

Linguistic Loneliness and Study Abroad

Cynthia Slagter

Marcie J. Pyper

Calvin College

Abstract:

This article considers the conflict between students' desire to improve their target language skills and their desire for belonging and community. The study, conducted over three years, examines student perceptions of barriers to target language gain during semester-long study abroad. Participants completed surveys, took the Versant Language Test before and after their study abroad experience, and participated in a post-program interview. Results suggest that students experience conflicting priorities in decisions governing native language versus target language use during study abroad. Although some persist in speaking the target language with their co-national peers, they find it unsatisfying because they are unable to meet their social needs. Valuing relationships over linguistic improvements, students resort to speaking their native language among themselves during study abroad. The researchers suggest strategies for how to best prepare students to reconcile these tensions.

Introduction

“What makes us think that students who study abroad become fluent?” Barbara Freed posed this seminal question in 1995. At that time, prevailing wisdom had it that study abroad (SA) would almost inevitably lead to improved second language skill. Other researchers recognized that confidence in the benefits of SA had been based exclusively on “intuitions and subjective observation” instead of documented research (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 37). Although many researchers have shown that target language contact, both input and output, is necessary for language acquisition (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Dufon & Churchill, 2006; Hernández, 2010; Pyper & Slagter, 2015), multiple studies have problematized the relationship between language contact during study abroad and language acquisition. Language growth during SA is not a given.

Although program directors and instructors continue to urge students to study abroad in order to increase their language fluency, the notion that SA equals linguistic immersion is clearly simplistic. Studies have repeatedly shown that second language contact during SA is far less than teachers or students have believed.¹ Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight (2004) found that the most frequent complaint of American students in several semester SA programs in Spain and Mexico was insufficient involvement in host family activities, thus limiting their linguistic and social interaction. Sovic (2009) reported that a majority of Asian and American students studying in London found limited opportunities for second language contact despite their desires to connect with members of the host

¹ Celeste Kinginger, in 2009, collected the research extant at that time in her comprehensive study *Language Learning and Study Abroad: A Critical Reading of Research*. She tracks the chronological development of Study Abroad research and reviews over three hundred research studies.

community in order to improve their language skills. Magnan and Back (2007) found that 75% of students in their study regretted not establishing friendships with as many native speakers as they had hoped. In Allen's (2010) study, participants noted that interactive contact with native speakers "did not occur spontaneously but had to be nurtured" (10) and that "establishing friends with French youth their age was more the exception than the rule" (20). Participants in Hernández' (2010) study "expressed regret over not having established a stronger social network of native speakers with whom to interact," with half saying that it was hard to meet and interact with native speakers (607). While students may expect that they will effortlessly establish contact with native speakers and develop relationships in the target language, the reality is far different.

When students do attempt to form relationships with persons in the host culture, they often experience feelings of inadequacy due in part to limited language skills. Researchers who study the assimilation of international students into English-language contexts have noted that these students feel that they have entered into an unwelcoming, even hostile environment (Bai, 2016; O'Reilly & Hickey, 2010; Sovic, 2009; Wang, Heppner, Wang, & Zhu, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Wei, Wang, and Ku (2012) recognize that discrimination based on limited language proficiency can harm a student's psychological adjustment.² Sovic (2009) notes that for students with limited language abilities, "the difficulty of 'breaking the ice' is substantial, and failure can be distressing" (755). In Sovic's study, a Taiwanese student studying in the United Kingdom complained that UK students were "usually only willing to talk to those speaking fluent English" (755). Sovic observes that due to the language barrier, it was simply easier for both parties not to engage in conversation. Likewise, Mendelson (2004) found that, despite American students' high expectations about informal linguistic contacts when entering the SA program, their Spanish usage was lower than they had hoped due to factors including nervousness and avoidance of "uncomfortable" linguistic situations.

Having encountered obstacles to creating relationships in the target language, students studying abroad often retreat from interactions with the host culture, instead seeking safe haven in a community of their native-language peers (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Yan and Berliner (2013) found that Chinese international students were frustrated with the difficulty of building friendships with Americans. Their social ineffectiveness, due to weak language skills and confusion about how to behave properly in social situations, triggered feelings of social isolation. The resulting tendency was to reduce contact with Americans and to rely on their co-nationals to meet social and emotional needs, which then "negatively impacted their cultural adjustment and English language proficiency improvement" (80). Martinsen et al. (2010) reported that students studying abroad naturally "bond with the people with whom they have the most in common—fellow study abroad participants" (57). A British study of the social integration of international students states that international students' perceptions that local students are unwilling to talk with them "makes those with inhibitions about their linguistic ability even more nervous, and can easily drive them to the easier option of talking more with their co-nationals, i.e., back into the trap of segregation" (Sovic, 2009, p. 756). Thus, in a variety of study

² Interestingly, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), researching second language anxiety in the context of the language classroom, recognized that second language communication entails risk taking and may "challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator" (128). The inhibitions that learners exhibit in a language classroom would presumably be intensified in the SA setting.

abroad contexts, there is evidence of the dynamic interplay between limited linguistic skills and social inadequacy.³

Some conscientious language students, finding limited success in developing satisfying relationships with TL peers, lessen their linguistic insecurities but also continue their linguistic efforts by speaking the TL with their non-native speaking peers. A Taiwanese student in Sovic's study stated, "I'm confident enough to talk to Asian students in English, but am really scared to speak to UK students" (2009, p. 757). Although Magnan and Back (2007) found a negative correlation between speaking the TL with other Americans and improvement on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), students in other studies report gaining confidence by speaking the TL with their co-nationals (Allen, 2010; Pyper & Slagter, 2015). However, these students also exhibit frustration with the limitations of their TL abilities.

Sawir et al. (2008) note that many students "feel better" speaking their native language as opposed to the TL. Students express disappointment with the "underdevelopment of relationships" with host-country peers and note a lower level of empathy in cross-cultural relationships than in same-culture relationships (p. 157). This is not surprising since, according to Horwitz et al. (1986), "adult language learners' self-perceptions of genuineness in presenting themselves to others may be threatened by the limited range of meaning and affect that can be deliberately communicated" (128). Yan and Berliner (2013) mention that none of the Chinese students in their study considered Americans to be their main social support network while abroad. The students "indicated that social and emotional needs were best met by interacting with their co-nationals" (80). Likewise, a student in Mendelson's study (2004) reported turning to conversation in English with American friends to ease the loneliness felt during SA.

All of these studies include anecdotes of students failing to make the linguistic progress they had hoped and failing to maintain communication in the TL. Could this be due to speaking too much of their native language and too little TL? Students in SA programs are caught in a tension between twin desires that, to them, appear to be mutually exclusive. They believe they can either grow their TL or develop satisfying relationships, but cannot do both. Though many studies hint at explanations for students' failure to achieve their linguistic goals, few, if any, focus on the process that leads students from their initial resolve to speak the TL to their eventual linguistic deterioration and retreat to their native language.

Overview

This three-year study included undergraduate students from a midwestern four-year liberal arts college who studied abroad in one of three Spanish language semester programs: Spain (93), Peru (60), or Honduras (36). Of these, 123 (65%) completed one or more of the components of the study. All participation in the study was voluntary and was not remunerated. Prior to SA, all students

³ An interesting corollary is that some researchers report that, although it is difficult for students to develop relationships with their target language (TL) peers in a SA setting, they may experience more success connecting in the TL with minority groups or with other cultural outsiders (Sovic, 2009). Goldoni discovered that some American students made Central American friends during their SA in Spain and compares this experience to that of "ethnographers in a new cultural setting who may initially be befriended by those who are culturally marginalized within their own society" (2013, p. 371). Perhaps shared cultural insecurities help students bond despite linguistic insecurities.

had completed at least one advanced language course and participated in a pre-program orientation that dealt primarily with logistical aspects of the program. Each semester program lasted between 18 and 19 weeks.

In all three SA locations, a professor from the Spanish department of the home institution directed the program on site. Students enrolled in three types of classes for the semester: classes with their home institution peers taught by the program director; classes with the same peers taught by a host university professor; and one or more classes in which they directly enrolled in the local university with target-language peers. All classes were taught in Spanish. All official program activities were conducted exclusively in Spanish. Additionally, all students lived individually with local families.

The study consisted of three components. Students took a pre-program survey and a pre-program language assessment prior to departure. Near the end of the semester, they completed a second survey and another language assessment. The summer following the SA experience,⁴ a research assistant conducted interviews to gather qualitative data.

This article will focus on the interview data that elucidates the following questions: What factors motivate students negatively in their linguistic choices during language-focused SA? That is, why do students choose to speak English during SA? And why do students fail to persist in using the TL when faced with linguistic challenges?

The survey, a modified version of the Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004), was administered via SurveyMonkey one month prior to program departure and during the final weeks of each SA program. The initial survey asked students to predict various aspects of their engagement with the host culture and the post-program survey prompted them to report their actual time spent engaged in those activities (see Pyper & Slagter, 2015, for survey questions and other details).

The language assessment instrument used was the Versant Spanish Test designed by Pearson Education.⁵ The Versant Test is an automated test designed to measure a student's ability to understand and communicate appropriately. Pearson Education has correlated the scores of the Versant Test to the ACTFL rating system (see references for further information). Sixty-seven participants (54.5%) took the pre-program language assessment and of those, 50 (40.6%) also completed the second. Only students who completed the pre-program language assessment were invited to take the post-program assessment.

Finally, two research assistants conducted post-program interviews with 76 participants (61.8%).⁶ The assistants recorded, transcribed, and entered the data into QSR NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program. Each interview was identified by program location, year, and an anonymous

⁴ The semester study abroad programs occurred in either the fall or spring semesters. All interviews were conducted the following summer.

⁵ Due to the number of participants, the cost for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview would have been prohibitive.

⁶ All students from each of the programs were invited to participate in the interview portion of this study regardless of their participation in other components of the study.

student identification number. Through an iterative process, the narrative data were then clustered and coded according to categories and sub-categories.⁷

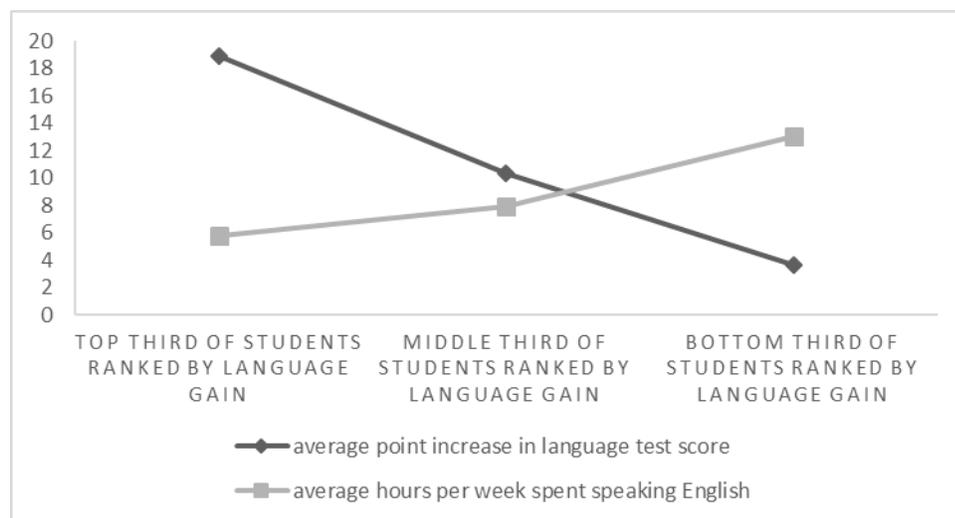
Findings and Discussion

In terms of predicted language gain, data from the survey showed that, based on the ACTFL level descriptions included in the survey, 89.5% of the participants (110) expected to attain the Advanced level of proficiency (according to the ACTFL scale) by the end of the program. Although most students improved by at least one sublevel, only 50% (25) of those who took both the pre- and the post-program Versant Spanish Test actually reached the Advanced level regardless of where they began.

Since nearly all the participants expected to attain the Advanced level of oral proficiency and only half succeeded, it is important to examine survey and interview data to uncover possible impediments to language growth during SA. The survey addressed this directly by asking participants to report on factors that hindered their language gain using a 4-point Likert scale. The data showed that, according to students, the single strongest factor hindering their language growth was the “personal choice to speak English with other students in the group,” (mean 2.89) followed by “using technology in English” (2.30) and “lack of support from peers” (2.22).

In the post-program survey, participants reported the average amount of time they spent each week speaking English. Out of an average of 25.7 total speaking hours reported per week, the average time reported speaking English ranged from just under six hours to 13 hours per week. Correlating the language gain of students during SA to their reported time spent speaking English reveals that students who reported less time speaking English showed the most pre- to post-language gain on the Versant Spanish Test (see chart).

Chart. Contrast of Time Spent in English with Language Gain



⁷ Some examples of coding nodes include: English language use (Situation Complexity; With Peers; With Others); Spanish language spoken (With Native Speakers; With Peers; With Professors).

The question that perplexes program directors and researchers is *why* students persist in speaking English during SA when it is clearly detrimental to their language gain and, in many cases, to their eventual professional goals. The qualitative data gathered in the interviews provide clues as to the motivations behind the poor linguistic choices students make while studying abroad. These choices include a complex interweaving of social factors that can be viewed through the lens of *linguistic loneliness*. We define linguistic loneliness as the tension that results from having inadequate linguistic skills during a time of linguistic displacement (such as SA) such that learners are unable to fully engage with a TL interlocutor in a way that satisfies their social, emotional, and intimacy needs. These speakers are able to express basic emotions; however, they are stranded in the superficial, lacking the vocabulary and syntax to express deeper and more nuanced ideas that would enable them to articulate important aspects of their identity. Qualitative data from the post-program interviews document this process.

When students apply to participate in a SA program, they recognize the need to, and generally express enthusiasm for, committing to speak the TL all the time. Once on site, interview data show that students discover numerous obstacles to maintaining their linguistic determination, principal among them the omnipresence of English and easy access to social media in English (Kinginger, 2010). A student studying in Spain recognized, “I’d be checking Facebook before I go to bed or emailing my parents a couple times a week . . . all in English” (S1205). A number of students mentioned being able to keep up with all their American television series while abroad.

Sometimes the lack of meaningful linguistic contact is due to the student withdrawing from social situations with the potential for linguistic challenge and growth. A participant in the Spain program commented, “I didn’t spend a whole lot of time with my host family just because I wanted to be alone a lot, and I think if I would’ve gotten to know them better and spent more time speaking with them in actual conversation, that might’ve helped to improve my Spanish” (S1102). While on one level, students recognize what they need to do to attain the fluency to which they aspire, on another, perhaps subconscious, level, they are unable to diagnose the psychological barriers they need to overcome: “I know that speaking with native speakers helps a lot, and so I don’t know why I didn’t try to do it more, ‘cause I think I probably would’ve been able to improve a lot more if I had tried to do that” (S1207).

Other times students fail in their attempts to enter the TL community due to their limited linguistic abilities: “In the beginning it was just a lot of like, I couldn’t even understand what the words were . . . so, I would just hear things and . . . I would just give up because I had no idea what . . . they were saying” (H1302). When their efforts are unsuccessful, students tend to retreat from interaction. This failure to communicate and subsequent withdrawal can become self-perpetuating:

I was kind of afraid at the beginning to speak in Spanish ‘cause I was, like, “Well, I’m not really . . . fluent or anything, and I don’t think I’m that great at speaking.” And I was afraid to make a mistake, and I wish that I had just made some mistakes and spoken and interacted a little more with native people and been a little more courageous ‘cause I think I would’ve started learning faster in the beginning and more. (S1207)

When students discover that they are unable to express themselves at an adult level in the TL, their identity as competent communicators is threatened. In order to overcome their fears, students must

be tenacious in their attempts to use the language, especially since they are dealing with situations that are both linguistically and culturally nuanced.

Students find that the social dynamic of communicating with limited linguistic skill in another culture is often more complex than they anticipated. While most students hope to make many friends during their time abroad, they soon discover just how difficult it is.

A lot of the Peruvians at the university . . . basically ignored us and tried to avoid us. They were afraid of us. And so . . . if I could redo things, I would take more of an initiative to make some of those relationships rather than waiting for them to reach out to me. (P1131)

Some students recognize the inadequacy of their linguistic tools necessary to enter or sustain conversation with native speakers:

I spent a lot of time with just the Hondurans and just heard them speak between each other a lot, but on the other side, it's kind of like . . . there wasn't much interaction with me, like, every once in a while they'd ask me a question, but otherwise they were just speaking between each other. (H1302)

Even in the relative security of the homestay context, many students are unable to make themselves heard:

[In] my particular situation, there [were] a lot of people around all the time, so I sometimes didn't feel like there was really space for me to fit into the conversation . . . In an ideal world, I would have not been intimidated and would've talked with them more. (H1236)

Paradoxically, although students need sustained linguistic contact to build their language skills, their linguistic discomfort leads them to withdraw from the very situations that would provide them opportunities for growth, as seen in the following student comments:

I just never really developed a really personal relationship with my family because I just, didn't want to say anything wrong, and so that hindered me a lot too. (S1211)

I did spend a fair amount of time in solitude doing homework [instead of with the host family in the living room] . . . I think [it] would've been good *if I just like stuck myself in those situations more* [italics added] and just like chose to do homework in the living room instead of at my desk or something. (H1404)

In many cases, the learners' *linguistic loneliness* is depriving them of both social and linguistic growth opportunities.⁸

Still, the language learning process occurs on multiple planes simultaneously and is by nature iterative. Even when students are unsuccessful in their attempts to participate in conversations with native speakers, diligent students will persist in their TL practice by speaking in the TL with their co-nationals:

⁸ DeKeyser (2007) recognizes that students may resort to L1 because it creates a bond with other non-native students allowing them to ameliorate "mild homesickness and severe culture shock." Referencing Wilkinson (1998), he says, "The native language thus becomes a protective capsule, a symbolic withdrawal from a cultural context they cannot withdraw from physically" (p. 212).

Our group was pretty intentional about sticking to our Spanish. So even if we took trips just together as a class, continuing to speak the language and just force ourselves to be using the language all the time and commit to a total immersion for the semester was vital, I think, for all of us. (H1304)

However, even this proves to be difficult to maintain in the long run. Since group dynamics have the power to shape an experience for good or for ill, even the students with the best of intentions find it challenging to remain faithful to their language pledge: “There were groups of us who tried to speak Spanish the whole time, but . . . it’s hard to stay in [Spanish] when other people weren’t” (S1308). Some students feel that they are swimming against the stream: “[I tried to] stand my ground and speak Spanish to the group. It’s really hard to do that if everybody’s speaking English” (H1301). Another student perceptively notes:

If the whole group isn’t focused on language, principally, I think that gets really hard. And it wasn’t like I didn’t like them because they spoke in English, it was so easy to . . . lose your own resolve or to speak in English back, so that was kind of an interesting struggle. (H1404)

Sadly, not all students are equally motivated. One student complained, “We had two students who always spoke English and that changed the whole group to English” (P1206). Some students appear to reject the premise of needing to speak the TL all the time: “The people that [spoke Spanish] got really annoying in some senses, because not everyone was doing it. It just became . . . like ‘I’m better than you’ . . . like ‘I’m getting the integration experience’” (S1135). Some students recognized the slippery slope of speaking English together with peers: “It just started as an outlet at first, like I need this English time because I’m surrounded by Spanish all the time . . . Then towards the end it was *just like a habit* [italics added]” (S1404). Thus, in spite of the good intentions of students, the temptation to speak English with peers seems to be all but irresistible. What are the circumstances that trigger this self-defeating behavior?

The qualitative interview data show that students are frustrated by the lack of linguistic tools to express themselves clearly in the TL: “[Students in our program] want to talk about a personal issue or something like that where they felt like ‘Oh, we don’t have the words to speak about this,’ then it would turn to English more” (H1302). The very situations where educators believe that students could grow the most are sometimes those in which students refuse to persist: “I’ve seen people just kind of give up. So they don’t really tell you the whole story, or they don’t really go into as much depth as they want to because they don’t want to think that hard” (P1204). The process of slipping into English appears to be subconscious: “We always started out reading and speaking in Spanish, but then it *dissolved into English* [italics added] because we wanted to talk about things we didn’t know how to talk about in Spanish . . . to focus on how we were doing as people” (S1102).

According to the student interviews, the strong desire to know and be known, both within the student group and with TL interlocutors, is of vital importance to most students and is a primary factor pushing them to use English. Students from two different programs admitted,

We fall into a trap of thinking to get to know each other we can speak English for a little bit and then we’ll switch to Spanish . . . If people spoke to me in English, it’s not like I was gonna respond in Spanish. (S1403)

It's really hard to get to know someone when you're both speaking another language and you have a common language . . . especially in the first month, that was the biggest reason, because we didn't know each other and we wanted to get to know each other better. (P1207)

A poignant remark from a student in Honduras illustrates the notion of linguistic loneliness: “[By speaking English during spring break] you get a taste of seeing who someone really is and then having to return to not being able to communicate, *it's like losing your friend* [italics added]” (H1401). As other researchers have found (Martinsen et al., 2010; Mendelson, 2004; Sawir et al., 2008; Sovic, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2013), the students' desire to fill their social and emotional needs is often best met by their co-nationals, and most easily met in their home language.

The better we got to know each other, I think the harder it was to speak in Spanish . . . At first you don't really know that much about each other so you can only really talk about surface stuff in Spanish. But, you know, once you get to know each other, it's harder. (P1303)

[There are times that you] have to switch to English, because you're so comfortable in it, and so comfortable with these other people that you have to—the only way to really express yourself at that point is in English . . . There's something about some discussions you can only really have in English. (P1115)

Another aspect of forming friendships is noted by a student who says, “It becomes very difficult to make *deep* friendships in a language you are not comfortable with . . . neither of you can be *deep* [italics added]” (H1401). “Deep” here could have two interpretations. In one sense “deep” refers to the emotional sense of intimacy, but it also signals the student's need for higher-level speech including abstract and linguistically complex language.

When students attempt to express their thoughts authentically in the TL, they become aware of a gap between their TL self and their native-language self. They are able to express who they are more genuinely and more completely in the native language. Horwitz et al. (1986) state that as students realize the limited range of communicative choices and the lack of authenticity with which they communicate who they are in the TL, their self-esteem becomes vulnerable (p. 128). Sense of humor is one aspect of personal identity that can be particularly difficult to express in a second language: “The one thing I missed about being here was our culture and sense of humor . . . In English you can just rattle off something funny and everyone just laughs and that relieves stress, so laughing is easier in English” (P1117). This supports the finding of Sawir et al. (2008) that during SA students experience a “culture deficit” and feel that their identities are under attack (p. 16).

Pedagogical Implications

While the quantitative data show that the greatest perceived hindrance to language gain during SA (as reported by participants in the post-program survey) is the personal choice to speak English with peers, the qualitative data reveal the complexities of the conscious and unconscious decisions that students make. It is clear that students are motivated and make a sincere effort to speak the TL and improve their language skills. However, it is equally true that many students give up and fail to meet their stated goals. With this in mind, how can educators and program directors begin to address this situation?

Even while promoting the importance of SA for language learning, educators can work to dispel the myth of easy language acquisition through immersion by sharing research extant on the topic with students preparing to go abroad. This may inure students to some of the difficulties or failures they will inevitably experience. Pre-program orientation can include a brief explanation of the language learning process, including the importance of both TL input and output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995) in order to build linguistic fluency.

In order to equip students to better withstand the challenges inherent in being a linguistically-impooverished Other, directors can introduce the concept of “strangerhood” as elucidated by Starr-Glass (2015). He encourages students to embrace their Otherness instead of allowing fear to paralyze or isolate them:

Being a stranger is not being alone or isolated—it is being different and understanding that difference through the Other. It is not to be avoided or feared, but students often need permission to recognize, appreciate, and interrogate the strangerhood into which they have brought themselves—perhaps even to rejoice in it. (p. 317)

Unfortunately, students tend to avoid this notion of strangerhood instead of embracing it and learning through it.

On a practical level, students need concrete tools both to make connections with native speakers and to express themselves in nuanced ways in emotional/psychological situations. In the post-program interviews, students expressed the wish that the program would have assigned them a native speaker contact, somehow expecting that this would lead effortlessly to a cross-cultural friendship:

I would've loved to have been assigned an individual tutor who was around my age, where we would just go and hang out and eventually it wouldn't be scheduled time but it would just become time to learn about this person and practice Spanish and enjoy what the relationship brings. (H1219)

Ife (2000) has also encountered this desire on the part of students, but bemoans the lack of student initiative:

Students themselves see the answer as lying in more contact with ‘natives’, better language preparation and more languages [*sic*] classes abroad. Significantly, these responses all offer a solution from outside: there is a disappointingly low level of perception of a need or an ability to help themselves. (p. 35)

Similarly, Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) point out a discrepancy in whose responsibility it is to engage in communication (in the homestay situation). They recommend that students “take the first step and initiate more conversation” (p. 257).

However, taking the initiative to talk with strangers can be intimidating, even in one's native language. One way for students to begin to experience this discomfort, but in a safe setting, could be to require (pre-program) that they initiate a conversation with someone they do not know, for example, in the campus dining hall or library. Having to overcome their inhibitions and converse with a stranger in their native language can be a first step in lowering the affective barriers that

prevent fruitful interactions with native speakers during SA. A follow-up activity would be for the group to process this experience allowing students to acknowledge their discomfort, to recognize the universality of their inhibitions, and to learn conversational strategies from one another. Ideally, this would be a multi-stage activity occurring over several weeks: initiating the conversation, debriefing as a group, sharing opening lines and strategies, and, finally, determining which of those conversational gambits will transfer both culturally and linguistically to the TL setting.

Another resource available on many college campuses is the presence of international students. These students can describe their experience of being strangers and share their successful communication strategies. In this situation, as with the previous one, role-plays may be useful.

Although one of the best ways to open a conversation is with a question, students must be able to ask good questions in order to do so. Instructors can provide students with “the linguistic and sociolinguistic ability to form contextually appropriate interrogative sentences” (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 71), but should note that “sincere questions imply that I really want to hear the answer, and am not just looking for ways to display my own knowledge” (Smith, 2009, p. 120).

Fearful students may need an excuse to initiate conversations with strangers in the SA context. A series of directed assignments can force students out of their comfort zone (see Cadd, 2012, for a series of tasks used to encourage students to engage with native speakers during SA).

Future Research

This study has some limitations. The information gathered on student engagement during study abroad is self-reported data. Just as students tend to over-estimate their language ability, they may also inaccurately report the time they spent on various activities during time abroad. However, gathering, documenting and analyzing objective data about individual students’ behaviors during a semester of SA would be time-consuming and expensive. The current qualitative study has the advantage of uncovering and examining factors involved in decisions made about language use during SA through students’ own perceptions of this process.

Future research will be necessary to address the following questions: First, how does raising student awareness of the phenomenon of linguistic loneliness affect student decisions regarding TL use during SA? Second, what strategies are most effective in overcoming barriers to interaction with native speakers? Third, is it possible to change student perspectives about strangerhood during SA in a way that equips them to overcome the temptation to retreat to the native language? Given the continued emphasis on language immersion for TL learning, it is vital to examine further the motivations governing linguistic behaviors of students during SA in order to better understand what helps and hinders language gain in that context.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by grants from Kuyers International Program Fund and Center for Social Research at Calvin College. The authors would like to thank McGregor Summer Research Fellows Katie Van Zanen and Brianne Dekker for their assistance with this project and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

References

- Allen, H. (2010). Interactive contact as linguistic affordance during short-term study abroad: Myth or reality? *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 19, 1-26.
- Bai, J. (2016). Development and validation of the Acculturative Stress Scale for Chinese college students in the United States (ASSCS). *Psychological Assessment*, 28(4), 443.
- Brecht, R., Davidson, D., & Ginsberg, R. B. (1995). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*, 37-66. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brecht, R. D., & Robinson, J. L. (1995). On the value of formal instruction in study abroad. *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*, 318-334. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Cadd, M. (2012). Encouraging students to engage with native speakers during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(2), 229-245.
- Churchill, E., & DuFon, M. A. (2006). Evolving threads in study abroad research. In M. A. Dufon & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language learners in study abroad contexts* (pp. 1-27). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Collentine, J., & Freed, B. F. (2004). Learning context and its effects on second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 153-171.
- DeKeyser, R. (2007). Study abroad as foreign language practice. In R. DeKeyser (Ed.), *Practice in a second language: Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology* (pp. 208-226). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dewey, D. P., Belnap, R. K., & Hillstrom, R. (2013). Social network development, language use, and language acquisition during study abroad: Arabic language learners' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 22, 84-110.
- Freed, B. F. (Ed.). (1995). *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Freed, B. F. (1995). What makes us think that students who study abroad become fluent? *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 123-148). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Freed, B. F., Dewey, D. P., Segalowitz, N., & Halter, R. (2004). The language contact profile. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(2), 349-356.
- Freed, B. F., Segalowitz, N., & Dewey, D. P. (2004). Context of learning and second language fluency in French: Comparing regular classroom, study abroad, and intensive domestic immersion programs. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(2), 275-301.
- Goldoni, F. (2013). Students' immersion experiences in study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 46(3), 359-376.
- Hernández, T. A. (2010). The relationship among motivation, interaction, and the development of second language oral proficiency in a study-abroad context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(4), 600-617.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- Ife, A. (2000). Language learning and residence abroad: How self-directed are students? *The Language Learning Journal*, 22(1), 30-37.
- Kinginger, C. (2009). *Language learning and study abroad: A critical reading of research*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kinginger, C. (2010). American students abroad: Negotiation of difference? *Language Teacher*, 43(2), 216-27.
- Lafford, B. A. (1995). Getting into, through and out of a survival situation. *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 97-121). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Magnan, S. S., & Back, M. (2007). Social interaction and linguistic gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(1), 43-61.

- Martinsen, R. A., Baker, W., Dewey, D. P., Bown, J., & Johnson, C. (2010). Exploring diverse settings for language acquisition and use: Comparing study abroad, service learning abroad, and foreign language housing. *Applied Language Learning, 20*(1-2), 45-69.
- Mendelson, V. G. (2004, Fall). Hindsight is 20/20: Student perceptions of language learning and the study abroad experience. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 10*, 43-63.
- NVivo qualitative data analysis software. QSR International Pty Ltd., Version 8, 2008, Version 9, 2010.
- O'Reilly, A., Ryan, D., & Hickey, T. (2010). The psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation of short-term international students in Ireland. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(5), 584-598.
- Pyper, M. J., & Slagter, C. (2015). Competing priorities: Student perceptions of helps and hindrances to language acquisition during study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 26*(224), 83-106.
- Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, J., & Thomson, G. (2007). Social connectedness among international students at an Australian university. *Social Indicators Research, 84*(1), 71-82.
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and international students: An Australian study. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 12*(2), 148-180.
- Schmidt-Rinehart, B. C., & Knight, S. M. (2004). The homestay component of study abroad: Three perspectives. *Foreign Language Annals, 37*(2), 254-262.
- Sovic, S. (2009). Hi-bye friends and the herd instinct: International and home students in the creative arts. *Higher Education, 58*(6), 747-761.
- Smith, D. I. (2009). *Learning from the stranger: Christian faith and cultural diversity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Smith, D. I., & Carvill, B. M. (2000). *The gift of the stranger: Faith, hospitality, and foreign language learning*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(3), 371-391.
- Starr-Glass, D. (2016). The self, the other, and the international student. *Journal of International Students, 6*(1), 314-318.
- Versant Spanish Test Validation. Retrieved from <http://www.versanttest.com/technology/VersantSpanishTestValidation.pdf>
- Versant Spanish Test and ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews Correlation. Retrieved from http://www.pearsonhighered.com/versant/assets/Fact%20Sheet_Versant%20Spanish_comparison_to_ACTFL_Level.pdf
- Wang, K. T., Heppner, P. P., Wang, L., & Zhu, F. (2015). Cultural intelligence trajectories in new international students: Implications for the development of cross-cultural competence. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation, 4*(1), 51.
- Wei, M., Wang, K. T., & Ku, T. Y. (2012). A development and validation of the Perceived Language Discrimination Scale. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18*(4), 340.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998). Study abroad from the participants' perspective: A challenge to common beliefs. *Foreign Language Annals, 31*(1), 23-39.
- Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2013). Chinese international students' personal and sociocultural stressors in the United States. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(1), 62-84.