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Target language use and development and sociocultural and psychological adaptation during study abroad: A systematic narrative review of barriers and facilitators

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Abstract

Through the lens of Applied Linguistics, this current paper explores and synthesizes findings regarding the interplay between the use and development of the target language of the mobility experience and students' sociocultural and psychological adaptation to the new environment. It does so by adopting a systematic narrative approach. This approach facilitates a wide exploration of the topic, encompassing multiple methodologies and contexts in a non-prescriptive manner. Following an initial search yielding 17,942 returns, 37 papers were deemed suitable for inclusion in the review. Findings firstly indicate that the role of the target language is under-represented in the literature. However, the papers under review highlight the centrality of language issues in erecting barriers to and facilitating adaptation, especially regarding preparation for mobility, relationship building during the sojourn and learner internal factors. It also reveals gaps in the literature regarding the role of technology and the impact of discrimination.

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Abstract in Spanish

En el marco de la Lingüística Aplicada, este artículo explora y sintetiza hallazgos sobre la interacción entre el uso y el desarrollo de la lengua meta durante experiencias de movilidad, así como la adaptación sociocultural y psicológica de los estudiantes al nuevo entorno. Para ello, se adopta un enfoque narrativo sistemático que permite una exploración exhaustiva del tema, integrando múltiples metodologías y contextos desde una perspectiva no prescriptiva. Tras una búsqueda inicial que arrojó 17.942 resultados, se seleccionaron 37 artículos para su inclusión en la revisión. Los resultados indican, en primer lugar, que el papel de la lengua meta se encuentra insuficientemente representado en los trabajos publicados. No obstante, los estudios analizados ponen de relieve la centralidad de los factores lingüísticos tanto en la generación de barreras como en la facilitación de los procesos de adaptación, especialmente en lo relativo a la preparación para la movilidad, el establecimiento de relaciones durante la estancia en el extranjero y las características individuales del estudiante. Asimismo, la revisión identifica lagunas relevantes en investigaciones previas, en particular en lo que respecta al papel de la tecnología y al impacto de la discriminación.

Keywords

Language acquisition; language use; narrative review; psychological adaptation; sociocultural adaptation

1. Introduction

Study Abroad (SA), an Applied Linguistics-specific field of International Student Mobility (ISM), has been a prolific context of research into additional language (Lx) acquisition and language practices since the mid-1990s. It is widely believed that the nature of the context provides opportunities for Lx engagement and development that cannot be achieved in the participants' home country (Mitchell & Güvendir, 2021). In fact, despite Lx development being somewhat challenging to predict, researchers have compellingly demonstrated that participating in a SA experience can enhance participants' Lx knowledge (for reviews, see Borràs & Llanes, 2019; Güvendir et al., 2024; Tullock & Ortega, 2017). One factor that appears to lead to more successful Lx outcomes is the quality and quantity of language use encountered in the SA context. However, access to an enhanced language experience is not always a given. It often necessitates the establishment of new social networks for interaction (see Valls-Ferrer & Mora, 2014; Dewey et al., 2013; Belnap et al., 2013; Paradowski et al., 2021 for positive correlations; also see Magnan & Back, 2007; Heinzmann et al., 2024 for lack of correlation). Establishing social networks in a new linguistic and sociocultural environment can be a challenging and complex process. Not only

may a certain proficiency level of the Lx be needed before this process can begin, but it may also require sociocultural insights into the new context, in tandem with the ability and opportunities to adapt, integrate, or even find a sense of belonging within the SA environment.

In light of the above, it is clear that language plays a central role in the students' relationship with the host country. Having the ability to communicate in the target language (TL), whether it be the language of the host country (LHC) or English as a lingua franca (ELF)¹, can ease interaction and relationship-building with other people in the host country. As such, TL knowledge coupled with access to social networks where the TL is spoken could be an indicator of success in transitioning or adapting into a new cultural and linguistic milieu. Furthermore, social and linguistic transitioning is often accompanied by psychological and affective changes within individual sojourners (Leong, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zimmermann et al., 2017) whereby factors, such as anxiety, open-mindedness and emotional stability, are deemed to either support or challenge sojourners' transition to the new context. However, within ISM research, there is a lack of consensus on how to conceptualise and operationalise the transition (see Ward, 2022, for an overview). The concept has variably been referred to as "integration," "adaptation," "adjustment," "socialisation" and, more recently, "creating a sense of belonging in the host community" (Mittelmeier et al., 2024). In this paper, "adaptation" will be used as an umbrella term encompassing interrelated sociocultural and psychological adaptations that students may experience during study abroad. In this study, following Zimmermann et al. (2017, p. 236), sociocultural adaptation is understood as the ability to manage everyday life effectively in a foreign context, with sojourners' social relationships in the host environment providing important indicators of this process. In terms of psychological adaptation, this has been operationalised as 'cognitive and affective aspects of well-being' (Zimmermann et al., 2017, p. 426) and often centres around an individual's dynamic capacity to cope mentally and emotionally in a new environment.

In summary, the adaptation required in becoming a member of the host community, whether this refers to the educational or the national community, can be an arduous task. Students who engage in ISM often find it challenging to overcome various social, cultural, and psychological barriers that prevent them from developing formal and informal relationships in their new host environment. Without these social connections, international students may not

¹For the purpose of this paper, we have operationalised the ELF context as one in which the intended medium of communication is English in a non-anglophone country. This is contrasted with the language of the host country (LHC) context. The LHC context may include English if spoken in an anglophone country.

develop a sense of belonging within their new communities. As previously mentioned, international students frequently struggle to establish meaningful ties abroad, possibly due to limited TL proficiency, yet such ties play a crucial role in improving their language skills. To date, several state-of-the-art articles, literature reviews and meta-analyses dealing with student mobility from an applied linguistics perspective exist (Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Hirai, 2018; Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Llanes, 2011; Tseng et al., 2024; Tullock & Ortega, 2017; Xiao, 2015; Xu, 2019; Yang, 2016). What these reviews have in common is that they primarily synthesize findings on the effect of student mobility on language development. None of these reviews explicitly addresses the complex interplay between language and the myriad adaptations that international students may experience. The current review aims to provide the first systematic overview of findings pertaining to this relationship.

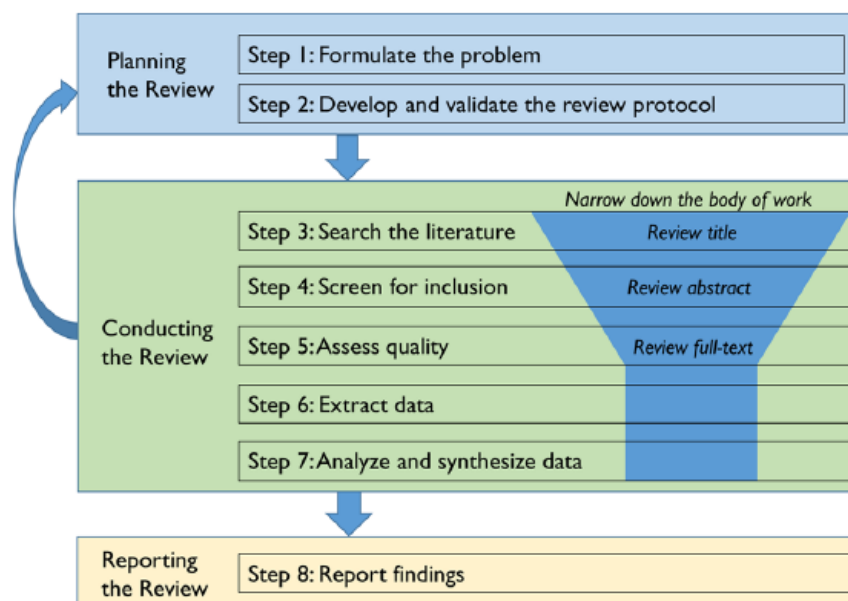
With this in mind, the narrative review sheds light on the research landscape which investigates the relationship between TL practices and sociocultural / psychological adaptation during SA within Europe. The following research questions will guide the present study: What are the facilitators of adaptation in study abroad (RQ1)? What are the barriers to adaptation in study abroad RQ2?

2. Methodology

This review was conducted following a narrative systematic synthesis approach (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Narrative reviews are characterised by their flexibility insofar as they facilitate a descriptive, qualitative synthesis of methodologically diverse research. They are particularly beneficial in the exploration of under-researched areas. Unlike quantitative systematic reviews, a narrative approach does not set out to prove a hypothesis or test causality, nor is it concerned with critiquing the robustness of the studies reviewed. In contrast, it can be viewed as a ‘persuasive presentation of literature’ (Xiao & Watson, 2019, p. 95) offering interpretations, noting gaps and presenting critiques (Sukhera, 2022). Turning now to the process, the initial step involved planning the review by formulating the problem and subsequently developing and validating additional protocols. An in-depth literature search was then conducted, followed by the screening of studies based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The corpus of studies was compiled, and data were extracted, analysed and synthesised. Finally, the results were reported. Figure (1) summarizes the approach.

FIGURE (1)

APPROACH TO THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW



2.1. Identification of data sources and search strategy

The data analysed in the current paper are part of a much larger systematic review on the social and cultural adaptation of international students (Uzun et al., forthcoming). While the umbrella project focuses on international student mobility from a plurality of disciplines, the novelty of the current review lies in its exclusive focus on empirical studies from the field of Applied Linguistics published between 1987 and 2022. All articles reviewed were in English and peer reviewed. The following databases were included in the search: the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Linguistics and Language Behaviors (LLBA), ProQuest, PsychINFO, Scopus-Elsevier and Web of Science (WOS). The search strings that were utilized were as follows (also see Uzun et al., forthcoming, p. TBA):

1. ("study abroad" OR "sojourner" OR "international mobility" OR "international student mobility" OR "international students" OR "mobile students" OR "foreign students" OR "erasmus students" OR "exchange students" OR "transnational mobility" OR "transnational students" OR "student mobility") AND ("* competence")
2. ("sojourner" OR "international mobility" OR "international student mobility" OR "study abroad" OR "international students" OR "mobile students" OR "foreign students" OR "erasmus students" OR "exchange students" OR "transnational mobility" OR "transnational students" OR "student mobility") AND ("social integration" OR "cultural integration" OR "sociocultural integration")

Since the first string retrieved more than a million papers, we modified it in the second iteration, which retrieved 17,942 papers across all disciplines. Table (1) provides a breakdown of the number of studies included from each database.

TABLE (1)
NUMBER OF STUDIES RETRIEVED PER DATABASE

Databases	No. of Studies
ERIC	4181
Dialnet	0
LLBA	3027
Scopus	2109
Proquest	5625
WOS	1953
PsychINFO	1047
Total	17942

2.2. Search results

The subsequent search yielded 17,942 manuscripts published between 1987 and 2022 that were related to the research focus. In this review, 15,764 duplicate manuscripts were excluded, resulting in 2,177 records. Figure (2) on the following page describes the flow of information through the different phases of the systematic review conducted in this study.

During the initial screening of the 2,177 papers, each one was reviewed by a team member. Papers that focused on the following topics were excluded from the final corpus: the COVID-19 pandemic period; non-European countries as receiving hosts; non-tertiary students (e.g., primary or high school students); and virtual mobility.

Consequently, this narrative review includes only studies published between 1987 and 2022, focused on non-COVID periods, with European countries (including Türkiye²) as host destinations and involving tertiary-level students - both degree-seeking and credit mobility (non-degree-seeking) participants. The initial year of 1987 applies to the launch of the Erasmus student exchange program which significantly increased the number of international students in mobility within Europe.

When the exclusion criteria were applied, 437 papers remained. The next step was then to screen the corpus of papers further and categorise them according to their respective disciplines. This process led us to a final number

² While not a member of the EU, Turkey joined the Erasmus programme in 2004 <https://www.erasmus.ankara.edu.tr/history/#:~:text=Brief%20History%20of%20European%20Uni on,the%202015%2D2016%20academic%20year.>

of 84 papers published in an applied linguistics journal or edited volume in this field or in a cognate field, e.g., education studies, where language was a key feature of the research (see Table 2).

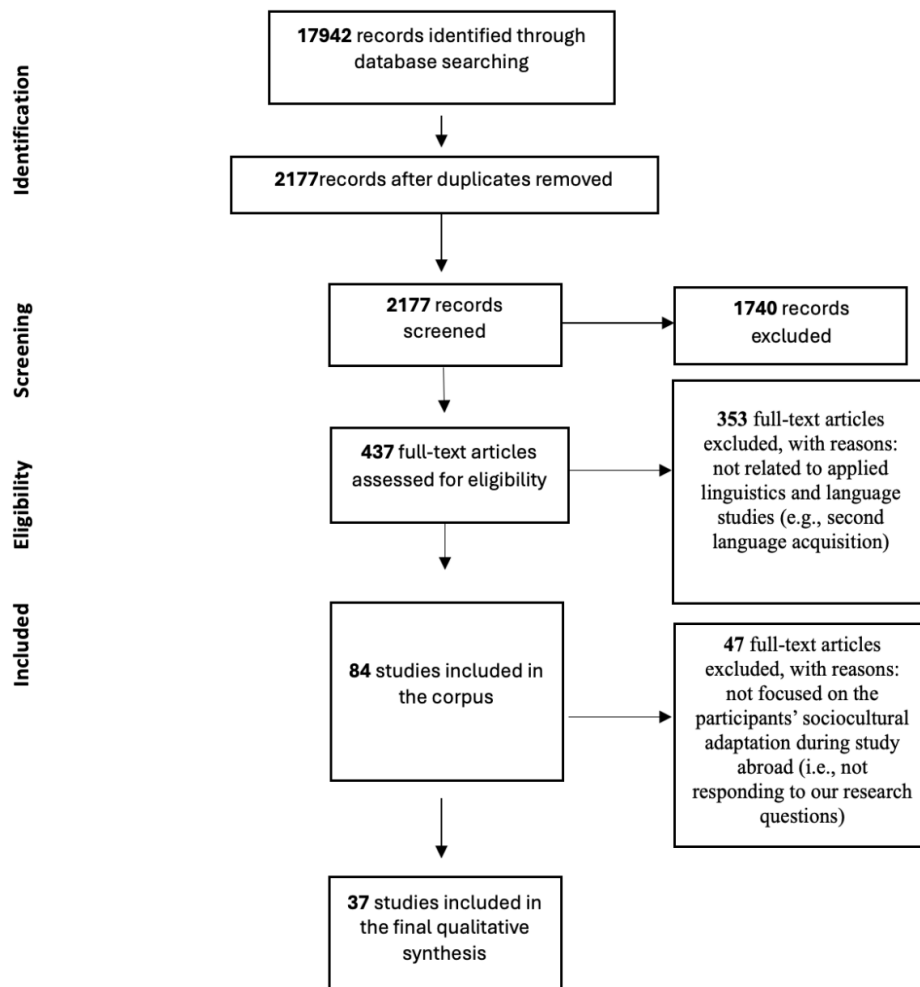
TABLE (2)

NUMBER OF AL STUDIES RETRIEVED PER DATABASE

Databases	No. of Studies
ERIC	33
Dialnet	0
LLBA	0
Scopus	21
Proquest	17
WOS	11
PsychINFO	2
Total	84

FIGURE (2)

FLOW OF INFORMATION THROUGH THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW



2.3. Screening and extraction of data

In a subsequent round, we further screened the texts for additional criteria and the field-specific research questions. This led us to our final AL corpus of 37 papers. Following the principles of a narrative review, papers were included regardless of their methodological approach. For the purposes of answering this paper's specific research questions relating to AL and considering the characteristics of the 37 AL papers identified, we focused on the following categories:

1. Study design (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed)
2. Theoretical approach
3. Sample size
4. SA destination
5. Sending country
6. Length of stay
7. Gender
8. Profile (e.g., degree-seeking, non-degree-seeking and Erasmus)
9. L1 (native languages)
10. Target language

2.4. Data analysis

The analysis was conducted by means of a two-stage approach whereby all papers, regardless of methodology, were brought together into a single corpus and analysed according to the principles of narrative review. The first stage drew on descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the aforementioned categories.

The next stage was a hybrid deductive / inductive thematic analysis conducted to identify underlying patterns which illuminate the range of facilitators and barriers to adaptation encountered during a language-focused SA experience. The thematic analysis followed the approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2021). In general terms, this involved developing initial codes which were subsequently clustered into latent themes centred on the research questions.

3. Results: Characteristics of the studies

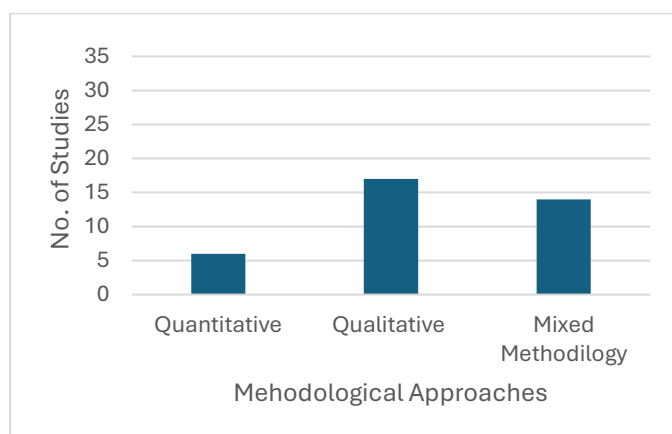
3.1. Study designs and number of participants

As can be seen from Figure (3), nearly half of the research papers analysed for this narrative review ($N = 37$) employed a qualitative research approach ($n = 17$). Within these qualitative studies, the average number of research participants was nine. Four of the qualitative studies analysed had only

one participant and used, for example, a case study (Jackson, 2016) or an autoethnographic approach (Sah, 2019). The next most used research approach was a mixed-methods approach ($n = 14$). In this case, the average number of participants was 517 with a considerable discrepancy between the lowest number of participants (Schwieter, 2021: $n = 10$) and the highest number (Asoodar et al., 2017: $n = 2,010$). The remaining six papers employed a quantitative approach with an average of 230 participants ranging from 38 to 463. The total number of participants across all 37 studies amounted to 8,730.

FIGURE (3)

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES



3.2. Conceptualisations of adaptation

As previously noted, the current review uses sociocultural / psychological adaptation as an umbrella term which encompasses the range of theoretical conceptualisations operationalised in the papers. The conceptualisations underpinning the studies are varied, often multiple and in a small number of cases not given ($n = 2$). In addition, most remain undefined. Table (3) provides an overview of the conceptualisations identified in the studies.

TABLE (3)

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALISATIONS OPERATIONALISED IN THE STUDIES

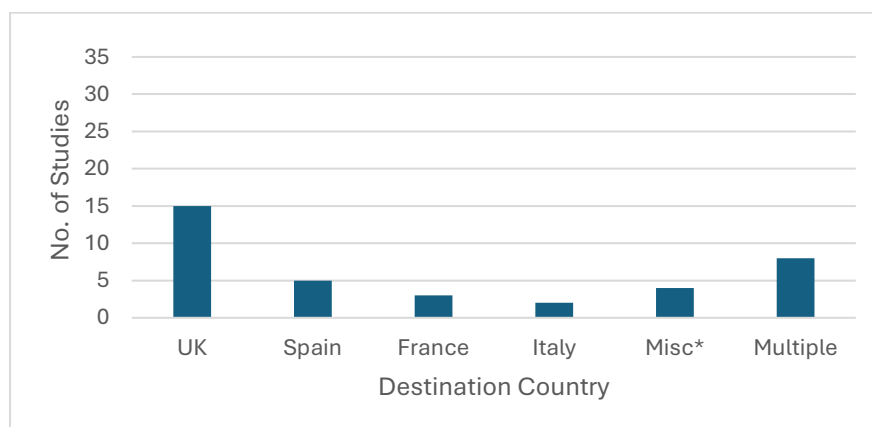
Conceptualisation	No. of papers
Interculturality	11
Cultural perspective	7
Adaptation	6
Socialisation	4
Acculturation	4
Integration	3
Identity	2
Adjustment	1
Investment	1
Not mentioned	2

Nine different conceptualisations relating to psychological and sociocultural adaptation were identified. The most frequent conceptualisation is that of interculturality ($n = 11$). These papers focused on intercultural competences, development, skills and sensitivity as well as the relationship between language and interculturality. Seven papers conceptualised psychological and sociocultural adaptation through the lens of general cultural perspectives with an emphasis on understanding cultural differences and enhancing cultural sensitivity. Six papers conceptualised it as adaptation (sociocultural, cultural, self and personal) while socialisation was the preferred conceptualisation in four papers focusing on language and academic language. Four used the conceptualisation of acculturation, three used integration and two focused on identity formation. One paper understood adaptation in terms of adjustment and one in terms of investment in the host community. It is important to note that two papers did not conceptualise the phenomenon.

3.3. Destination country

Figure (4) shows the students' destination countries in the papers analysed. The most commonly occurring destination country is the United Kingdom, with 15 of the 37 studies (41%) researching students attending university there. Spain appears in five studies, France in three, and Italy in two. Ireland, Germany, Czech Republic and Türkiye are each featured once as the destination countries. Additionally, eight studies involved students undertaking SA in multiple countries.

FIGURE (4)
DESTINATION COUNTRY



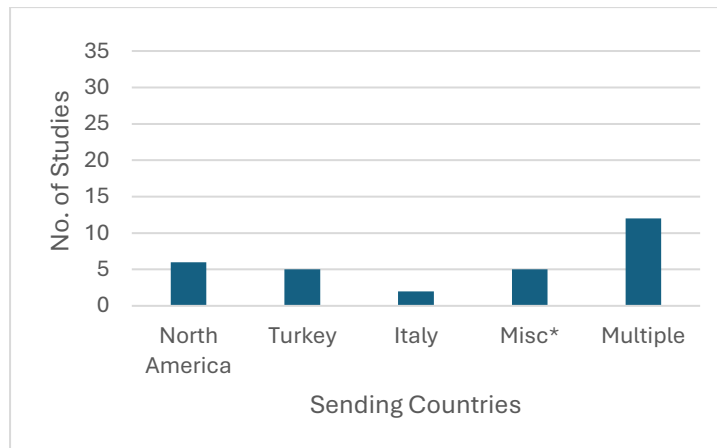
3.4. Sending countries

Similarly, Figure 5 presents the various countries of origin of student participants. In seven of the papers analysed, the student research participants' home university was in China, six had home universities in North America (four in the USA and two in Canada), five in Türkiye and two in Italy. Finland, Nepal,

Poland, Portugal and the UK appear as the sending country in one study each while a total of 12 research papers document the experiences of students from various sending countries.

FIGURE (5)

SENDING COUNTRY

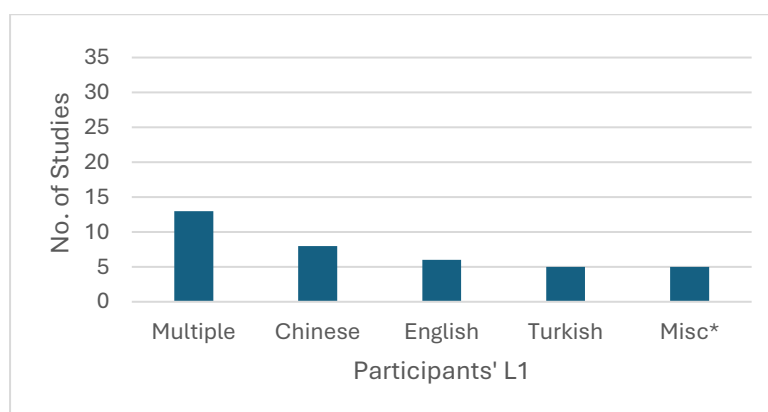


3.5. Participants' first languages

Participants in the studies analysed reported a range of L1s. A total of 13 studies had participants with multiple different L1s. In studies where participants had a single L1, Chinese (including Cantonese and Mandarin) was the most common ($n = 8$), English was the second most common L1 ($n = 6$) and then Turkish ($n = 5$). Finnish, Italian, Nepali, Polish and Portuguese each appeared as the participants' L1 in one study. (Figure 6)

FIGURE (6)

PARTICIPANTS' L1



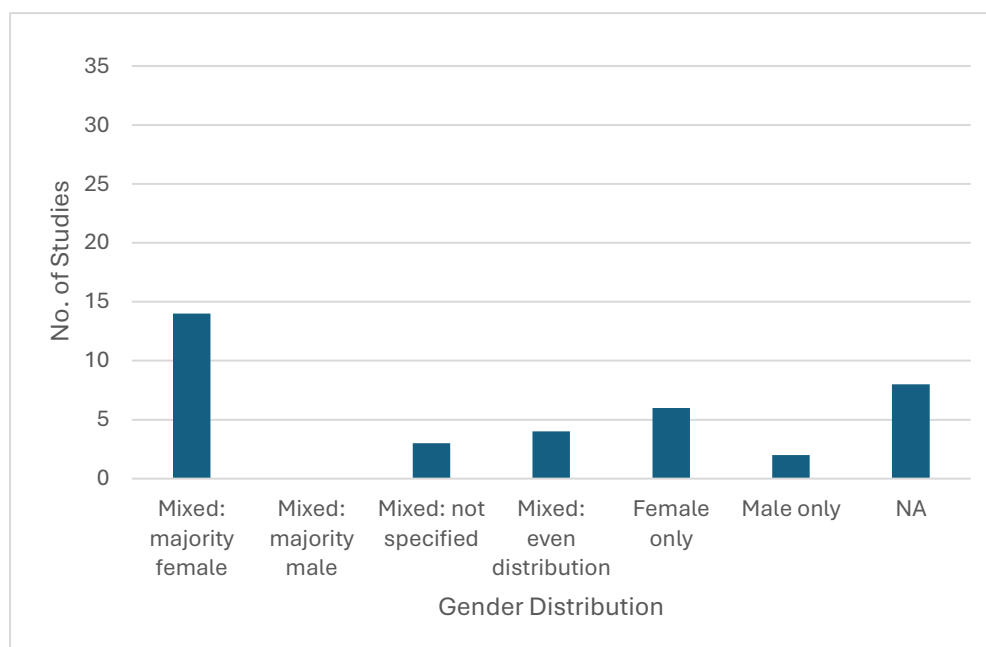
Regarding participants' target languages (TL), English was by far the most common. It appeared in almost all articles of SA students whose first language (L1) was not English, either as a TL in English-speaking countries (predominantly the UK) or as a lingua franca in English-medium instruction

(EMI) contexts (e.g., Włosowicz, 2022). In seven studies, students had English as their L1 and in these cases their TLs were either French or Spanish.

3.6. Gender distribution of participants

As can be seen in Figure 7, the gender balance within research papers studies is skewed towards female participants. In over half of the papers analysed female participants account for all ($n = 6$) or the majority ($n = 14$) of the research subjects. In only two studies, the participants were exclusively male, and in studies with mixed-gender samples, males were never in the majority. In only four studies there was an even distribution of participants in terms of gender. Three studies did not report the gender composition of mixed-gender groups, and eight studies provided no information on participants' genders.

FIGURE (7)
GENDER DISTRIBUTION

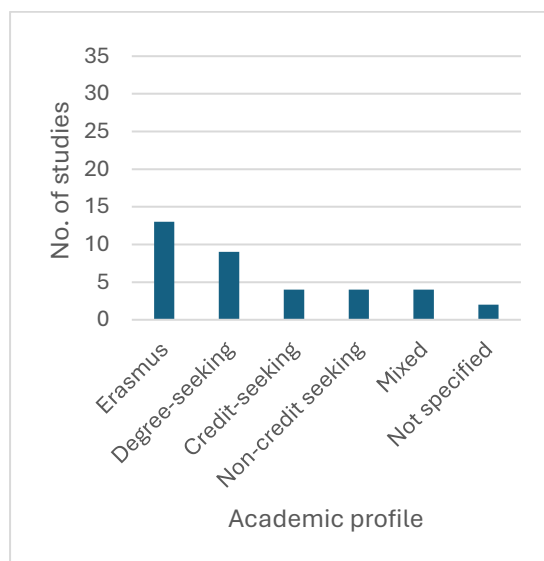


3.7. Students' academic profiles

Erasmus was the most common program of study among student participants, with 13 papers specifically examining this group's experiences. Nine studies involved participants pursuing degrees in the host country, often at the postgraduate level, while seven focused on students studying abroad to obtain an undergraduate degree. Four of the studies investigated students who were seeking credits during their SA but not a degree and not as part of the Erasmus programme. Four studies investigated students who were not seeking credits (ECTS) but who were mainly taking part in short-term language-focused SA. In four studies, the participants had various academic profiles and in two of the studies analysed, no information on the nature of the qualifications sought was provided (see Figure 8).

FIGURE (8)

QUALIFICATIONS SOUGHT

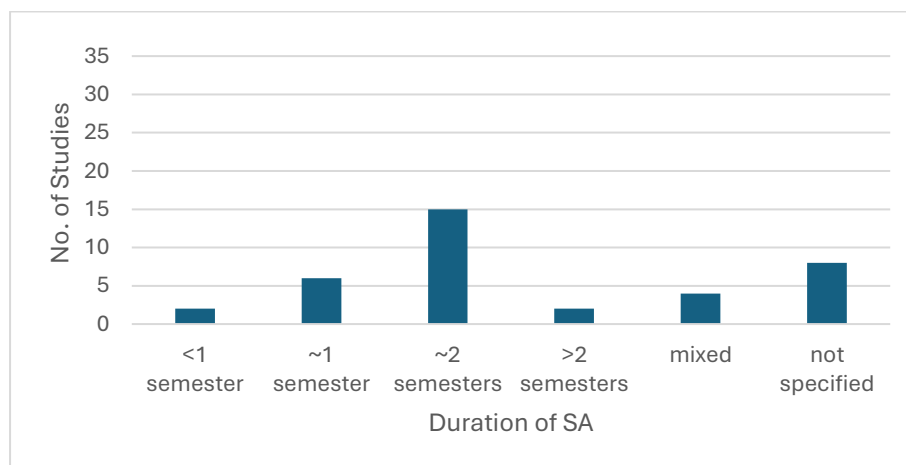


3.8. Length of stay

In two of the papers analysed, participants were undertaking a short-term study abroad, that is, a sojourn lasting less than one semester in these cases four or five weeks. In six of the papers, the participants were studying abroad for approximately one semester; this is sometimes stated as one semester or as four months which we infer to be a semester-long sojourn. In fifteen of the studies, we understand that the students studying abroad for two semesters; this is sometimes reported as such or as one year or nine months which we infer to be two semesters at university. Two studies investigated participants who were staying in the host country for a period longer than one year and in eight cases the length of stay was not specified (see Figure 9).

FIGURE (9)

DURATION OF SOJOURN



In brief, the above analysis highlights the heterogeneous nature of the research landscape. Despite this, trends do emerge. While the overall number of participants across studies appears substantial, this figure masks considerable variation in study design and sample size. In particular, the small number of purely quantitative studies and the relatively modest sample sizes in several cases may limit the generalisability and statistical power of some findings. Moreover, the predominance of cross-sectional designs in the quantitative literature constrains conclusions regarding directionality and developmental change over time. Although Erasmus students are the most studied, the sending/receiving countries and language combinations are varied. The single cohort most studied is Chinese students in the UK. The majority of students stay for approximately two semesters and female participants dominate the landscape. Noteworthy in the current review is the appearance of Türkiye as both a sending and destination country.

4. Thematic analysis

The second stage of analysis focuses on an exposition of latent themes. Initial coding was conducted focusing on facilitators and barriers to adaptation into a range of social and educational contexts. Following initial coding, a number of often overlapping themes and subthemes emerged which shed light on the interplay between language practices and adaptation. These will be explored under the headings of pre-sojourn experiences; in-country experiences; and learner internal factors. As discussed in the introduction to this paper, we use adaptation as the umbrella term which encompasses sociocultural concepts, such as integration, sense of belonging and socialisation as well as psychological factors, such as anxiety, openness and motivation. The papers reviewed also describe adaptation into a range of contexts, such as academic discourses (Sah, 2019; Halenko & Winder, 2022), personal adaptation (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016), integration with native speaker peers (McManus et al., 2014) and more general integration into the host community (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019).

4.1. Pre-sojourn experiences

Many papers reviewed were concerned with the students' experiences prior to their sojourn abroad. The quality of these experiences can have a positive or negative effect on their ability to adapt to the new context. Two subthemes that emerged from the review are the formal preparation students received in their language and intercultural competencies, and their previous experiences of travelling to other socio-cultural and linguistic environments. One of the major themes to emerge was that of preparation. In general terms, several studies highlight insufficient preparation by the sending institute as a

major barrier to engaging in language practices for the purpose of adaptation (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Jacobone & Moro, 2015; Sobkowiak, 2019). A deeper analysis reveals two distinct subthemes: language preparation and (inter)cultural preparation.

4.1.1. Language preparation

The question of pre-sojourn language preparation emerged as both a facilitator and a barrier to adaptation particularly relating to language proficiency levels. On the one hand, high levels of pre-sojourn proficiency in the TL(s), which could be ELF (Çiftçi et al., 2022; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021) and/or host languages, such as French (McManus et al., 2014) or English (Young et al., 2013), are considered facilitative and can lead to greater degrees of adaptation. Conversely, lower levels of proficiency especially in ELF were viewed as hampering adaptation (Şener & Gün, 2019; Sobkowiak, 2019). Cao et al. (2016) note that “insufficient language competence may refrain students from speaking up during class, initiating conversation with classmates and asking for assistance to professors or colleagues when needed” (p.16). However, it is important to note that lack of language preparation emerged as more nuanced than simply a failure to attain a specific proficiency level. It was attributed to an overfocus on preparation “specifically for examinations, such as IELTS and TOEFL” (Young et al., 2013, p. 166) by the sending institute as well a failure to develop awareness of differences in communication styles and inadequate preparation in more social aspects of the TL (Şener & Gün, 2019; Wright & Schartner, 2013). On the other hand, it was found that language preparation, which leads to high levels of metalinguistic awareness in addition to sensitivity to sociolinguistic variation eased the process of sociocultural adaptation (Gallagher, 2013; Jackson, 2008; Savicki et al., 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2018).

4.1.2. Intercultural preparation

Often overlapping with language preparation, (inter)cultural preparation came through as a noteworthy subtheme. More specifically, lack of preparation proved a significant barrier to adaptation. As evidenced, the TL was at times taught pre-sojourn in a manner which seemed to erase aspects of culture (Schwieter et al., 2021; Young et al., 2013). Additionally, pre-sojourn preparation presented an unrealistic or essentialised vision of the host community the students hoped to become a part of. Such unrealistic expectations are clearly illustrated in the words of one participant in Sah (2019): “I had imagined people in Britain using the RP [received pronunciation, the most prestigious variation of British English] that would provide me with enriched exposure to the variety that I considered to be ideal, but in fact, they do not use such variety in their daily communication” (p.188). In other cases, (inter)cultural preparation was not perceived as a necessity by students.

According to Çiftçi and Karaman, (2018, p. 603) participants “simply neglected the importance of a guided intercultural preparation for study abroad due to their naiveté”. On a very specific note, Garbati and Rothschild (2016) foreground the negative impact of lack of intercultural knowledge surrounding the educational practices of the host institute on adaptation.

Prior intercultural experiences

In addition to preparation for SA, learners’ prior experiences of mobility and intercultural experience were highlighted as facilitators to more successful adaptation. Engaging in international travel was shown to aid adaptation by allowing students “to draw on their experiences as tourists to ease their adjustment in the host environment [which in turn] afforded them more exposure to Spanish in informal, social situations” (Schwieter et al., 2021, p.134). Furthermore, learners who had already experienced multilingual intercultural contexts in a number of settings found it easier to adapt to the new environment (Larzén-Östermark, 2011; Martinsen et al., 2014; Şener & Gün, 2019; Yildirim, 2013). Likewise, learners who already demonstrated high levels of intercultural sensitivity or interest in the host community were more successful (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Huhn et al., 2016; Jackson, 2008).

4.2. In country experiences

In reviewing the relevant studies, it becomes clear that in-country experiences constitute most factors investigated. The sub-themes that emerged are language; structures; and social engagement. As noted previously, the themes often overlap and take into account adaptation into both societal and institutional contexts.

4.2.1. Language

Language as a barrier or a facilitator was a prominent theme across many social settings during the sojourn.

ELF vs host language

This is a subtheme that came to the fore predominantly in research focused on language practices in ELF contexts where there is a mismatch between the educational and societal languages. For some, adaptation beyond the institute was hampered by the expectation that ELF is sufficient for communication across all settings, with learners expressing surprise that ELF is not more widely used within the host country. For example, Włosowicz (2022) states that participants were “disappointed by the limited number of Czechs able to speak English” (p.181). Corroborating this, Cao et al. (2016) and Şener and Gün (2019) expound on how a lack of knowledge of the host language can impede adaptation in settings beyond the educational. On the other hand, studies, such as Włosowicz (2022), indicate the positive impact of even a knowledge of basic

phrases in the host country language noting that “in some situations basic phrases in Czech proved indispensable to them [the participants]” (p.182). For learners whose focus is the host country language, globalisation and the prominence of ELF as the international language of tourism could be considered a barrier, leading to reduced opportunities for interactions in the host language. For example, Prieto-Arranz et al. (2023, p. 226) highlight students being “forced to communicate in English” in tourist areas of Italy. This led to feelings of voicelessness and a lack of acceptance by the local community.

Multilingual environments

While the above highlighted potential barriers ELF can impose on adaptation in societal settings, drawing upon multilingualism, on the whole, was deemed facilitative to adaptation within an educational context. For example, providing bilingual peer learning opportunities and calling on ELF or other common languages were seen as a means of reaching out and breaking down barriers (Bavieri & Beaven, 2021; Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016; Jeanneau & O’Riordan, 2020; McManus et al., 2014; Shao & Crook, 2015; Shively, 2013). Bavieri and Beaven (2021) highlight the benefits of “opportunities offered by translanguaging and/or the use of a lingua franca for the development of linguistic, discourse and socio-pragmatic competencies” (p. 251). Likewise, facilitating multilingual activities in and outside the campus also aided a sense of belonging educationally among international student communities by “increasing students’ comfort zone” (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019, p. 389). However, operating in a multilingual environment was not always considered conducive to adaptation as it could be viewed as too global rather than local, thus reducing a sense of belonging to the local community. In Larzén-Östermark’s (2011) study, a participant working in a multicultural/linguistic setting stated that they “would have benefitted from a more homogenous cultural and linguistic input” (p. 468).

Language support

While language support did not emerge as a major subtheme addressed in the papers during SA, it nevertheless sheds additional insight into its impact on adaptation. The provision of specific TL support by the host institute was considered to have a positive impact on adaptation (Halenko & Winder, 2022). Conversely, lack of language support was considered a barrier (Huhn et al., 2016). This has resulted in Halenko and Winder (2022) calling for “host institutions [...] to support novices to effectively participate in their new academic discourse communities” (p.62)

Native speakerism

The concept that native speaker-like language practices are preferable was found to impede adaptation. For example, Sah (2019), in an auto-

ethnographical study, explains how socialisation in academic discourses can be hampered due to “the use of the native variety of English in classroom interaction, which receives the highest level of authority and power leads newcomers to feel inferior and remain quiet” (p.188). Additionally, it can manifest as internalised biases among students whereby “interaction with ‘native speakers’ are privileged as effective means of L2 and cultural learning” (Quan, 2019, p.13). This was considered a barrier to sociocultural adaptation.

4.2.2. Opportunities for interaction

Opportunities for interaction in the TL attracted considerable attention in the field of SA. Unsurprisingly, it emerged as a major theme. Intense opportunities to practise the TL were considered conducive to adaptation (e.g., Halenko & Winder, 2022; Leung & Dewaele, 2023; Prieto-Arranz et al., 2023). Several papers investigated how this could be maximised. Contact with co-nationals was deemed inadvisable when sociocultural adaptation to new communities is seen through the prism of language (Gallagher, 2013; Prieto-Arranz et al., 2023). Prieto-Arranz et al. (2023) note that language-focused students prioritise “restricting contact with fellow nationals and socialising with other international students and, if possible, locals” (p. 226). In addition, studies highlight the facilitative nature of linguistic interaction with a range of others, including co-sojourners and locals (Larzén-Östermark, 2011; McManus et al., 2014; Quan, 2019; Young et al., 2013). In particular, the benefits of living with non-co-nationals were highlighted (Jackson, 2016; Larzén-Östermark, 2011). Staying with a host family was also beneficial, but only when strong ties were formed (Quan, 2019). Further, more specific activities were recommended for adaptation via language contact. They include engaging in a shared activity in the language of the sojourn, interacting with social media, finding a romantic partner (McManus et al., 2014) and attending cultural events (Larzén-Östermark, 2011). However, the intensity of use with a range of people and media over a diversity of contexts may not be sufficient. The nature of the language used may also prove important to adaptation. For example, “frequency of use of English academic inner speech was linked to higher levels of LX socialisation, namely frequent use of English in daily life, a higher level of sociocultural adaptation” (Leung & Dewaele, 2023, p. 1182). However, it was also found that learners had unrealistic expectations of their contact in the TL especially surrounding the benefits of using the TL with non-native speakers. This proved non-conducive to adaptation (Quan, 2019).

4.2.3. Agency and interaction

While the above may imply opportunities are there for the taking and students have agency over decisions regarding with whom to interact, where and about what, other studies highlight more structural barriers that prevent

this regardless of students' wishes. These include a lack of interest in the sojourner from local students (Wright & Schartner, 2013), a lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge among administrative and teaching staff (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019; Sah, 2019), and (perceived) racial and religious intolerance (Aydin, 2012; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Huhn et al., 2016; Sah, 2019). For example, Aydin (2021), who explored perceptions of Turkish students during a SA sojourn, notes that making students more aware of potential "negative perceptions towards religious issues" (p.16) may help overcome barriers to adaptation to the host environment. Finally, additional structural issues, such as a heavy workload (Gallagher, 2013; Wright & Schartner, 2013) and financial constraints (Gallagher, 2013), were also noted as barriers to students' agency surrounding language contact and adaptation.

4.3. Learner-internal differences

For the final theme identified in the analysis, the lens will be turned towards the issue of learner-internal differences, which is couched in terms of the language-related individual factors that influence adaptation. While these have been widely studied in the field of second language acquisition, taxonomies of individual differences are highly disputed and often overlap or contradict (Wolff, 2011). The differences explored in the papers in this review often do not fall neatly into previously defined categories. As a result, they will be discussed under two main subthemes: psychological factors and learning strategies. The former is a conflation of a number of categories of traditional individual differences – i.e., motivation, attitudes, expectations and personality features; and the latter is a traditional stand-alone category.

4.3.1. Psychological differences

First, it is important to note that the subthemes may not represent current interpretations of individual differences within second language acquisition research, instead they are representative of factors addressed in the papers.

Motivation

Where motivational factors were explored, attributes, such as interest, desire and enthusiasm, were posited as positively impacting adaptation (Garbati & Rothschild, 2016; Şener & Gün, 2019). For example, Şener and Gün (2019) highlight the benefits of being motivated to go on a sojourn due to "cultural and geographical reasons" (p. 337). However, when sojourners deemed the TL unnecessary, they had less motivation to integrate (Prieto-Arranz et al., 2023; Quan, 2019).

Attitudes

Attitudes sojourners express towards cultures other than their own can either positively or negatively impact adaptation. The attitude that cultural differences between the home and host cultures are great can lead to a reluctance to adapt. In fact, Cao et al. (2016) note that “perceived cultural differences accounted for 62% of the total variance of academic integration difficulty” (p. 8). In terms of stereotypical cultural attitudes, Schwieter et al. (2021) highlight that students “tended to engage in stereotyping and did not develop a deep awareness or understanding of the host environment” (p. 134). Likewise, attitudes relating to ethnocentricity, low tolerance for other cultures and the refusal to accept other cultures (Jackson, 2008; Savicki et al., 2013) all are barriers to adaptation. On the other hand, sojourners who approached SA with globalised mindsets (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021) and attitudes reflecting high levels of intercultural sensitivity (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Huhn et al., 2016; Jackson, 2008; Larzén-Östermark, 2011) were more likely to adapt into the new cultural and linguistic milieu.

4.3.2. Expectations vs realities

While expectations have not previously constituted a separate category of individual differences in SA research, they nevertheless emerge as a subtheme in the papers under review. In terms of language contact, many sojourners come with unrealistic expectations regarding the degree of interaction they will have and with the belief that interaction with native speakers is preferential. The reality of the situation often hinders adaptation. Added to this is a misalignment between how the students expect to be positioned by native speakers and how they are actually positioned by the community. For example, students may try to position themselves as legitimate speakers of the TL, or as learners of the TL. However, members of the host community may reject this positioning. This in turn may disincentivise learners to adapt as “investment depends partly on how hosts position them and envision both their own and students’ roles in an SA context” (Quan, 2019, p.16). Also to be taken into consideration are the social and emotional upheavals sojourners often experience when they translocate, which can also be considerable barriers to adaptation. These include homesickness, culture shock, isolation and the stress of simply being in an unfamiliar context (Jackson, 2008; McManus et al., 2014; Wright & Schartner, 2013), which can lead to fear of stepping out of linguistic and cultural comfort zones (Hartwell & Ounoughi, 2019), and linguistic anxiety (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021).

4.3.3. Personality

Individual differences regarding personality have been addressed in a considerable number of papers, with each paper approaching it through a

facilitative lens. Traits such as confidence (both in the self and the L2) (Gallagher, 2013; Garbati & Rothschild, 2016; Larzén-Östermark, 2011; McManus et al., 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 2018) have been found to result in greater adaptation; likewise openness and curiosity (Huhn et al., 2016; Jackson, 2016; Yildirim & İlin, 2013), willingness to take risks (Aydin, 2012), a positive mindset (Schwieter et al., 2021) and flexibility (Jackson, 2016) which can increase the ability to “solve the problems concerning socialization and adaptation to new social environments” (Aydin, 2012, p. 11).

4.3.4. Learning strategies

Learning strategies is the final learner internal difference explored in the papers. These refer specifically to language learning strategies and are reported as binary insofar as the lack of strategies impedes adaptation (Schwieter et al., 2021). Setting goals and strategising, especially those that the sojourner has agency over and can self-direct have been seen as facilitative to adaptation (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; McManus et al., 2014; Shively, 2013; Spencer-Oatey, 2018). Additionally, self-reflection ‘on language learning and the development of abilities to overcome language barriers through relational strategies’ (Bavieri & Beaven, 2021, p. 250) further aids adaptation.

4.4. Summary

To conclude, the thematic analysis of barriers and facilitators reveals that the papers are concerned with three main categories – preparation, in-country experiences and internal differences. Themes and subthemes surrounding language proficiency, language beliefs and contact dominated the areas of preparation and in-country experiences. These were complemented by a range of individual differences, including psychological factors and learning strategies. Taken together, they paint a complex picture of the social, cultural, psychological and strategic factors that can support or challenge adaptation into a new geographical and linguistic context.

5. Discussion

This narrative review explores 37 papers published since 1987. It does so with the aim of shedding light on the research landscape regarding barriers and facilitators to SA adaptation mediated through a range of TL practices. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences of third-level students engaged in study abroad or international student mobility. That is to say, “cultural novices and their acquisition of new cultural skills” (Ward, 2022, p. 158). Although the papers may be considered disparate in nature covering a wide range of contexts, conceptualisations and methodologies, what holds them together is that the

adaptation (or lack of) is not only into a new cultural milieu but into a new linguistic context. Before discussing the findings, we begin with a recap of the methodological demographic and theoretical contexts of the reviewed studies.

5.1. Methodological, demographic and theoretical contexts

As previously mentioned, this narrative review highlights considerable variability in approaches to research. The studies are predominantly qualitative ($n = 17$) indicating a preference for an in-depth, case-oriented focus on understanding individual or small-group experiences. The UK emerged as the most common study destination, featuring in 14 of the studies. Relatively frequently cited destinations were Italy, Spain, and France. Similarly, the origin of students varied, with China, Türkiye, and the USA the most frequently represented sending countries. This selective representation of both sending and receiving countries highlights the need for broader research to achieve a more balanced understanding of SA dynamics.

Participants' linguistic backgrounds were likewise diverse. Twelve studies included participants with multiple L1s, reflecting the plurilingual nature of the SA cohort. Chinese ($n = 8$) and English ($n = 6$) were the most common single L1s. TLs showed a strong focus on English ($n = 15$). However, this predominance was contrasted by studies ($n = 9$) that emphasised students' engagement with multiple TLs or the pursuit of multilingualism. Studies addressing ELF remain limited ($n = 3$).

The gender distribution across the studies reveals a pronounced female majority, with six studies exclusively featuring female participants and 14 studies reporting majority-female mixed-gender cohorts. The types of qualifications pursued by participants were largely credit- or degree-seeking. In terms of credit-seeking mobility, unsurprisingly Erasmus was the most researched programme. Notably, however, six studies did not specify the type of qualification sought by participants, despite it being a variable that can significantly influence the adaptation processes. Just as with the type of programme, the length of stay has been identified as a relevant factor in interpreting SA outcomes in terms of the overall adaptation processes (see Leong, 2007; Zimmermann et al., 2017; Ward, 2022; Ward & Kennedy (1993)). Despite this, a considerable number of studies ($n = 12$) did not specify participants' length of stay, limiting insight into this important contextual variable. Finally, in terms of theoretical approaches, once again this proved diverse. While engagement with theoretical approaches generally remains underdeveloped, the most widely employed theoretical lens is that of interculturality.

Having reviewed the contextual features of the studies, we now turn to the research questions. As previously noted, what constitutes a barrier or facilitator is often dichotomous and contradictory. That is to say, in some cases, the advantages of one factor may imply the disadvantage of its absence. In other cases, a factor can function as both a barrier and a facilitator. In the following discussion, we hope to disentangle some of these intricacies.

5.2. Facilitators to adaptation

Overall, 28 papers explored facilitators to adaptation across all three major categories. In terms of pre-sojourn experiences, this was addressed by 13 papers. The most commonly addressed factor was language preparation ($n = 9$). High levels of pre-departure proficiency in the target language ($n = 4$) and increased degrees of meta- (socio)linguistic awareness ($n = 5$) were presented as determining factors for successful adaptation. In total, three papers highlighted the benefits of prior exposure to intercultural environments, and just one looked at the facilitative nature of previous international experiences, either in the form of SA or tourism.

In-country experiences constitute the biggest category of research foci, with 24 papers. Unsurprisingly, language issues dominate the research landscape ($n = 19$). Nine of the papers focused on the facilitative nature of TL contact. This takes the form of intensity of contact, the 'with whom' of contact, and the nature of it. Three papers specifically cite greater intensity of contact with the TL as being facilitative. When it comes to with whom interaction with the language is beneficial, one paper advocates for the necessity to minimise contact with co-nationals, two papers emphasise the importance of strong ties with locals and one paper describes the importance of a TL-speaking romantic partner. However, more significantly, seven papers indicate that the benefits of interaction in the TL are not dependent on contact with native speakers. They present strong evidence that contact with a wide range of people, including co-sojourners and other international students within culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse settings can effectively facilitate adaptation. The nature of language contact was addressed only in two papers which show the benefits of engaging in a hobby, attending cultural events, having a work-based sojourn and using social media. Finally, with regard to ELF contexts, i.e., contexts where the TL of the students is English, but the national language is different, two papers highlight the facilitative nature of at least some knowledge of the host country language. This was something that students did not expect and had not been prepared for. When it comes to the role of the host institute in facilitating adaptation, in terms of language-specific facilitators, specific language instruction ($n = 1$) and peer learning with an emphasis on drawing on shared

linguistic resources ($n = 2$). Beyond language matters, only two other facilitators were proposed – general institutional support ($n = 3$) and mentorship ($n = 1$).

Finally, we turn to internal factors. Here, we encounter a very different research landscape. Facilitative factors are covered in 18 papers. Of these, 15 deal with the positive influence of what might be termed individual factors. The most common include confidence ($n = 5$); openness and curiosity; and high levels of intercultural sensitivity in three papers each. Moreover, a number ($n = 5$) posit that goal setting and strategising are facilitative.

5.3. Barriers to adaptation

In comparison to facilitators, barriers have been studied to a slightly lesser degree at 24 papers across the three categories. As mentioned previously, the barriers often run dichotomously to the facilitators, especially with regard to internal factors, or seemingly contradict them. Language once again emerged as the central theme ($n = 19$). Moreover, the barriers identified present a much more nuanced picture of the role of language in adaptation than the facilitators.

In addition to foregrounding lack of language proficiency (specifically ELF) as a barrier to adaptation ($n = 3$), what also emerges as a barrier is the nature of pre-sojourn instruction. This covers what could broadly be referred to as a lack of culturally sensitive language preparation. This ranges from too strong an emphasis on English language exam preparation ($n = 1$), inadequate preparation in pragmatics and for interacting in different communication styles ($n = 2$), essentialised preparation ($n = 3$) and lack of preparation in the host language in ELF contexts ($n = 2$). Either too much or inadequate access to ELF during the sojourn was considered a barrier, depending on the SA context. In terms of the ELF SA context, one paper highlights that students found the lack of English spoken within the host community non-facilitative; on the other hand, students who embark on SA to develop their skills in the host country language (either through non-ELF English or other languages) often encounter too much ELF either due to globalisation ($n = 1$) the ubiquity of English as the language of tourism ($n = 2$) or due to the presence of EMI in their host institute.

In terms of the host institute, a lack of language support was noted in one paper. This was exacerbated by academic and administrative staff who had seemingly not been trained to deal with linguistically and culturally diverse students ($n = 3$). This led to students not being accepted as legitimate speakers of the language. Opportunities for socialising in the language were researched as a barrier to a much lesser degree. Only one paper mentioned spending too much time with co-nationals. Another focused on the barriers to adaptation due to lack of opportunities for affective language use and one on lack of interest shown by host country locals, while one paper highlights that students' belief in native

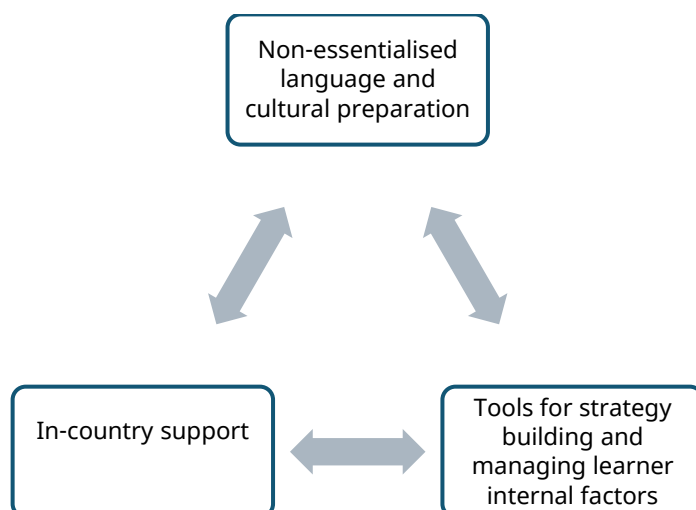
speakerism - i.e., that it is only worthwhile interacting with native speakers - can hinder adaptation. Papers that approached the issue via the lens of individual differences note linguistic anxiety ($n = 1$), fear of leaving your linguistic comfort zone ($n = 1$) and lack of language learning strategies ($n = 1$).

Moving beyond purely language-based barriers, societal attitudes have also been researched insofar as they may hamper access to the TL and consequently the process of adaptation. It is important to note that these can be bidirectional originating from the sojourners and the host country. These include (perceived) racial and religious intolerance emanating from the host culture ($n = 3$) as well as immigration policies and societal discourse surrounding immigration. These may serve to position the students as illegitimate interlopers in the new society. However, it is not just the host society that may erect these sorts of barriers. The incoming students may bring their own prejudices which similarly make access to the language and adaptation process problematic. For example, two papers note that students' low tolerance for the host culture is shaped by their ethnocentricity.

Taken together, the review indicates that successful adaptation to a new linguistic and cultural context is highly complex and shaped by dynamic, interrelated and often competing factors. While establishing relationships and building networks in the TL appears to be crucial, the achievement of this seems to be contingent on a triad of interacting factors (see figure 10) whereby each factor can inform and be informed by the others.

FIGURE (10)

TRIAD OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS



It is apparent that successfully establishing social networks and relationships in the TL, thus easing the adaptation process, does not begin on arrival in the host country. The process does, in fact, commence pre-sojourn. The

papers overwhelmingly point to the importance of non-essentialised language and cultural preparation both in regard to students and academic / support staff. Moreover, the preparation must be targeted to the context in which the students sojourn. By this we mean that focused attention should be given to sociopolitical aspects of the destination country which can have an impact on students' ability to adapt and that careful consideration should be given to whether the context is ELF or LHC, for example, or whether student expectations tend towards a localised or globalised experience. The synthesis of the papers suggests that such preparation may be beneficial in helping students build resilience and deal with affective and ethnocentric factors which hinder adaptation. However, this should not be a top-down approach. Rather, it is crucial a feedback loop is established whereby academic / support staff from both host and sending countries and students collaborate.

6. Conclusion and future directions

Within the parameters of a narrative review, the current paper illuminates the range of factors that either support or challenge students' adaptation to a new linguistic, social and cultural context, it also reveals many gaps. In terms of the research landscape, the first limitation to emerge is the paucity of research into the sociocultural / psychological adaptation mediated through an additional language within a European context. Of the 2,177 papers initially meeting the criteria, following two additional rounds of screening, only 37 were deemed admissible to the corpus. We do not deny that this could be a result of inadequacies in search terms. However, given that the initial search yielded such high numbers, this seems improbable. Moreover, in a review of the intercultural policy statements of 36 universities worldwide, Humphreys (2023) notes that only one university mentions language. Taken together with the current findings, we can speculate that, in terms of researching adaptation among international students, the role of language is often overlooked. In addition to the overlooking of the central role of language in international students' adaptation to the new environment, it is worth highlighting that there is a dearth of quantitative studies which limits the possibility of exploring causality. As a result, this review foregrounds the interplay of factors.

An additional challenge is a lack of definition of key terms surrounding adaptation. As previously noted, a wide range of terminology is present in the corpus. Terms such as adaptation and integration are often used interchangeably in a single paper. In some cases, definitions are clear. For example, Shao and Crook (2015) refer to cultural adaptation operationalised through cultural learning. Halenko and Winder (2022), Li and Han (2023) and Sah (2019) all specify and define academic discourse socialisation. However, other papers use terms such as sociocultural adaptation (Leung & Dewaele,

2023) or integration (McManus et al., 2014) without definition. Furthermore, many papers do not specify which contexts the students adapt to – for example, academic or host country. From a language perspective, it is often unclear whether the context is ELF or LHC. This points to the need for researchers to clearly define both the terms and the contexts to ensure that outcomes can be more accurately compared. Finally, regarding information supplied in the methods sections, the surprising omission of key aspects highlights the need for complete information regarding the demographics of participants, duration of sojourn and the sending / host countries to be present as these are important variables that can once more influence outcomes.

Concerning future directions, further investigation of digital contexts in promoting, or indeed inhibiting, adaptation during international mobility would be beneficial with a view to understanding students' language use and interaction patterns. A number of theoretical considerations arise when we consider the influence of social and other media on adaptation during study abroad including the asynchronous nature of online interaction which may change patterns of language use; the expanding context of online communication whereby sojourners' social connections from diverse geographic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds may operate within the communication space; and the fact that sojourners may adopt and present a specific online identity during their study abroad (Durbidge, 2022). Moreover, methodological issues are also in need of consideration as traditional methodologies in study abroad research often fail to account for the impact of emerging digital and mobile technologies (Martínez-Arbelaiz et al., 2017). Finally, the ethical implications of collecting data which may involve non-participants in these digital spaces requires robust investigation (Durbidge, 2022). Despite such issues, the use of digital media during study abroad offers a rich vein for further investigation of how sojourners navigate their adaptation. As highlighted by Dressler & Dressler (2019), social media platforms "offer SA researchers a myriad of possible topics of study including [...] academic social and cultural engagement; and social network development" (p. 127).

Lastly, the issue of structural inequalities, including (perceived) racial and religious intolerance, emerged as a barrier to adaptation. However, few studies have explored this theme in depth, pointing to a need for future work to examine how these structural factors interact with language learning and adaptation. Given the sensitivity of these issues and their profound impact on individuals' identity and well-being, especially in societies that claim to have overcome such inequalities, a more comprehensive investigation from multiple perspectives is crucial. Rather than treating (perceived) racial or religious intolerance as isolated incidents, these findings may be more productively interpreted through an intersectional lens (Block, 2015) which highlights how

multiple axes of identity (e.g., race, religion, nationality, gender and linguistic background) interact to shape students' positioning within host communities. From a critical AL perspective, language is not merely a communicative tool but a site where power, legitimacy and belonging are negotiated. Students may be racialised through their accents, names, or religious markers, and positioned as deficient speakers regardless of their proficiency (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Such processes reflect broader colonial and postcolonial hierarchies in which certain varieties of language and certain bodies are constructed as normative while others are marginalised (Kubota, 2020). Future research would benefit from examining how adaptation is shaped by the intersection of linguistic ideologies, racialisation and institutional power structures.

By addressing these gaps, future research can provide a more holistic understanding of the complex factors that shape sociocultural adaptation and language proficiency during international mobility, offering more profound insights into the facilitators and barriers to successful integration.

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