" (Ihm and Choi, 2015, p. 32). Furthermore, the authors report that the phenomenon of study abroad reveals "the escalating sense of inequality in South Korea in which the trappings of a middle-class life are both less accessible and more difficult to sustain" (2015, p. 53). Therefore, this increasing inaccessibility has resulted in making the national educational system "more than ever inclined to privatization and individualization, effecting the very changes that have supposedly driven the ESA education exodus" (Ihm and Choi, 2015, p. 53). In short, the chapter explores the rise of early immersion experiences in South Korea by addressing the different motivations that are involved (such as English language acquisition, dissatisfaction with the national educational system, a competitive educational and professional marketplace, and the ambition of forging a future successful career). These ideas parallel similar dynamics observed in Catalonia, which will be further elaborated in a subsequent section of this thesis. Now we move on to the next section, which deals with the factors involved in deciding to participate in ESA.

## **2.2 The decision to partake in ESA: Who and why**

Research shows that the decision to participate in an immersion experience abroad involves both parents and students. Choi states that “rather than emphasizing the role of parents as a key influence on their ESA decisions, many of [the students] stressed their own role as an active agent who was conscious of various education options and their attempts to make rational choices to maximize expected gains” (2021, p. 379). Moreover, the involvement of students in regard to their academic path has been influenced by the “neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and self-management” (Choi, 2021, p. 384). Students have different motivations as to why they want to partake in a SA experience. Tamtik (2019) discloses that Asian students seek foreign diplomas, whereas European Union citizens aim to experience cultural exchanges. Moreover, Tamtik’s study findings (2019) reveal that the ultimate goal of the students who participate in immersion experiences is related to securing their future success and opportunities. Additional findings indicate that there are three main categories that influence the decision of taking part in SA: “family (personal experiences, connections with friends and relatives), recruitment agents and educators at home schools” (Tamtik, 2019, p. 1060). In terms of the parents, Schecter and Bell affirm that “their goal is to have the children develop “globally valued skillsets,” including fluent English” (2021, p. 6). Nevertheless, other considerations for both the students and their families are “the belief that education abroad is better, and desires for global experience” (Ihm and Choi., 2015, p. 36).

## **2.3 Benefits of ESA in regard to language learning**

Several of the existing studies on ESA have focused on the improvement of English skills by children and adolescents. For instance, Llanes (2012) shows that students partaking in

study abroad programs experienced greater L2 gains than those learning a language at home (AH). One of the findings of this study was that the improvement of English skills during SA was more significant in oral skills rather than writing proficiency. It is also worth noting that “oral fluency [in SA literature] is the skill that has been examined the most since it is believed to be one of the most sensitive skills to learning context” (Llanes, 2012, p. 180). Llanes also reports that L2 vocabulary is another aspect that improves during immersion experiences abroad as opposed to other learning contexts. Similarly, she also argues that English listening skills also seem to improve, although there are fewer studies in this area to confirm this finding. Writing and reading are the two domains where results proved to be more inconclusive and controversial in regard to the improvement of English skills in this area (Llanes, 2012). Although Llanes discusses the improvement in relation to each individual skill, she also presents a more general overview when she claims that “child SA participants experienced greater gains than their AH peers on most of the measures examined” (Llanes, 2012, p. 181). A similar study by Sauer and Ellis’ study (2019) demonstrated that two students participating in an adolescent SA program enhanced their language skills in the areas of lexis and fluency. One of the learners improved in regard to the frequency of her use of small words, defined as “small words and phrases, occurring with high frequency in the spoken language” (Hasselgren, 2002, p. 150, quoted in Sauer and Ellis, 2019, p. 748). The other student experienced the same occurrence while also exhibiting advancements in regard to her frequency in lexical diversity. In addition, the fluency of the language skills of both students improved over time. To sum up, different studies have demonstrated the improvement of English language skills in children who took part in ESA, especially in the areas of lexis and oral

fluency. The focus of this section now shifts to the phenomenon of socialization experiences and how these occur during ESA.

#### **2.4 Socialization experiences during ESA**

Children and adolescents partaking in SA programs are exposed to unfamiliar situations and challenges when living in new settings and exploring different cultures. Therefore, they need to adapt to new and distinct social environments. Schechter and Bell's study reveals that "students report stories of social isolation and difficulties with linguistic and cultural adaptation" (2021, p. 6). These researchers also claim that young learners also experience feelings of culture shock and pressure towards academic success. The authors argue that students must overcome such feelings because "building a sense of social connection among and with ESA students [is] key to their academic engagement and sociocultural inclusion" (Schechter and Bell, 2021, p. 20). A similar study conducted by Sauer and Ellis (2019) disclosed that, although the two girls who participated in their research were involved with multiple social networks, there were some differences among their experiences. Since one of the students had a bigger social network that was based on German language use (rather than English), she had to make a bigger effort and needed more time to become part of certain local groups. Contrastingly, the other girl became a member of her local group since the beginning because she was more in touch with English-speaking social networks. This study also revealed that international students must be determined to adapt and notice affordances around them in order to socialize with local students (Sauer and Ellis, 2019). As we move on to the next section of this thesis, it is important to examine the experiences of students returning from their stays abroad to understand the impact of these stays.

## 2.5 The impact of ESA: The experiences of returnees

Although the area of research concerning ESA returnees remains somewhat underdeveloped, there are some studies that address this topic. For instance, Yang's thesis (2018) addresses the issue of social reproduction through English in South Korea by looking at teenage students who have participated in ESA (also called *returnees*) and low-achieving groups of students (also called *underachievers*). In his research, Yang states that there is a class-based difference between these two groups, as returnees come from middle-class families and underachievers belong to the working class. This division is significant because these two types of students also hold different values and norms that influence peer relationships and social positions.

A returnee student is usually characterized by their enthusiastic participation in class and their effort to obtain the teachers' attention (which contrasts with the fact that they encounter more difficulties in becoming friends with other students). Underachievers usually present themselves as more mature students, which creates conflict with teachers. When returnees of ESA go back to Korean middle schools and continue their education with local classmates, they need to display their Koreanness in order to interact and socialize with the rest of students who have not studied abroad (that is, they need to show traditional Korean values while also presenting themselves as modern and worldly). For instance, having a native-like English is perceived by underachieving boys as more feminine, which is an idea that they present in order to enjoy a higher status compared to their returnee classmates while also challenging their masculinity. Yang also points out that other studies which deal with the lives of returnees in Korea "show that they must develop a wide range of linguistic and cultural strategies to fit in with their local peers" (2018, p. 13). For instance, returnee students in this study eventually had to display a

Korean accent when talking in English in order to blend in with the rest of their classmates. When comparing the ESA experiences of Korean and Catalan students, the main difference amongst them is the fact that Korean ESA is much longer, which means that reincorporation of students back into their local cultures and educational systems is more complex and challenging. As this section draws to a close, the following area of this dissertation will contextualize the importance of ESA in Catalonia.

## **2.6 ESA in Catalonia**

Codó and Sunyol's research (in press) discusses how the phenomenon of ESA is becoming increasingly popular among Catalan middle-class families. Teenage educational mobility has experienced a significant growth in Catalonia since 2017, as evidenced by the number of students being sent abroad (escalating from 2,000 to 20,000 in a decade in the whole of Spain).<sup>1</sup> Catalonia sends around 25% of the students that partake in ESA in Spain according to data provided by the placement agencies. Although the offer of immersion experiences abroad is not new, it has been progressively diversifying over the last ten years. Now they are presented as more personalized, and therefore, as more appealing. ESA experiences have four typical destinations: Ireland, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Families generally prefer to send their children abroad during the fourth year of secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> The available data is from the Spanish Association of Promoters of Language Courses Abroad (ASEPROCE). It is also worth noting that it does not represent the whole population, as it does not include stays organized by companies that are not affiliated with this association. The data from the 2010/11 academic year is obtained from <https://www.europapress.es/madrid/noticia-mas-2000-adolescentes-38-ellos-madrilenos-viajan-paises-anglofonos-estudiar-eso-bachillerato-20100816173258.html> and the data from the 2021/22 academic year is extracted from <https://www.aseproce.org/los-cursos-en-el-extranjero-de-estudiantes-espanoles-recuperan-los-niveles-prepandemia/>.



The increasing popularity of ESA in Catalonia is occurring due the existence of societal discourses that emphasize the importance of being proficient in English, which makes families invest in English language learning practices (one of these practices being ESA). Families also choose to make teenagers partake in ESA because it is a factor of distinction, as it positions them as a well-off family (McDaid, 2020). Furthermore, it also demonstrates the role of parents in regard to ensuring that they provide their children with the necessary resources to master a good English level. The families' need in relation to sending teenagers abroad is based on the fact that parents worry about the existing precariousness in the job market and socioeconomic instability in Catalonia. In order to face this circumstance, families aim to provide their kids with educational assets that will make them improve their English proficiency (a factor that they perceive as safe and profitable). Having presented the relevant background information, we will now present the methodology employed in this thesis.

### **3. Methodology and Data**

This object of study of this dissertation is the narratives in regard to their ESA experiences provided by four Catalan teenagers (two girls and two boys) in five different interviews. Two of the interviewed students lived in a boarding school and the other two participants stayed with a host family. The anonymity of the students has been preserved by means of the use of pseudonyms. This data belongs to a larger corpus that is part of the ENIFALPO<sup>2</sup> research project, which also contains interviews with parents, agencies, ethnographic notes from participation in ESA information sessions, and a corpus of promotional

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<sup>2</sup> This acronym stands for English Immersion as Family Language Policy: Strategies, Mobilities and Investments, grant ref. PID2019-106710GB-I00 funded by MICIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

materials created by specialized businesses and educational organizations. The data was collected by different researchers<sup>3</sup> by means of online semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted around an hour and a half and was conducted in both Catalan and English (although Catalan was more predominant). The interviews were afterwards transcribed, and such transcriptions are what has been used in this dissertation (the transcription conventions used are presented in more detail in the appendix). The questions asked covered topics such as how the decision was made to spend a year abroad, teenagers' typical activities and routines at school, their relationship with their host families or boarding school classmates, and their perception of their own English skills. The data of the corpus is thematically coded (Braun and Clarke, 2021) following the threads of the script and the most central points in the teenagers' discourse. The next section of this thesis presents a detailed analysis of it.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Type of stay</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Academic year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
Laura Fabra Bataller	1 year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year of ESO	2021/2022	United Kingdom	Boarding school
Paula Morán Sintes	1 year	4 <sup>th</sup> year of ESO	2019/2020	Canada	Homestay
Miquel Caballé Puig	1 year	4 <sup>th</sup> year of ESO	2019/2020	Ireland	Boarding school
Joel Todó Molina	1 year	4 <sup>th</sup> year of ESO	2021/2022	Ireland	Homestay

Table 1. Interviewed students and details of the type of stay

#### **4. Data Analysis**

In this section we will present the findings from the interviews, in which teenage learners recount their experiences and provide insight into the multifaceted nature of partaking in

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<sup>3</sup> Detailed information about ENIFALPO and its members can be found on: <https://web.uab.cat/enifalpo>.

a study abroad stay. In order to answer the research questions, the data analysis will focus on the narratives provided by the adolescents in order to reveal what they perceive as the most significant aspects of their immersion experiences. It will highlight the different everyday situations and challenges that the students faced in relation to their socialization opportunities depending on their type of accommodation, the improvement of their English language level, and the impact of study abroad stays upon returning home.

#### **4.1 Accommodation and opportunities for socializing: Boarding schools versus homestays**

One of the common themes that is present in the teenagers' narratives is how they describe and differentiate their experiences based on the type of accommodation. There are crucial differences in the stories of students living in boarding schools compared to those who participate in homestay programs. Boarding school students are constantly surrounded by other students of a similar age, which makes it inevitable to interact and socialize. Living with other students makes it easier to spend time with them in order to bond, as explained by Laura when she says that it is easier to hang out with friends from school because they are already there (“és molt més fàcil quedar amb amigues del cole i tot perquè directament surto amb elles i coses així”). Miquel's narrative also supports this idea, as seen in an instance where he says that since he spent all day with this classmates, they eventually communicated and talked about different things (“com que estavem amb ells tot el dia/ (.) perquè clar érem companys (.) de- de classe (.) però també:: (.) érem companys de- potser d'habitació:/ (.) o companys d'equi:p\ (.) llavors parlaves de coses molt diferents\”).

The fact that becoming proficient in English is perceived as the main factor for partaking in ESA experiences shapes the students' behavior, evidenced by the fact that

they prefer not to socialize with people from their own country. Laura explains this when she says that she was lucky because she only met one person from Spain during the first trimester of the school year (“però vaig tenir bastanta sort perquè d’espanya sol hi havia::: una persona”). Miquel also contributes to this idea when he claims that he always tried to interact with people who spoke English (“jo sempre intentava barrejar-me amb (.) gent que parlava anglès”). Although both students tried to interact with locals, some of the Irish teenagers were annoyed at certain attitudes held by Spanish students overall. While this was minimal in Laura’s experience (she only mentions Irish girls being a bit mad about Spanish girls speaking in Spanish and asking them to switch to English), Miquel puts more emphasis on this topic, as he claims that he encountered certain stereotypes about Spanish people among the Irish and had to overcome them. He explains that he got along with his Irish classmates, but some of the locals ignored or did not talk to him (“alguns directament ni et parlaven\ (.) i:- i altres en plan no\ però notaves que (.) en plan- no et feien cas o: o alguna broma d’aquestes\ (.) que no fan gràcia i ja està”). This is key in relation to depicting how powerful language is when socializing with people, as it shows how belonging to a certain culture or speaking a certain language can affect interaction opportunities. Furthermore, being part of a different culture also entails difficulties, as foreign students had to make considerable effort in order to interact with the locals (some of them even had racist attitudes). In order to overcome these situations, Miquel always tried to speak and interact with people who spoke English. Being part of the rugby team was also another helpful strategy when interacting with Irish students, as Miquel explains that it made it easier for him when making new friends (“just because i played rugby/ i could make a lot more friends than- than: other spanish guys”).

Another factor that is highly influential in boarding schools is the fact that several students leave during the weekends. This caused Laura to feel somewhat alone, but she eventually socialized with people other than her roommates. Therefore, although staying in a boarding school sometimes created the perfect setting for socialization, it could be argued that, for her, it had the possibility of being the opposite during the weekend (as she had to go out of her way in order to meet new people and socialize). Furthermore, once her friendship with other students developed, she was able to go to their homes in order to spend the weekend together. This shows that living together in a boarding school paved the way for further interaction opportunities which culminated in her socializing outside the school context. In Miquel's case, he claims that he never felt bored because he was surrounded by other students who were the same age (as he did not differentiate between people that he could interact with, which resulted in more socialization opportunities).

Laura and Miquel's narratives also differ in regard to how the weekend routine and activities were organized by their schools. While Laura talks about day trips organized by the school ("els caps de setmana sempre hi havia un un day trip i anàvem a un lloc pues depèn ( ) christmas shopping i depenia del dia"), Miquel mentions that he only travelled during the midterm break and not during regular weekends. He also explains that the weekend activities that took place on the school were self-organized by the students and consisted in playing basketball. Although his boarding school did not directly organize sightseeing activities for the students (in which they would come together and interact), they still communicated in order to plan other activities and play sports. It is also worth noting that Miquel lived in an all-boys school where a lot of emphasis was placed on sports, as it was a way of bonding and a crucial aspect of daily

life there (taking into account that the students involved interacted during training and competitions).

Students who took part in homestay programs present circumstances in their narratives that are dissimilar to those who lived in boarding schools. For instance, Paula even considers her host family as part of her real family. This also works the other way round, as Paula explains, “you know my mum texted me the other day and she was like you know you're family”. Furthermore, she also mentions that she did not want to leave, which is something that contrasts with Joel's experience (“tinc ganes de veure als meus amics i família/ i crec que si si m'hagués d'anar ara a casa jo crec que ja hauria passat una bona experiència aquí”).

One key difference between homestay and boarding schools is the fact that socialization opportunities are presented in different ways. While teenagers in boarding schools interact in their rooms, in class, or when playing sports, the availability window for socializing is smaller in homestay programs, as families and host students do not spend that much time together. Nevertheless, living with a host family also inevitably creates different opportunities to interact with other people. For instance, Paula explains that she was able to bond with her neighbors, which implies that participating in a homestay program did not limit her ability to communicate and interact with different types of people. Joel does not mention the idea of becoming friends with other people rather than his classmates or host family. Nevertheless, in his narrative, he talks about how he was able to communicate and bond even more with his host brothers by means of finding shared experiences and interests, such as engaging in conversations about sports (“parlem de futbol ells també el segueixen/ (.) de:: de rugby bueno clar sí”). This circumstance supports the belief that socialization is different in homestay and boarding school

experiences. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there is a difference in the amount of communication or interaction; it just shows that the way of socializing is different and occurs in distinct ways. For instance, participating in a homestay allows students to interact with a broader range of people, such as other adults (something that is not present in boarding schools, as students normally only interact with other people their own age). Furthermore, the interaction with adults (normally teachers) that boarding school students experience tends to occur in a more formal context, which implies that homestay students not only have the opportunity of interacting with more adults, but said interaction also occurs in more informal contexts.

Another crucial idea is that, although both Paula and Joel were close to their families, they had other means of socializing rather than just interacting with the people they lived in (something that does not occur in boarding schools). When Joel talks about his friends in Ireland, he refers to his friends from school, which shows that he actually socialized outside the context in which he lived. Paula also explains how, although she got along with her family, they were not her main and only source of interaction, as she had different friends at school. This is a key difference with boarding schools, as the students are always together in the same environment. This implies that a homestay also allows students to enlarge and diversify their social networks, which also means that they have more opportunities for richer social interaction and language use.

Another important idea is the fact that living with a host family does not mean that teenagers do not have the opportunity to engage in activities such as visiting new places (similar to those that would normally be present at boarding schools). Paula supports this idea when she explains that she had been on weekend trips with her family and had the chance of going to a ranch and riding a horse (“són molt de de fer això cabanyetes i així

hi ha moltes en lloguen i totes són moníssimes llavors el cap de setmana fas excursions/ o o vas a un rantxo a muntar a cavall/ o coses així i llavors sí vam passar molt molt de temps així en família”). This is another way in which the host family and the student could interact, as it was a chance to bond and spend time together. It is also worth mentioning that the opportunity of travelling and visiting new places also depends on the host family, as not all of them share the same interests. Therefore, there is an aspect of this circumstance related to luck and being paired up with a family that is active and enjoys engaging in outdoor activities and trips.

#### **4.2 Motivation, perceptions of linguistic improvement and overall linguistic experiences**

A circumstance that was found to be common to all of the students interviewed is the fact that, although they expected to improve their English level during their stay abroad, it was not their main motivation. Paula’s response exemplifies this idea when she explains that she felt the need to experience this adventure abroad, leave Barcelona, and change her environment. Joel also claims that, although it was one of his priorities, improving his English level was not the most important thing. He was more focused on meeting new people and starting over in a place where nobody knew him. Furthermore, Joel states that he already knew and assumed that his English proficiency would get better, which is why he did not perceive English language learning as the most crucial aspect of his stay. Laura’s response is aligned with those of the other teenagers, but she also mentions that their parents were the ones that actually gave more importance to the fact that she was going to learn more English during the stay (“per mi era més veure món però pels meus pares e::h els va bueno més eh això d'aprendre anglès”).



The students had different perceptions in regard to how they positioned themselves and their English skills. While Paula states that she already had a good level of English before she went abroad, Laura expresses that she did not know much English before (she was just familiar with a few words and she had trouble with specific vocabulary and writing). Miquel also claims that he already knew English before going to Ireland, which is rather different from Joel's explanation, as he states that his English level was somewhat poor ("jo m'imagino que tenia:: l'anglès una mica dolent"). Nevertheless, the students' perceptions of their English proficiency changed after living abroad for a significant period of time.

All of the teenagers report that their language skills improved, but the ways in which this progress occurred are also different. For instance, Miquel declares that, although he did not notice a considerable improvement in terms of grammar, his speaking and writing abilities were what experienced the most considerable progress. He also explains that he felt more comfortable talking in English after his ESA experience. Moreover, when asked about his level now, Miquel affirms that he believes that has a medium-high level of English. Joel's narrative is somewhat similar: he also claims that his speaking skills improved (alongside his listening ability, but not his vocabulary knowledge). Alternatively, Laura and Paula make reference to the fact that other people back home were able to notice their English proficiency based on their accent (that is, they equated their near-native sounding accent with high language proficiency). This is something that both girls appreciated and valued.

Although the students claim that their English language level progressed, they also report that they had to face several language challenges during their stay abroad. While Laura explains that writing and spelling were what she encountered most difficulties with,

the rest of the interviewed students claim that getting used to the local accent was challenging. Paula explains that it was difficult to acquaint herself with her host family's accent, Miquel says that he encountered more complication with some teachers, and Joel reports that it was difficult to understand the accent of his football coach and some of his teammates. Furthermore, both Miquel and Joel had to handle issues related to confidence, as they were felt more insecure when speaking in English before. Joel gives a more detailed explanation of this occurrence, as he declares that familiarizing himself with the speed of native speakers and participating in conversations were factors that he found quite challenging (“l'accent i la velocitat era lo més xungo”). Paula states that other difficulties that she encountered were related to communicating exactly what she wanted to say in certain moments and writing compositions for class (“sobretot el que fèiem era moltes redaccions i clar jo no tenia aquest nivell formal”).

In order to overcome these challenges, the teenagers reveal the use of different strategies used by them in order to improve their language skills. A common technique was the use of an online translator (Laura and Joel claim that it helped them sometimes). Laura also mentions that the presence of foreign language assistants in the classroom was useful, as they were able to help them by translating words from their same native language. Another of the strategies used by both Laura and Paula consisted in asking their friends (or a teacher, in Paula's case) for help (“la professora em va ajudar moltíssim també i::: i aquestes les meves amigues també em van ajudar”). Laura also explains another strategy was to obtain help from fellow students, as some of her classmates corrected her English and tried to find synonyms when she did not know a certain word (“hi havia gent que m'intentava corregir i jo ho apreciava (...) i quan no sabia la paraula m'intentaven buscar un sinònim per allò i tal i:: no sé i si ( ) i sempre m'intentaven anar

més lent quan parlaven amb mi”). Miquel and Joel also present another way in which they overcame linguistic challenges: trying to find synonyms or an alternative explanation to explain something when they did not know a certain word. Joel also states that he tried to avoid pauses to think about what he was going to say, asking other speakers to repeat certain words when he did not understand them, and also aimed to remember different words he heard in order to incorporate them to his vocabulary.

Another key aspect of the students’ narratives is related to their perceptions of what a good level of English consists in. For Laura, it means to be able to speak perfectly with a native English speaker. Nevertheless, when Paula answers the same question, she instantly mentions the idea of having more opportunities while also being able to communicate and understand information in a different language. She also directly relates the idea of good English to its social indexicalities<sup>4</sup> (she argues that people relate having a good accent to being an intelligent person). Miquel believes that it has to do with writing and speaking fluently rather than accent (a perception that changed during his stay in Ireland). Joel’s view is similar to Miquel’s, as he also believes that fluency is an essential characteristic. Furthermore, another recurrent theme is the idea of how beneficial English will be in the future for the teenagers. Although Laura did not mention it, the rest of the interviewed students agreed on the fact that having a good level of English was going to help them in their future professional career. For instance, Paula mentions that English will be important to her in order to become a politician on the international arena. Joel also emphasizes the importance of speaking several languages (as companies might value it during job interviews) and Miquel mentions that it is possible to miss employment

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<sup>4</sup> A term coined by Michael Silverstein in which he refers to “the property of sign vehicle signaling contextual “existence” of an entity” (1976, p. 29).

opportunities due to not being proficient in English (“hi han moltes oportunitats de feina (.) que et pots perdre pel simple fet de: no parlar anglès”).

### **4.3 Impact of the stay as returnees**

Another fundamental aspect of ESA stays is the fact that they prompt students to experience a significant amount of change in various aspects of their lives. For instance, Paula and Joel explain that it had a positive effect in regard to their personal development. Paula mentions that it was better than what she expected, as she adapted herself to the experience very quickly and felt thrilled (“em vaig sentir tant tant integrada/ tant bé/ o sigui em vaig adaptar molt molt ràpid/ em vaig adaptar molt bé també”). Nevertheless, not everything was that effortless and satisfactory, as she also claims that she had to try and separate her life in Spain from her life in Canada in order to be fully immersed in her new routine and environment back home (which actually shows the complex and demanding mental process experienced by the teenagers during these experiences). Paula also implies that, for her, personal change is an intrinsic part of ESA experiences (“I mean obviously I've changed like you can't expect me to be the same person I was a year ago right”). Joel affirms that the experience made him more independent, which allowed him to do more things on his own. However, he also claims that his friends say that his personality has stayed the same, something that contrasts both with Paula’s experience and with his own response of being more independent now.

Another factor of ESA that is highly important is its impact on the social lives of students after they return home. In Laura’s case, she explains that a lot of her classmates in her school back home now ask her about the experience and want to know how she speaks English (which they perceive as exceptional when they hear it). Furthermore, she

has also been asked to show pictures of her stay in the UK. The fact that Laura has lived abroad has given her more opportunities for socialization in her usual school, as more people approach her now and are interested in interacting with her. She also states that she likes this circumstance (“és molt guai que tothom em pregunti”). Paula also presents a positive view regarding the social aspect of her ESA experience, as she explains that she wants to go back abroad in order to visit the friends she made there (implying that the stay was fulfilling, taking into account that she was able to form new friendships there). Nevertheless, returning to Spain after such a good experience was hard for her. She had a distressing and complicated period of time due to the fact that she was missing her friends from Canada (a feeling that persisted until she started school again).

The coexistence of these two emotions serves as an example of how conflicting ESA experiences can be, as returning back home is not an easy thing to handle for the students. Paula’s case is highly significant because, out of all the interviewed teenagers, she is the one that experienced the biggest amount of social change as a returnee. Her group of friends in Spain completely changed due to the fact that they perceived her as someone that was completely different now (“tots els meus amics tipic em van deixar de banda perquè deien que havia canviat molt llavors vaig canviar d’amics al cent per cent”). Paula links this aspect of her social life with her personal development, as she affirms that her friendships had to change because her personality also evolved. Furthermore, the transition of coming back home has not been easy for her (considering that Paula also states that she feels like there is a barrier between her and her friends in Spain because they are not able to understand and relate to some of the things she lived through in Canada). She experiences frustration when she is not able to share certain things in English (such as jokes), which highlights another challenge in feeling a sense of

belonging to two different places. Miquel's case contrasts with the experiences of Laura and Paula, as he explains that he has not felt any type of change with his classmates at his school back home (he mentions that his status has only changed in his local rugby team). Joel's response is also aligned with Miquel's, as he claims that he came back and everything was the same ("you have/ your friends are the same/ like they are in the same group/ nothing has changed").

The challenges and difficulties of coming back home also have an impact on an academic level. This is especially visible in Miquel's case, as he affirms that he encountered great trouble and was very lost when returning to his school in Spain (he even mentions one instance in which he was considering whether he regretted partaking in an ESA experience or not). Miquel also explains that it is crucial to stay focused on your studies during the last two years of baccalaureate (due to the fact that they are very important). Therefore, living abroad proved to be somewhat of a setback for him in the academic aspect, as it caused him to struggle during the first months of school. Laura presents a similar idea when she declares that getting used to her local school system again was exhausting ("se'm va fer molt cansat pues perquè no parava en tot el dia sempre estava fent deures i tal"). Joel also supports this idea when he affirms that he did not want to go back home because he would need to put more work into school and make a bigger effort. Nevertheless, he later presents a different idea, as he says that he is not worried about returning to high school. Even though Joel is aware of the fact that the last two years of baccalaureate are challenging, he believes that he will not have a hard time getting used to the school system again.

The impact of ESA is also notable in a linguistic level, as some of the children's relationship with English evolves. Joel clearly mentions this idea in his narrative when he

explains his appreciation and enthusiasm for English has grown after living in Ireland. He enjoys using it now due to the fact that he is able to properly speak it (“i el sé parlar bé i tal/ llavors t'agrada més\ i és co::m el disfrutes més que abans”). This idea contrasts with Joel’s previous English usage, as he declares that communicating in English used to be frustrating because he was not a proficient speaker (“jo m'enrecordo frustrar-me de petit\ i dir és que no sé com es diu això/ i no m'ho ensenyen bé/ i no sé com fer-ho\ llavors/ però ara ja millor molt millor”). Furthermore, he is willing to keep using English in his daily routine by watching TV shows and reading books in English. Living in Ireland and immersing in an English-speaking culture has made him able to connect more with the language and incorporate it in his daily life. Miquel’s narrative presents a similar idea, as he says that he feels more comfortable with English now than what he did before. It is also worth noting that only Joel and Miquel talk about their current relationship with English, as Laura and Paula only make reference to the fact that their language proficiency has improved.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this dissertation’s data analysis have evidenced that study abroad encompasses a multitude of complexities that do not only relate to language learning, such as students immersing themselves in unfamiliar cultural settings, engaging in different social activities, and building new social relationships. In terms of socialization opportunities, the insight gained from analyzing the teenagers’ interviews aligns with the findings by Sauer and Ellis (2019), who proved that ESA students had to make big efforts in order to interact with local people and be part of English-speaking social networks. Laura and Miquel’s narratives (especially the latter) exemplify this when they explain

that Irish students were sometimes annoyed by certain behaviors and attitudes of the Spanish students. In the case of both Laura and Miquel, their descriptions of their stay abroad illustrate that foreign students faced important challenges when interacting with local students. It is also worth noting that even though Sauer and Ellis' research was focused on two students who participated in a homestay experience, the results of this dissertation reveal that the biggest sacrifice is needed of the boarding school students (as the interviewed homestay students did not mention similar experiences to the ones presented by Laura and Miquel). The students' narratives also support previous research that mentions that teenagers abroad usually recount instances of social isolation and encounter linguistic and cultural challenges (Schechter and Bell, 2021). This is present in Laura's narrative, as she explains that getting used to the fact that her boarding school friends left during the weekend was complicated, as it made her feel alone at the beginning of her stay.

As refers to linguistic development, although there are some similarities between Llanes' study (2012) and the findings of this dissertation, they are not totally aligned. It is important to acknowledge that such divergence may emerge from the fact that the reviewed literature employs a quantitative and experimental methodology while the data analysis of this thesis follows a qualitative, discursive, and self-reporting approach.<sup>5</sup> This methodology includes descriptions of the adolescents' lived experiences, their ideas and perceptions of English proficiency, or their relationship with English (aspects that are generally overlooked by experimental studies). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, although the employed methodology is different, certain results are still aligned. Llanes'

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<sup>5</sup> The scarcity of literature in the topic of ESA and the fact that most of the existing research focuses on linguistic experiences from a quantitative approach have been the determining factors in choosing to review such studies.



findings disclose that the improvement of English skills by children and adolescents partaking in ESA was most notable in the area of oral proficiency rather than writing proficiency, something that is supported by the interviewed teenagers. While Paula and Laura only mention that their pronunciation and accent improved, Miquel and Joel acknowledge a progress in their speaking skills overall. Nevertheless, a discrepancy arises when Miquel mentions that his writing ability also improved (which contrasts with the previous research findings). Llanes' study also reports that the listening skills of the research participants improved, which is a statement that is supported by Joel's narrative. Another claim made by Llanes consists in the fact that vocabulary is an aspect in which the students experience advancements during ESA. However, this is not supported by the findings of this thesis, as Joel declares that his vocabulary skills did not improve and the rest of the students do not mention this topic.

As refers to the impact of ESA, the data analyzed in this dissertation shows the greatest disparity in findings when compared to Yang's research (2018). While that study states that returnee students have an enthusiastic participation in their classes back home and usually make efforts to obtain the teachers' attention, this aspect is not mentioned in any of the interviews analyzed in this thesis. Furthermore, having an English level that is close to the native standard is not perceived as feminine by any of the Catalan students (as opposed to the results of the aforementioned study). Another one of Yang's findings consists in the fact that returnee students must talk in a Korean accent while speaking in English in order to blend in with the rest of students. This experience contrasts with Laura's narrative, as her circumstance when returning home was totally different due to the fact that her classmates perceived her English speaking skills as exceptional. Nevertheless, certain similarities still exist amongst the reviewed literature and the

analyzed narratives of the adolescents. The idea that returnees need to adopt local values in order to conceal their personal development is something that is present in Yang's research and Paula's narrative (considering that she explains that she needed to dissociate her life in Canada from her life in Spain in order to better integrate upon returning home). It is also worth mentioning that this idea is not present in all narratives, as Miquel and Joel state that they did not feel any kind of change with their classmates and friends back home.

## **6. Conclusion**

The primary goal of this thesis has consisted in providing an overview of study abroad experiences based on the biographical narratives of four different adolescent English learners that have taken part in immersion experiences across the globe. In order to achieve this objective, several articles and studies in relation to the topic of ESA were reviewed. Such research revealed that study abroad experiences are a growing trend of education across borders and involve several motivating factors, such as dissatisfaction with educational systems or the ambition of having future successful professional careers (Ihm and Choi, 2015). In order to analyze the narratives constructed by the Catalan students, a data analysis has been carried out, which has especially focused on the areas of socialization opportunities depending on the type of accommodation, motivation, the encountered linguistic challenges and experiences, and the perceived impact of the stay as returning students in their home countries. In the case of socialization experiences, the analysis has shown that living in a boarding school or partaking in a homestay can result in crucial differences regarding the type of interactions students engaged in. Although boarding school students are surrounded by adolescents their own age, international

students still have to make a big effort to interact with their classmates. The socialization opportunities of students in homestays presented several differences, as teenagers had the opportunity of communicating with a wider range of people and in different contexts. In regard to linguistic experiences, the analysis revealed that the improvement of English language skills was not the main objective of the students living abroad. Although living abroad made them encounter certain linguistic challenges and develop different techniques in order to overcome them, they all disclose that their English level progressed and improved. With reference to the impact of the stay as returnees, the adolescents also depict encountering distinct circumstances. While some students mention that they maintained the same friend group back home, living abroad had an impact in their social circle. Most of them also mention their personal evolution and the academic challenges that they encountered when returning from their stay abroad, which shows that these stays have an impact on the students' development and attitudes.

The findings of the data analysis also point to a general need for research on the experiences of English adolescent learners, as studies do not generally focus on how they construct their descriptions of their lived experiences or their feelings and perceptions in regard to immersion experiences. Further research is needed in this area, especially including a larger corpus of teenage narratives. Due to space constraints, this thesis has addressed specific topics that have been identified as the most relevant. Nevertheless, there exist other areas to focus on, such as the students' academic experiences and their learning opportunities in the classroom in relation to the teaching methodologies of each school. Further work could also examine the linguistic and adjustment supports that the students receive or compare the teenagers' narratives with their parents' viewpoints.

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions (adapted from Jefferson, 2004)

P:	participant
(.)	short pause (0,5 seconds)
(1)	length of the pause expressed in seconds
(( ))	comments about speech
::	lengthening of a vocalic or consonantal sound
-	interruption of the turn by the speaker
<u>hola</u>	emphasis
=	latching
[	beginning of overlapping
/	rising intonation
\	falling intonation