EFL learners’ post-sojourn perceptions of the effects of study abroad

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EFL learners’ post-sojourn perceptions of the effects of study abroad
Les perceptions post-séjour des apprenants d’anglais comme langue étrangère sur les effets des études à l’étranger

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Abstract
This qualitative study investigated the ways in which tertiary-level English foreign language (EFL) learners believed that they had changed following study abroad. The participants were 12 Austrian EFL learners who had been exchange students in Ireland, the UK, or the USA. I conducted a cross-sectional study, grouping participants according to the duration of their stay abroad as well as the period of time since they had returned to their home country. Comparisons were drawn between students who had spent one semester on study abroad with those who had spent two semesters on study abroad. I also investigated the differences displayed depending on how long a student had been back in their native country; Group A (1-6 months), Group B (1 year), and Group C (2 years). The interviewees prepared a mind-map or short narrative, which was used as a prompt during the interviews. The findings revealed personal, social, cultural, and linguistic effects.

Résumé
Cette étude qualitative a exploré les manières dont les apprenants universitaires d’anglais comme langue étrangère (ALE) ont cru qu’ils avaient changé suite à des études à l’étranger. Les participants étaient 12 apprenants autrichiens d’ALE qui avaient été des étudiants d’échange en Irlande, au Royaume-Uni ou aux États-Unis d’Amérique. J’ai mené une étude transversale, regroupant les participants en fonction de la durée de leur séjour à l’étranger, ainsi que du laps de temps depuis qu’ils étaient retournés dans leur pays d’origine. Des comparaisons ont été tirées entre les étudiants qui avaient passé un semestre d’études à l’étranger et ceux qui avaient passé deux semestres d’études à l’étranger. J’ai également enquêté sur les différences affichées, en fonction du temps écoulé depuis qu’un étudiant était de retour dans son pays d’origine; Groupe A (1-6 mois), Groupe B (1 an) et Groupe C (2 ans). Les personnes interrogées ont préparé une carte mentale ou un court récit, qui a été utilisé comme réplique durant les entretiens. Les résultats ont révélé des effets personnels, sociaux, culturels et linguistiques.

Keywords: study abroad; EFL learners; post-sojourn effects; long-term impact; tertiary-level
Mots clés: études à l’étranger ; apprenants d’anglais comme langue étrangère (ALE) ; effets post-séjour ; impact à long terme ; niveau tertiaire

Introduction
Second language (L2) study abroad (SA) can offer the “the prospect of exploring a new language, culture, society, and the chance to reinvent yourself” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 150). The SA experience showcases a variety of different opportunities, and can thus affect various areas of learners’ lives. Indeed, research has found that the potential effects of SA can far exceed language learning by also impacting personal, socio-cultural, and academic development (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2006; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003a). However, most of the research available today is focused mainly on the period or sojourn abroad itself, or the time when learners have just recently returned to their home country (Coleman, 2013). There has been comparatively little research exploring how long-lasting the potential effects are (e.g., Alred & Byram, 2006; Dwyer, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2006). It would be naïve to assume that the immediate effects of SA are automatically long-lasting. For this reason, I chose to investigate participants who had been back in their home country for one to two years, to
evaluate if, and to what extent, the experiences of SA are maintained or diminished. In other words, I asked, how do learners who have been back home for various lengths of time assess the significance of their SA in the long-term? Other questions also arose, such as: Which areas are most pertinent to former SA participants who stayed for a shorter period of time? And for which areas of development do former SA participants believe it is necessary to stay for an entire academic year?

Coleman (2013) criticizes the divergent contexts and unclear terminology of SA research, which can result in discrepancies within the findings. In the current article I report on a study that investigated if, and in what ways, tertiary-level English Foreign Language (EFL) learners believed they had changed following SA. The participants were all English majors, studying at a university in Austria, who spent particular periods of time at partner universities in the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, and who attended courses identical to those provided for native residents. In an attempt to capture some of the possible dynamics in these learners’ sense of change, I employed a cross-sectional design, which investigated students who had been back in Austria for particular lengths of time. I chose to compare participants who had lived and studied abroad for one semester (one to five months) with those who had stayed abroad for an entire academic year (nine to ten months). Additionally, the participants were grouped according to the duration of their SA; half of the participants had studied overseas for one semester, while the other half had done so for an entire academic year. Within the current article, I will focus on the perceived effects of SA, along with their different dynamics and durability, drawing from the in-depth data reported by the individual learners that I used for a larger study (Steinwidder, 2015).

**Literature review: Study abroad effects**

The focus of research on the outcomes of SA has primarily been on language proficiency, which has revealed substantial individual differences (Kinginger, 2013). In order to account for these differences, Coleman (2013, p. 36) argues that “understanding the study abroad phenomenon requires researchers to take into account the whole person and the whole context.” In other words, research into the outcomes of SA must regard the learner as a multifaceted person and should acknowledge that the SA experience is unique for each participant. Individuals will inevitably have differing experiences, both during their SA experience and after their sojourn. At the same time, Irie and Ryan (2014) explain that a successful SA experience does not automatically result in solid gains in language proficiency. This argument also appears to be relevant for any other possible benefit of an overseas study. It is surely only to be expected that the potential effects of SA may not be guaranteed and that not every SA participant will benefit to the same extent, nor that the benefits will necessarily be long-lasting.

An investigation into learners’ perceptions and attitudes about their SA experience, as well as about themselves as SA participants, can be helpful in understanding the significance of SA for the individual learner. Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodcott, and Brown (2013, p. 9) point out that a SA experience can be regarded as “a ‘critical experience’ within the story of a language learning career” and can therefore be interpreted as a “key point in [the learner’s] development.” Recent case studies acknowledge that the SA experience can have an impact within various domains of learner identity (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003a; Pellegrino, 2005). These studies discuss personal, cultural, and social aspects of the SA experience and explore its relationship to learner identity, culture, and language. Murphy-Lejeune’s (2003a) in-depth qualitative study followed 50 European students who were residing in varies other European countries for one year.
She discovered that SA participants can gain socio-cultural insight by personal observation and experience and can develop “a more intimate, personal insider’s knowledge,” which can ultimately lead to “openness and its various facets—curiosity, tolerance and flexibility” (p. 109). Furthermore, she highlights personal benefits, such as autonomy and self-confidence as well as a “deeper sense of who they are and what resources they can avail in unusual social circumstances” (p. 109). These findings suggest that SA predominately affects personal and cultural effects in the long-term. In addition, her study indicates that multiple variables, such as agency, social contacts, or learners’ motives can impact the potential effects of sojourns.

Pellegrino’s (2005) ethnography discusses the social, psychological, and cultural challenges students might face during their SA experience in order to investigate how these factors influence L2 use. She explored factors such as the anxiety, self-esteem, risk-taking, and gendered nature of experience of 76 American students who studied Russian abroad and found that students who saw themselves as poor language learners were more likely to reject “opportunities to interact and improve their L2 skills,” while learners with a positive self-image were more likely to interact and receive feedback (p. 90). Thus, her study illustrates that a learner’s personal and cultural identity can complicate the adaption process to the host culture and, in turn, the communication with host country members. Pellegrino’s findings are limited with respect to the timing of her investigation: the learners’ perceptions were collected during the SA experiences, which were regarded as “volatile, changing from moment to moment, depending on the events of the day” (Pellegrino, 1998, p. 114). Pellegrino’s distinctly black or white in-sojourn outcomes raise the question whether the impact factors she traced continue to be salient post-sojourn. In order to investigate the significance of SA experiences in the long run, learners’ retrospective perceptions of the difficulties and successes abroad might offer additional insight into individual variation.

In another qualitative study addressing the pre-, in-, and post-sojourn periods, Jackson (2008) analyzed the complex links between language, culture, and identity re-construction by following 15 female Chinese university students enrolled in a five-week SA sojourn to England. Her findings illustrate that internal (e.g., personality attributes) as well as external factors (e.g., host receptivity, social networks) can influence the situated learning of SA participants. For example, Jackson explains that those SA participants who showed an interest in and attempted to understand the unfamiliar culture and who employed a wider range of strategies to engage with the new culture were subsequently more successful in adjusting to the foreign culture. Evidently, these findings imply that, for successful language and cultural learning, SA participants must make a conscious effort to be socially active during their sojourn. With regard to post-SA developments, Jackson investigated the sojourners for a period of nine months after their return and found that the majority of her participants, despite the short stay of only five weeks, viewed their sojourn as a “valuable and life-changing experience” (p. 217). Essentially, Jackson found the perceived impacts of L2 SA to concern intercultural communicative competence, personal growth, increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, and further identity re-construction. She also discusses notions of re-entry shock, wherein students described a temporary sense of dissatisfaction with their home environment or felt they missed their host families and the alternative freedoms they had enjoyed in England. Her findings draw attention especially to individual differences and the implication that participants who felt they had had a successful time abroad also perceived its personal impact to be greater.

Jackson’s (2008) study notwithstanding, research on the long-term effects of SA is scarce and only a few studies have explored this aspect of the field recently (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2006; Murphy-Lejeune, 2003b). Yet some effects perceived at the end of or immediately following the
SA may not be long-lasting and surely require review over time, while additional developments may occur as further time passes long beyond the participants’ return. Some changes might only occur later once learners have had more time to reflect on their experiences and to re-evaluate from the perspective of their home environment.

Thus, the current article will address in-depth perspectives on SA as reported by learners who embarked on this experience. It will focus on an exploratory study, which investigated a broader, more holistic and situated view of learners’ evaluations of their SA experience and its subsequent effects. It will also incorporate the complexities of SA experience for the individual (Jackson, 2008). Finally, it incorporates a wider temporal dimension by using retrospective oral and written narratives by students who had been back in Austria for certain lengths of time and beyond only immediate re-entry.

Methodological design
Research questions and method
A qualitative approach was chosen for this study since its focus was to explore tertiary-level EFL learner perceptions related to SA experience. A qualitative approach is well suited for research topics that concern complex, subjective, and potentially or likely changeable human experience. In particular, it investigated if, and in what ways, tertiary-level EFL learners believed they had changed following their SA, considering also the dynamics and persistence of these perceived effects for the individual learners. It was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do learners believe that they have changed as a result of their SA and, if so, in what ways?
2. What are the dynamics and duration of any perceived changes following SA?

This study thus required perceptual data that captured the feelings, attitudes, and perspectives of the respondents, rather than examining any actual events. That is to say, the study focused on the ways humans make meaning of their experiences, understanding that such perceptions are shaped within narratives that are equally as informative as the apparent facts of the events to which they might refer. Indeed, a narrative approach is well suited for exploring complex and unique SA experiences and their perceived effects (Jackson, 2008). SA experiences can represent a point of change in learner histories or self-narratives in that “the stories people tell about themselves help us to understand the ways in which individuals situate themselves and their activities in the world” (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014, p. 2). In this sense, “it is the learner’s interpretation of the past which becomes significant for the current self, and not the past event per se” (Mercer, 2014, p. 57). However, each individual SA participant has their own unique beliefs and attitudes, which can influence the kind of goals they set themselves, the way they act, and how they interpret their past experiences (Mercer, 2011). How learners interpret past events also affects their evaluations of their current identity, in relation to their current environments.

Participants and cross-sectional design
The participants were 12 tertiary-level EFL learners—eight females and four males—studying at a university in Austria, all of whom had been exchange students in Ireland, the UK, or the USA. In order to investigate the dynamics of any perceived changes, I conducted a cross-sectional study that interviewed students who had just returned from their SA (Group A), those who had been back for more than one year (Group B), and those who had been back in Austria for more than two years (Group C). In addition, the participants were grouped according to the duration of their SA. Half of the participants had resided abroad for one semester (one to five months), and the other half for two semesters (nine to ten months). All participants were aged between 22 and 27 at the time of
Regarding their ethnicity, all participants were white, eleven were Austrian, and one female student was originally from the German-speaking part of northern Italy.

At the time of the interviews, eight participants were studying for a Master’s degree in English teaching. It is important to note that the Austrian system for a teaching degree requires students to graduate with a second major subject. Of the remaining four students, one participant had recently finished her English Master’s degree, one participant had just finished her English Bachelor’s degree, and two students were still studying for their English Master’s degree. The reported information is valid for the time at which the interviews were carried out.

The participants embarked on different SA programs offered by their host universities. The eight learners who studied in Ireland and the UK participated in the “European student mobility programme” (Erasmus). Three of the participants who went to the USA applied for the “Joint Study Programme,” a student mobility program for overseas universities, while one participant went to the USA as part of the “European Joint Master’s Degree in English and American Studies,” a Master’s program in which students can complete part of their education at a partner university. The decision to study abroad is entirely voluntary within the Austrian degree programs. For an exact overview of the participants (all pseudonyms), their host location (destination country), see Table 1.

Data collection and analysis

The perceptual data required to explore the participants’ changes was gathered by means of qualitative interviews. However, in order to give the participants enough time to reflect on their SA experience, the areas they felt they might have changed as a result of their SA, and the dynamics and durability of their individual changes, they were asked to prepare a collage or narrative before the interview. Whatever they chose to prepare was used as a prompt during the interviews. Semi-structured, retrospective interviews were conducted in order to allow for and even encourage unexpected variations. The interviews, which were conducted in English, included open-ended questions aimed at gathering in-depth information about the participants’ SA experiences and their impressions of change.

The preparation tasks and interview transcripts were analyzed using the data management software Atlas.ti, which employs a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2001). This approach allowed “the analysis to remain true to the data as a whole and retain the contextualised meanings expressed in learners’ own voices” (Mercer, 2011, p. 4). After initial line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts and preparation tasks, I subsequently looked for patterns and relationships between themes (O’Leary, 2010). The relationships of categories were first analyzed by the co-occurrence function. Additionally, network views were used to explore connections between categories. During the coding process, and also during the ongoing comparison of data segments, I wrote memos recording possible findings and questions for further analysis. In order to be able to compare different segments of data, I created families and used them as filters for further analysis. Furthermore, I searched for “discrepant, negative and disconfirming cases” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 493), when comparing categories among all participants; that is, I looked for data that would account for individual differences. Finally, tables were created in order to compare the different groups of participants across the cross-sectional design. In the later stages of analysis, the Byram’s (1997) Model of Intercultural
Communicative Competence proved appropriate for reviewing and discussing the perceived cultural effects of SA. Byram identified five aspects of intercultural competence: knowledge (*savoirs*), attitudes (*savoir être*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre / faire*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*).

**Findings**

The main findings revealed that all participants believed that their SA experience was valuable for their personal, social, cultural, linguistic, and academic progress. A comparison between the one-semester group and the two-semester group indicated that there are variations within the findings.
that arguably link to the length of the SA. The comparisons across the three different lengths of
time that participants had been back in Austria—just returned (A), more than a year (B), and more
than two years (C)—suggested that there were individual differences in the dynamics of perceived
effects of SA experiences. While all relevant information about the individual participants is
summarized in Table 1 in the Appendix, to help keep in mind each participant’s time post-sojourn
as well as the length of their sojourn I provide their grouping in brackets following their
pseudonym each time they are mentioned below. For example, “(B/2)” stands for “Group B / back
in Austria for one year” and “stayed abroad for two semesters.” The findings are organized into
personal, social, cultural, and linguistic effects and are interpreted according to relevant research
literature. In order to remain within the scope of the current article, participants’ perceptions of
academic development are discussed elsewhere (see Steinwidder, 2015).

**Personal development**

Personal development was of paramount importance to the participants. While no observable
differences could be established in comparing the one-semester and two-semester group, the
analysis of the persistence of personal development indicated both long-lasting as well as in-flux
dynamic developments upon students’ return to Austria. The long-lasting nature of personal
development can be seen in increased self-efficacy beliefs about living abroad. Self-efficacy is
defined as “a person’s expectation of their ability to perform a particular task in a specific context”
(Mercer, 2012, p. 11). In the context of a SA, all participants believed that they had successfully
mastered living abroad, coped with being alone in a different country, and felt comfortable with
meeting new people. These successes have potentially led to lasting increased self-efficacy beliefs
about the ability to embark on similar sojourns again. In the data excerpt below, Alex (B/2), a
student who had been back in Austria for one year, explained that he enjoyed traveling more after
his SA in England:

It doesn’t matter if someone joins me or not. I can do it on my own now. [...] I feel so comfortable
with just traveling, finding new people. Because I know I can do it, you know. It is easy for me to,
I don’t know, set foot in a new environment because I already did it. I know how it works and I
know I feel comfortable with that. Yeah so I don’t really feel the need to bring something from
home or to ask some friends to join me, to feel safe or secure. I just I can do it now.

Indeed, all interviewees appeared to have developed a feeling of comfort and assurance in the
context of traveling abroad and consequently a notion of confidence to go abroad again. Increased
self-efficacy beliefs about living abroad were also apparent for those students with previous SA
experiences and thus can be interpreted as potentially accumulative as well as long-lasting.

Likewise, a number of students reported an expanded sense of self-awareness and self-
potential. Five participants from across the groups explained that they felt more aware of their life
goals and interests. For example, Hannah (C/2), who returned to Austria about two years before
the interview took place, emphasized that she had become more aware of her future aspirations:

I feel like since I’m back, I know exactly what I wanna do: internship-wise, job-wise, music-wise.
[...] And I feel like foremost I have to make sure that I do things that I really want to do and that I
can build on in the future [...] And I think that going abroad has something to do with that because
when you are out of your normal space and environment, you really realize the things that you start
missing and the things you want in your life because you are out of your routine. And then you
realize what you still [...] want to have in your life.
In contrast, some learners’ perceived gains in independence and personal growth are arguably more dependent on whether the sojourn was the first extended residence abroad and on their personal housing situation at home. Initially, nine students reported feeling more independent and mature as a result of their SA. This sense of personal growth was particularly apparent for a person moving abroad for the first time. In fact, all students who embarked on a SA for the first time (n=7) commented on the notion of personal growth and independence. The remaining three participants, Ursi (B/1), Kate (B/1), and Tina (A/1) did not mention personal growth or independence gains, which may be explained by the fact that these three students had already moved out from their parent’s home and additionally had experienced living abroad before their most recent SA. These data suggest that they might have already developed a sense of independence and therefore did not feel that their most recent SA had significantly affected their personal development.

Regarding the durability of gains in personal growth and independence, three male students reported falling back into old patterns within one year of being back in Austria. This can be explained by their post-sojourn housing situation: Chris (C/2), Alex (B/2), and Maurice (A/1) each moved back in with their parents upon their return to Austria. The fact that three male students commented on a perceived decrease within this area may suggest a gender-based variation. However, as Becca’s case (C/1) demonstrates, other complex social factors seem to play a major role with regard to the durability of self-confidence and independence. Becca claimed that she had gained self-confidence in her first stay abroad in the USA at the age of 15, but had lost her self-confidence over the five years between her first SA and the more recent one. She suggested that going abroad again would provide the opportunity to rebuild any personal development that she felt she had lost; she stated explicitly: “A main goal for me was when going back to the United States, to regain this self-confidence.” Importantly, Becca perceived her second self-confidence gain as more durable, which can perhaps be attributed to her subsequent actions in her home environment. Becca articulated that her gain in self-confidence indirectly led her to dramatically change her social environment in Austria. Her subsequent actions involved moving out from her parents’ home as well as ending her relationship with her boyfriend. Consequently, Becca emphasized: “I now know what I want, I’m proud of myself and I see myself as a strong and independent woman, which certainly wasn’t the case before”; a sign that she has successfully incorporated her new sense of identity into her home environment. These data suggest that the personal situation to which a participant returns can impact the durability of the personal development they experienced abroad.

Similarly, a learner’s sense of identity appears to be more in-flux and context-dependent. According to contemporary socio-cultural theory, identity is defined as dynamic and “an individual’s sense of self [is known] in relation to a particular social context or community of practice” (Mercer, 2012, pp. 11–12). Although six participants stated that they were exhibiting a new identity during their SA, it is important to note that the identity construction of these learners seemed to be connected to their particular socio-cultural context. In other words, while these six participants explained that they had the freedom to try out new things abroad, or to live different facets of their personality, most of them felt that they could not transfer their new sense of identity to their lives in Austria. As such, these learners argued that they felt pressure to conform to certain social or cultural constraints within their home environment. The following excerpt demonstrates how Alex’s (B/2) identity can be defined by contextual constraints at home:

Alex: Yeah if you move back, you fall back in old patterns and you are just a different person at home because everybody knows you differently. And I love my family and I really enjoy being at my parent’s place but I don’t like the person I am at my parent’s place.

Sandra: The child, I assume?
Alex: Yeah probably the child. You know they picture you differently and they talk to you differently and you react differently than you would in another place. I was completely different when I was in England. I used to act completely different when I met people in Brazil, for example. And yeah you just fall back and it’s like your development and your growth never happened, until you leave again. Then you are back to normal, to your new self.

Alex felt he had experienced a dramatic personal change. However, he clearly connected his sense of identity to a particular location. He believed that he was a different person abroad and that he acted differently in other countries. He perceived it as difficult, however, to live his new sense of self in his home environment, because he felt that his family did not see or treat him according to his new self-image. Moreover, the potential discrepancies between a sense of old and new identity can cause difficulties in re-adapting to the home environment. In the following excerpt, Alex explains that he ended his relationship with his girlfriend, and that it took considerable time to re-adapt to his old life in Austria:

At the same time some problems arose because my girlfriend back then, as I said, she stayed home and I went abroad, so she did not experience the changes I made. And that was also quite difficult for us because she thought everything would go back to normal [...] but it just couldn’t go back to normal because I changed so much. I developed and it was difficult to, I don’t know, find my place again. [...] I was thinking in a different way, [...] I had other things to talk about, for example. And it took me quite a while to settle back in everyday life.

The examples from this section illustrate that SA participants can see themselves as a different person, even one or two years after their SA. However, the durability of personal changes appears to be connected to perceived socio-cultural constraints within their home environment and to the particular social context they find themselves in once they have returned; this is especially the case if living with parents again or finding they are not so well matched with their romantic partner as before the SA. Certainly, the perceived discrepancies between the pre-SA self and the post-SA self can cause difficulties in re-adapting to the home environment. On the other hand, if students feel they can incorporate their new identity into their usual home environment, their sense of personal change might be more long-lasting.

**Linguistic effects**

Linguistic effects were another predominant theme in the data. The dynamics of the perceived linguistic effects of SA seemed to be domain-dependent, with notable differences between the speaking and writing domains. Regarding oral language skills, seven students initially believed that they had become more fluent. Four students stated they believed that they had improved their English pronunciation, or even changed their accents. Certainly, the majority of learners saw their SA as the pinnacle of their oral language development. Indeed, nine students expressed that they believed their English skills had deteriorated since returning. However, these learners predominately related their language deterioration to their speaking skills, recounting a sense of decline in oral fluency and pronunciation. Significantly, these learners suggested the lack of opportunities to speak in English in Austria and, in particular, the fewer opportunities to converse with native speakers on a daily basis as the main reason for their sense of deterioration in this domain.

A notable theme that emerged from the analysis of the data is that some learners appeared to have a lack of agency in improving or maintaining their spoken language level once they were
back in Austria. Vera (C/1), for example, explained that she adapted her pronunciation to her respective speaking partners:

in the first couple of months after I returned, I really had the feeling, like oh my god, I’m getting worse and worse because [...] I am a person who can easily adapt to the other person. So if I’m talking to somebody whose pronunciation is really good, like a native, of course, my pronunciation is also better. But if you are back and you are surrounded by so many Austrians talking English [...] so my pronunciation is of course now worse than it was.

Likewise, Maurice (A/1) argued that although he frequently conversed with his girlfriend in English, he inevitably forgot some English vocabulary during the period of five months following his sojourn: “I think certain expressions already got lost. I’m not sure, not sure how to avoid it. I think the only way to avoid it is to go continually abroad like for longer stays.” This statement suggests that Maurice believed that he could only improve his English further by living in another country where he must use his L2 daily. Whereas these two statements indicate a lack of agency in further improving linguistic development, there were also beliefs expressed about the importance of practice. For example, Nathalie (A/2) argued in her preparation narrative for the interview that

being back in Austria and being confronted with everybody’s questions and beliefs is sometimes difficult because everybody assumes my English must be perfect now and I can speak like a native speaker which isn’t true and I’m still working on my English skills. I also have the feeling that when you stop talking English regularly, you come out of practice very soon.

As can be seen from this excerpt, Nathalie appeared to have realized that she must continue to work actively in order maintain her level of linguistic proficiency. Similar to eight other participants, she seemed to believe that the chances to practice oral English in Austria are insufficient.

In contrast, three learners believed they had maintained, or even improved, their linguistic development after their SA. Those learners who explained that they had used English regularly, for example, by speaking with significant others or having to use English in their jobs believed that they have been able to maintain their level of spoken English. Lena (B/2) argued:

No, I don’t think so. Maybe I think, like first I thought maybe my speaking skills. But I think, it just has to do, maybe I was even like, I was a tiny bit more fluent when I lived there. Just because I had more contact with native speakers. But other than that, not really. Also because [...] I went back and got the job and there I only had to use English. So I think that was a good way to like maintain a certain level. I think it would have been different, if I had just stayed here.

Similarly, Chris (C/2) believed he had improved his language skills by “conversing in English” with his girlfriend, staying in contact with his international friends, and having to use English regularly in his studies and work. Likewise, Oliver (A/2), who had been back in Austria for one month, held optimistic views on language maintenance “it’s like riding a bike. As soon as you can do it, I mean you are getting a bit bad but not too bad [...] but if you are practicing and using the language all the time, I think you will keep your level.”

The importance of practice can also be seen when Maurice (A/1), despite generally believing that he experienced a decrease in his linguistic development, admitted that he sometimes still thinks in English, even one year after his return:

Sometimes, I mean I’m not sure if it’s because the term abroad or because of my girlfriend, but sometimes I even start thinking in English, which is pretty interesting. Not often, sure, but sometimes, you know, when there is a contact phase, I start thinking in English and sometimes
when I’m not thinking about the things, what I say, it’s just something that just pops out, some things pop out in English. So that’s funny.

These excerpts illustrate that intensive contact with English, along with practice in the home environment, can prolong the sense of L2 development. Moreover, these learners’ statements indicate that, for SA to be effective in the long term, there must be post-sojourn support.

In addition to outcomes focused on oral skills, nine students articulated that they had witnessed an improvement in their writing skills; from this group, eight learners emphasized that they now prefer writing seminar papers in English, rather than in their mother tongue, German. Alex (B/2) explained, “actually for essay writing [...] I figured that I’m better in English than in German now”; and Nathalie (A/2) mentioned that “writing papers in English is more fun because you write short sentences and it’s just easier.” Only two students addressed improved reading skills, for example, Becca (C/1) noted, “reading comes more easily [...] I understand academic texts a lot better now.” Also, six learners believed that they now understand different English accents more easily, and two participants generally referred to improved listening skills. In addition, five participants articulated that their SA had triggered a self-confidence boost regarding the language domain, meaning all language skills combined. These five noted that they felt more confident in their English language use, and less concerned with making mistakes. Maurice (A/1), for example, stated: “I think I’m still more comfortable using it certainly. I feel familiar with it.” Importantly, all of the improvements in these domains are perceived as durable; none of the participants commented on any sense of deterioration within these areas.

In contrast, one participant expressed doubt or reservations concerning his language improvement. Oliver (A/2), who recently returned to Austria, seemed unable to self-evaluate his written language proficiency:

Improving my language skills because I know I wasn’t that good. So I wanted to improve that. And I think I did. I don’t know, let’s wait for the next semester in [Austria]. But my grades in [Ireland] were kind of good. [...] So it was kind of alright for me and surprising. The thing is, I don't know, if they were nicer because we are internationals or if we were that good. That’s the question. So I mean I’m just gonna wait for the next semester and then I’m gonna see. But I think it was getting better.

For Oliver, the evaluation of his written English performance seemed dependent on his academic successes during his SA as well as their replication post-sojourn. He attributed the achievement of good grades to an Erasmus bonus, and suggested that teachers abroad were less strict in grading; he seemed not to have gained in linguistic self-confidence to the same extent as the other participants. Irie and Ryan (2014) argue that a learner’s self-evaluation is perhaps dependent upon feelings of achievement in the SA context, but we see from Oliver (and others) that achievement is reviewed in the post-sojourn context. Indeed, as most of the other participants had been back in Austria for a certain period of time and explained that they had received positive feedback at their Austrian university, this post-sojourn re-assessment might have further promoted their language confidence. Nonetheless, it seems to be the case that receiving feedback on language production in the home environment following the SA has been very important for these learners.

**Social effects**

Comparisons regarding social aspects showed differences between the one-semester group and the two-semester group. Students’ ambitions and motivations to build close friendships appeared to be dependent on the duration of their SA. Numerous students drew a connection between the length
of their SA and the process of making friends, in particular with native speakers. For example, Becca (C/1) explained how her personal motivation to meet people was influenced by the brevity of her SA:

I mean when I was [in the USA] I knew I was going to be back [in Austria] in five months. So I didn’t really put that much effort also into possible friendships, to put it that way. But when you know you are going to stay for a year, I think you just approach the entire situation completely differently. And I would therefore really recommend everyone to spend an entire year abroad.

In hindsight, five participants articulated that it would have been more beneficial for their language development and cultural understanding to spend more time with native speakers during their SA. Among these students, only Oliver (A/2) is from the two-semester group; this could be interpreted that students who were abroad for a shorter period of time were less likely to build friendships with native speakers. Generally, relationships with host locals were seen to be more difficult to establish, while relationships with other international students were seen as comforting and supportive, particularly during the first weeks of the SA.

With regard to the analysis of the post-SA period, there were no observable patterns across the different groups. While all participants, except Tina (A/1), noted that they have remained in contact with new friends, there are some individual differences in the degree and intensity of staying in contact with friends they made abroad. Overall, there was a tendency toward a decrease in contact with SA friends the longer participants had resided back in their home environment. However, Chris (C/2) and Vera (C/1) claimed that they have been in regular contact with their SA friends. This is in contrast to Tina and Maurice (A/1), who had just returned to Austria, but had stayed only for one semester; they explained that they were not in regular contact with friends they had met during their SA. Likewise, Hannah (C/2) and Alex (B/2) noted that the degree of contact diminished during the time in which they had been back. Some participants expressed their concerns that some friendships had faded and had not progressed beyond the sojourn. Becca (C/1), for example, explained “that is a very big cultural shock when you go back from the States. That you actually see the friendships were for the point of time there and that’s it. Now that you’re gone, you are not interesting anymore. And that was really tough for me also to understand.”

SA participants who had meaningful contact with others expressed that they miss friends from abroad, even one or two years after their return home. Conversely, Alex (B/2) felt connected to his friends but also accepted that it was not necessary to have regular contact:

even though we don’t have so much contact now, we just share this year together. So I feel that if I decided to go somewhere, I would have a place to stay [...] and the same goes for them. If they come to Austria, they can obviously stay at my place all the time. It’s just we are connected, even though we don’t have so much contact now. We just share the big events in our lives, like yeah I moved out or, I don’t know, got a degree and stuff like that. Yeah we share that with each other.

Nathalie (A/2), Lena (B/2), and Chris (C/2) entered romantic relationships during their SA. At the time of the interviews, both Nathalie and Chris were still in a relationship with their partners from abroad. Lena’s relationship with her Scottish boyfriend, however, had ended six months after her return. These close relationships have had an impact on participants’ re-adaption to Austria and their impressions of re-entry culture shock. Lena, who had been back for one year, recounted her re-entry phase as follows:

Lena: Well I think in the beginning I like was still very nostalgic. I just missed people [...] now it’s quite distant because I mean I appreciate what I had like the life I had over there. But there is not so much nostalgia anymore I think.

Sandra: When do you think this changed?
Lena: Hmm, I think probably when things ended with my boyfriend. Because then, because before that I thought I will probably be back a lot of times to visit him. But I think this probably changed around autumn, like late November, I think that’s probably the main turning point.

Both Chris (C/2) and Nathalie (A/2) drew particular links between their relationships with their partners and their linguistic, personal, and cultural development. Chris, for example, stressed the influence his girlfriend had on him:

she was emancipated in so many ways [...] she was not judgmental in so many ways. And I think that comes with being, I guess, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and a cosmopolitan and perhaps obviously with her being, I guess, sometimes critical of the EU [...] but still being a citizen of the world, perhaps not the world, Europe. And you could actually sense it. I feel like I have learned so much from this girl, simply because of how she is. And I guess that’s one of the biggest impacts any of these cultural aspects had on me.

Although Chris had been back in Austria for more than two years, he explained that he still wished to incorporate this “cosmopolitan” identity into his own personal life: “translates into a desire to live this cosmopolitan part of your personality again soon. And to be conscious to integrate it into your life as it progresses.” These examples demonstrate the important links between social environment abroad and a learner’s identity formation. Clearly, these data also suggest a variety of individual differences, which poses a challenge in comparing across the different groups in regard to social aspects.

In the data, the participants also reported notions of changed social interactions within their home environment. Back in Austria, Becca (C/1), Kate (B/1), Vera (C/1), and Hannah (C/2) seemed to appreciate socializing more. As already mentioned above, Becca explained that her new sense of independence encouraged her to move out of her parent’s home, which subsequently led her to socializing more with her fellow students at her home university. Becca also showed signs of empathy toward foreign exchange students in her home environment. As such, she actively sought to make contact with an American exchange student in one of her cultural studies classes at her home university. Becca felt an obligation to show the exchange student her home country, as she would have appreciated the same gesture when she lived abroad:

And so after class I walked up to her and started talking to her. I took her to lots of like sightseeing places [...] because I felt like I have to. This is my job to show her our country. And I know it’s difficult for an exchanger to really walk up to strangers talking and starting a conversation. So I felt it’s my job to now do this and not the exchanger because I would have appreciated that in the United States.

Surprisingly, Becca is the only participant who expressed this behaviour in reference to empathetic motivations. I had assumed that more participants would seek out more diverse friends back home in Austria, as seven participants stated that they appreciated the diversity of the people they encountered abroad.

Cultural effects

All participants in the current study commented on their intercultural insights and believed they had gained cultural knowledge. Following Byram’s (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, with regard to attitudes, or savoir être, nine students claimed that they had become more open-minded and tolerant toward other people from different cultures. In the excerpt below, Becca (C/1) explained how living in the USA increased her understanding of certain behaviours:
Before I lived in the States for a while, I just condemned them as being [...] killers of planet Earth and whatnot. But if you really live there and you see the distance between their house and the next store, then you understand why they have such big cars because with the small ones they couldn’t like carry all the food or everything they need with one grocery shopping. It’s ridiculous. And that’s just one thing you I think you really only understand when you live there because as I said before they were just all devils to me.

In another example of changed attitudes, Kate (B/1) commented on her general ability of understanding differing viewpoints, but also argued that she did not blindly tolerate other opinions:

You have a discussion and then they give their arguments and then you see OK I would never come up with that argument, because I wouldn’t think of it. So that was really interesting to see a completely different view, which does not mean that it’s better or worse but it is just different. You have to acknowledge it. **Of course, you at some point you cannot just acknowledge it but you say well that’s right and that’s wrong.** But you can be really objective. And then you can think OK why people have a different opinion because if they are living in that environment and if they have that information, they are not like they can’t think differently, you know. [Emphasis added.]

This excerpt illustrates that she did not automatically tolerate or adopt other viewpoints. Kate believed that she was able to understand different viewpoints, but her empathy did not involve a complete change in attitude. The immersion into a diverse cultural environment could be linked to gaining multiple perspectives. Byram (1997) categorizes this as empathy, that is, the understanding of someone else’s point of view and emotional standing. In the data, ten participants explained that they could understand multiple perspectives and the viewpoints of others. According to Byram (2008), interculturally competent learners must recognize deviations in values and beliefs, but do not necessarily have to adopt them.

Skills of interpreting and relating or **savoir comprendre** refers to the ability to interpret documents and events from other cultures and to explain and relate them to ones in one’s own culture (Byram, 1997, 2008). Tina (A/1), for example, compared Irish and Austrian mentalities and worldviews: “I have to say Austrians and Irishmen they share a lot of similarities because of the history. You always have the big brother, you know and the troubles with him.” Tina then explained how the particular relationship to the “big brother” can affect a country’s cultural identity, comparing the relationship Austria has with Germany with the relationship the Republic of Ireland has with England:

Tina: Yes, I see some because you have this idea that you are always the more insignificant country. That’s what you are used to from history and then you feel, the country as such feels that you need more of a, I don’t know how to say, more need to show what you have, what kind of opportunities.

Sandra: Kind of find own identity?

Tina: Yes, exactly and the Irish are much more like the Austrians because they only got their independence like in the 50s. But there were also some other similarities, for example, just in the mentality with pessimistic worldview and, you know, complaining about things all of the time, that’s the same you know. [...] So I found a lot of similarities

Drawing from her historical knowledge, Tina appeared to have gained cultural knowledge by communicating with others, and seemed able to interpret her insights with regard to her own culture.

With regard to skills of discovery and interaction or **savoir apprendre / faire**, three participants reflected on the communication strategies that they used to interact with people from
different cultures. They articulated that they had employed these strategies to encourage opportunities for a social and cultural exchange, as well as being careful not to inadvertently offend those with whom they conversed. For example, Becca (C/1) explained that the awareness of cultural differences facilitated her social communication with others:

I would usually say, I don’t know, when this point came up and they told me I was like “Really, you are kidding” and they felt offended, you know what I mean, like “No why should I be kidding about that.” And so that was one of those Fettnäpfchen [to commit a blunder] at the very beginning. But I think when you know about this, it’s easier to talk with people because you are aware that there might be this issue.

However, the fact that only three participants noted intercultural communication skills begs the question why the majority of learners did not mention this during the interviews. Perhaps students only became aware of these skills when they encountered communication difficulties abroad. An example to support this argument was provided by Chris (C/2), who explained how he learned that the phrase “I like you” can be understood differently by a person with a different cultural background:

I guess that’s a love thing, [...] I had to learn the melodramatic way what it means when a Canadian girl says I like you. Because I just responded: “Yeah well I like you.” And she said, “No, I like you.” And I said, “Yeah I really like you as well” and that was terrible because that basically meant ok we are getting married. And I was like, “Yeah you are cute and you are a good friend and yes you are fit as well,” but yeah. [...] And she was Asian-Canadian from Vancouver and said “I like you” and it meant “Fuck I have a crush on you” and I was like, “Yeah I like you as well.” So yeah that was a bit drama.

Agar (1994, p. 100) uses the term “rich points” when referring to these difficulties in communicating with others across cultures. Potentially, these experienced communication issues during SA could result in a lasting impact for these learners. In this instance, Chris remembered this interpersonal difficulty two years after his return, and from this has learned to understand the significance of his verbal reactions. If he were to find himself in a similar situation again, he might react differently. Thus, the memory of these “rich” experiences may continue to have value and profound learning may emerge from the initial misunderstandings.

With regard to Byram’s fifth category of critical cultural awareness, or savoir s’engager, Vera (C/1), for example, explained that her newfound tolerance had even made her become more critical of her cultural identity during her SA in England:

I think I am a more tolerant person now, because I only realized how intolerant Austrians can be as I went there. Because people there, [...] they are more laid-back than we are, and they don’t care so much about how somebody looks like or, I don’t know, what he wears, because there are so many people from different backgrounds.

While Vera argued that she had become more critical of Austrian culture, her impressions of English culture might still be clouded by her appreciation and love for that country and its people. Nevertheless, critical reflections of host and home culture were prevalent in the data. Indeed, all students appeared to have reflected on their home culture, and in turn, on their own personal and cultural identity.

A final aspect of the SA experience related to intercultural communication, seen by many participants, was using a common language that is understood by the majority of speakers in a particular context. As such, five students stated that they conversed in English when people with differing mother tongues were present (including other German speakers). These participants
explained that it could be seen as impolite to communicate in a language that other people cannot understand.

With regard to the comparisons of cultural effects between the one-semester group and the two-semester group, a longer SA duration was generally regarded to be more beneficial for cultural development. Almost all participants held the view that it took some time to settle into the new environment abroad. For example, Maurice (A/1) asserted, “when you are in another country, a semester is really not that much of a time to really immerse.” In contrast, despite her short stay in Ireland, Tina (A/1) emphasized the perceived cultural benefits she gained within only one month. It is important to note that Tina did not regard her one-month SA as vital for her language or personal development, relating this to the short duration of her SA, as well as to her prior stay abroad in England. During the interview, however, she elaborated on her cultural insight, thoroughly reflected on social, economic, and historical factors, and compared Irish and Austrian mentalities and worldviews.

Concerning the persistence of cultural effects, none of the participants appeared to expect that their cultural insights, tolerance level, and understanding of different points of view could fluctuate or deteriorate over time. This begs the question whether these learners wished to advance their cultural competence further. Nevertheless, the comparisons across the three groups are suggestive of the different dynamics of the re-entry period. In accordance with Citron’s (1996) findings, participants who believed that they had meaningful contact with others during their SA experience, or who embraced the host culture, argued that they experienced difficulties in their initial months in returning to Austria. The immediate re-adaption phase can be seen especially well in Nathalie’s (A/2) data. At the time of the interview, she had just returned from the USA, with her American boyfriend visiting her in Austria, which would suggest that Nathalie was still in the critical re-adjustment phase. Nathalie argued that she regarded herself as more critical about her own and her friends’ lifestyles, suggesting a link between her new identity and cultural norms. In this study, five students acknowledged that they were experiencing reverse culture shock, in the initial months of returning to Austria. For most of these participants, the severe difficulties in adjusting to the Austrian context passed after the initial months. Conversely, Chris (C/2), a participant who referred emphatically to his reverse culture shock, believed that he had incorporated facets of other cultures, had grown accustomed to living in England, and had formed close social relationships abroad. In fact, Chris explained that he “hated coming back to Austria,” and even two years after his return noted that “it’s not ended [...] it stayed the same but it becomes bearable as your life goes on and fills up again.” These data suggest that participants may experience difficulties for a longer period of time, when prolonging the effects of their SA through contact with meaningful others from their host countries.

Discussion
This research has illustrated that SA has the potential to affect learners in the personal, social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of their lives for a period after their sojourn. That a SA experience can impact personal benefits (for example, noted gains in independence, self-confidence, and personal growth) has been demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Dwyer, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2006; Tragant, 2012). However, the findings here highlight that the post-study abroad context is especially relevant for learners’ interpretations of the lasting effects of their personal development. While SA participants’ sense of personal growth and independence may initially be increased, their impressions of socio-cultural constraints within their home environment can inhibit their ongoing sense of these kinds of personal development. In particular, the relationships with friends,
family, and romantic partners at home can play a role in mitigating the effects of SA experiences and may cause difficulties in re-adapting to the home environment. These findings confirm the dynamic and context-dependent nature of identity in relation to SA (Block, 2009; Mercer, 2011). Pellegrino’s (2005) and Jackson’s (2008) findings highlight complex links between learners’ social environments and their identity construction. Similar results were found in this study. Some students, who appreciated certain personal or cultural characteristics of close friends from abroad, wished to incorporate these facets into their own identity even two years after the sojourn. The account of one student (Becca), who felt that she had successfully integrated a new sense of identity into her home environment might be seen as a lasting sense of change.

Likewise, SA students’ interpretations of maintaining their linguistic improvement relied on a sense of satisfaction from general practice and—in some cases, continued—daily use of the language as well as on the attributed source of the linguistic successes they experienced abroad (Irie & Ryan, 2014). The majority of participants sensed a decrease in their oral production skills, with some students’ statements indicating a decreased sense of agency to improve their English further once they had returned to Austria. This could have potentially ongoing negative implications and suggests that students require post-sojourn support especially for oral language skills maintenance. Conversely, all participants seemed to believe that they had maintained their writing, reading, and listening skills after the sojourn. Only one student noted reservations regarding improvements in writing. While this participant explained that he did not receive specific feedback during his sojourn, he had also just returned to Austria at the time of the interview and not yet received any feedback from his home university to confirm gains in written language ability. With regard to the persistence of linguistic improvements, this instance indicates that students might still be dependent on positive feedback in their home environment for the perception of sojourn-related language gains to go beyond any doubt.

In contrast, it seems that participants perceive intercultural developments, such as open-mindedness and tolerance, as long-lasting. While seven participants explained that they appreciated the diversity of the people they encountered abroad, it is disappointing or concerning that only a few participants stated that they have changed their social interactions in Austria, for example, by seeking more diverse friends. While this was a lasting outcome in Dwyer’s study (2004), the majority of participants here perhaps did not feel the need to actively approach others—or did not perceive that others might appreciate this—once they were surrounded again by their familiar social network. This indicates a limit to the awareness of otherness that was initially gained or further developed abroad. Indeed, some intercultural gains are perhaps more about self-image than about deep engagement with others. Other potentially persistent effects are the long-lasting self-efficacy beliefs about the ability to live abroad independently, the wish to travel more, and the assurance about meeting people abroad. These findings are supported in the SA literature (e.g., Murphy-Lejeune, 2003a) and imply that the learners in this study could re-establish an open-minded attitude if they were to move to a different country again.

Regarding the comparison between the one-semester group and two-semester group, some differences are notable. Generally, all participants agreed that staying for an entire academic year was more beneficial for personal, socio-cultural, and linguistic developments. Six participants explained that it took considerable time to adapt to the new environment and to fully immerse themselves comfortably into the different culture. Similarly, Murphy-Lejeune (2003b, p. 225) notes that the majority of her participants believed that the academic year abroad is “necessary to achieve the level of adaptation they expect in order to feel ‘at ease’ in their host society.” In addition, most participants from the one-semester group explained that they either did not actively
pursue building close friendships or that finding close friends was difficult for them as making friends takes a certain amount of time. Another theme that emerged is that SA participants recounted that they felt understood among other international students and that it was easy to connect with them. These data are in accordance with Pellegrino (2005, pp. 18–19), who argues that SA participants may need to “maintain a sense of security” and a “sense of safety” in their social interactions. However, it needs to be stressed that retrospective, perceptual data might conceal personality or investment factors, defeatism, or self-limitations. Nevertheless, potential limiting factors are perhaps reduced when participants experience a longer sojourn as more time offers more potential for development as well as the likelihood of counterbalancing any limiting perceptions at the start. Furthermore, there is individual variation in staying connected with friends from the sojourn abroad, with a general tendency for contact with SA friends to diminish as time passes. Students who stayed for an entire academic year were more likely to have higher motivations to find meaningful friendships; consequently, the friendships made by this group were more likely to progress after the sojourn.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that both the SA experience itself and its evaluations are connected with a variety of internal and external factors (Jackson, 2008). It would be naïve to assume that any potential effects of SA are long lasting. The long-term significance of SA is likely to depend on how learners sustain their motivation to progress further and “how they approach learning beyond these key events” (Irie & Ryan, 2014, p. 358). In order to maximize the potential of a sojourn for the individual learner, the SA experience should be viewed as a holistic experience that begins with pre-departure preparation and continues long after participants have returned to their home universities (Irie & Ryan, 2014). However, the conclusions are drawn from the learners’ own retrospective perceptual data. It could be the case that these learners’ perceptions were clouded by “rosy retrospection,” that is, “the tendency for people to remember and recollect events they experience more fondly and positively than they evaluated them to be at the time of their occurrence” (Mitchell & Thompson, 1994, p. 85). Similarly, Ehrenreich (2006) argues SA narratives seem bound to be positive and that participants might emphasize their experiences of success in order to prove that their SA was worth their time and effort. Therefore, the findings of this present study should be carefully interpreted and the value of a SA, as expressed by participants, should not be overstated.

**Conclusion**

This exploratory qualitative study examined Austrian EFL learners’ perceptions of the lasting effects of SA in Ireland, the UK, or the USA. The findings demonstrated that SA participants believed that their SA was a valuable experience for their personal, social, cultural, and linguistic development. Overall, after being investigated one or two years post-sojourn, the SA experience was seen as a milestone in students’ learning development.

The comparison between the one-to-six months, the one-year, and the two-year post-sojourn groups showed some variations in the persistence of certain perceived effects. With regard to the persistence of personal development, learners’ notions of self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-efficacy concerning their ability to go abroad are longest lasting. Meanwhile, learners’ sense of independence, personal growth, and identity construction are clearly dependent on the particular contemporary socio-cultural context within which they live and the lives they choose to lead on their return. Regarding the persistence of perceived linguistic effects, most of the learners regard their speaking skills as deteriorating after returning to Austria. In contrast, the perceived effects on their writing, reading, and listening skills are seen to be longer lasting. The effects on
cultural development are perceived as long-lasting across each of the different groups analyzed. A comparison between the one-semester group and two-semester group indicated that participants who stayed abroad for the entire academic year were more successful in building friendships with native speakers. In addition, a longer SA was perceived as being more beneficial for learners’ cultural and linguistic development, as stated by the majority of participants.

However, conducting retrospective studies has its limitations. It could be the case that any information shared by the participants was selective or about maintaining a positive SA self-image. Additional research is needed to gain more insight into the persistence of any perceived effects of SA. This study could benefit from further interviews, with the same participants further on in their lives to find out whether they can maintain perceived gains or how these gains are reconsidered. It would also be informative to analyze the perceptions of students who decided not to embark on a sojourn in order to find out if they can relate to the opinions of SA participants about its significance.

Finally, despite the aforementioned limitations, the value of exploring perceptions for SA research needs to be stressed. While the long-term effects, as reported in this study, are both real and hypothesized, the investigation of learners’ learning histories can expand our understanding of culturally situated, dynamic, and individual identity construction (Coffey & Street, 2008). Certainly, former SA participants’ perceptions play a vital role in the ongoing formation of their identity by creating meaning from life events. It is these interpretations of past events, or past successes, that become meaningful in their present lives. Sojourners’ perceptions of the long-term effects of such experiences are clearly contingent on the depth of personal impact of the experience, such as the recalled “rich points” (Agar, 1994). The long-term significance of SA is also contingent on circumstance, for example, on a participant’s ability to operate their new identity within their home environment and their eventual application of their behaviours acquired in-sojourn afterward at home.

References


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