Studying Abroad During the Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Two Case Studies

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Abstract

This contribution discusses two case studies that illustrate the experiences of mobility students who were studying abroad during the first outbreak of COVID-19. The case studies have emerged from a larger longitudinal, mixed-method study, which included an interview study with six international students planned for spring 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants had to terminate their stay early. Hence, the original interview study was adapted to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on students' social contacts, linguistic practices, and emotional well-being in these exceptional circumstances. In the present contribution, we understand study abroad as a rite of passage, an important time in the life of young adults, and we draw on insights from previous research on educational travels with transformative potential to make sense of the students' differing reactions to their early return.

Abstract in German

In diesem Beitrag werden zwei Fallstudien erörtert, die die Erfahrungen von Mobilitätsstudenten illustrieren, die während des Ausbruchs von COVID-19 im Ausland studierten. Die Fallstudien sind aus einer größeren mixed-method Längsschnittstudie hervorgegangen, welche eine für das Frühjahr 2020 geplante Interviewstudie mit sechs internationalen Studierenden umfasste. Aufgrund der

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COVID-19-Pandemie mussten alle Teilnehmer*innen ihren Aufenthalt vorzeitig beenden. Daher wurde die ursprüngliche Interviewstudie angepasst, um die Auswirkungen von COVID-19 auf die sozialen Kontakte, die sprachlichen Praktiken und das emotionale Wohlbefinden der Studierenden unter diesen außergewöhnlichen Umständen zu untersuchen. Im vorliegenden Beitrag verstehen wir das Auslandsstudium als einen Übergangsritus, eine wichtige Zeit im Leben junger Erwachsener, und wir stützen uns auf Erkenntnisse aus der bisherigen Forschung über Bildungsreisen mit transformativem Potenzial, um die unterschiedlichen Reaktionen der Studierenden auf ihre vorzeitige Rückkehr zu verstehen.

Keywords:
study abroad; COVID-19; rite of passage; case studies

Contextualization

In this contribution, we discuss two case studies that illustrate the experiences of two mobility students who were abroad at the time of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case studies presented here have emerged from a larger longitudinal, mixed-method study of international students' language attitudes, practices, and competences. This project started in 2018 with the aim of applying a multilingual perspective to the investigation of student mobility, a type of educational travel which is still usually thought of and investigated in terms of a primarily monolingual focus on the target language with native speakers as the benchmark. The study combines questionnaires and interviews to gain insights into mobility students' social contacts and language practices, and the interrelations between these and their language attitudes and linguistic development. The study participants undertake mobility stays in English-speaking countries or in English-language programs elsewhere with a minimum duration of ten weeks.

Like traveling in general, study abroad has been viewed as a key transformative experience for higher education students (e.g., Landon et al., 2017). As Grabowski et al. (2017) emphasize, many young people are motivated by the idea that studying abroad supports them in transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Students often undertake educational travels at important times of transition in their life course, e.g., between finishing their tertiary studies and before entering the workforce (Wilson et al., 2009). As Arnett (1994) has argued, higher education students are in a liminal phase as

they are neither dependent adolescents nor fully independent adults. Drawing on van Gennep's (1960) three-stage anthropological model and in line with other researchers (Beames, 2004; Grabowski et al., 2017; King, 2011), we conceive of studying abroad as a rite of passage. According to van Gennep (1960), a passage comprises three rites, namely 1) separation, 2) transition, and 3) incorporation. In the case of study abroad students, the first rite entails leaving their home environment to go abroad. During the second phase, these students adapt to a new life in an unfamiliar environment. The stay abroad often signifies detachment from the parental home as it is the first time for many students to live on their own. The students automatically assume more responsibility for their daily life decisions and typically experience a new freedom and independence while abroad. As interviews with young adults who took a pre-university gap year have revealed, they repeatedly refer to notions of confidence, maturity and independence when talking about the impact of their gap year (King, 2011). The incorporation phase entails students returning home transformed, with new social status and added responsibilities (Beames, 2004; Grabowski et al., 2017). In the present contribution, we use the 'rites of passage' model as a theoretical framework to make sense of the different reactions of the two investigated students.

In spring 2020, an interview study to explore mobility students' perceptions and evaluations of their social and linguistic practices abroad was underway, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Over the course of the ensuing weeks and months, the virus caused major disruption in various areas of public and private life and had an unprecedented impact on international student mobility. Our six initial interview participants suddenly faced the dilemma of whether to stay in their host country or return home, considering the epidemiological situation in both places and the swiftly changing travel restrictions in place. Ultimately, all six participants of our interview study returned home prematurely, which made it impossible to carry out the interview study as planned. As a research team, we considered that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this cohort of students was so significant that we should make an effort to learn more about it.

In line with Nardon and Hari (2021), we understand the disruptions caused by the pandemic as a sense-breaking situation that triggers sensemaking efforts/processes. In such situations, sensemaking allows individuals to

interpret why things are different than they expected. We wanted to explore how students make sense of their situation and how they cope with the fact that they had to abandon the idea of spending an entire semester abroad. Therefore, we adapted our original interview study to focus on the impact of COVID-19 on mobility students' social contacts, linguistic practices, and emotional well-being. While the last topic was not originally a focus of the larger study, we included it because of its specific relevance, as documented in several early COVID studies (e.g., Elmer et al., 2020; Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020). We conducted semi-structured interviews with six study abroad students enrolled at different Swiss higher education institutions who returned prematurely from their studies or work in different European countries.

In the following, we present and compare the experiences of two of these participants, Anna and Lea, in more detail. These two were selected as they differed markedly in the way they perceived and reacted to the unexpected turn that their stay abroad took. Both students had planned to spend 22 weeks abroad but returned home to Switzerland much earlier than intended. For the presentation of these cases, we primarily draw on interview data but will complement these with questionnaire data collected within the quantitative part of the larger project to provide possible explanations for the differing experiences. All quotes from the interviews are our translations from Swiss German. To protect the identity of the interview participants, all names of places and people were replaced with pseudonyms. Both case summaries are structured along similar lines: First, the interviewees detail the time immediately before the decision to come home early, who they talked to and how it felt for them to eventually make the decision to return. Next, they describe which social contacts were key in dealing with this extraordinary situation and how returning home early affected their social interactions, language use, and linguistic development respectively. Lastly, the case summaries also shed light on the students' well-being and their coping strategies.

Case Summary 1: Anna

The Swiss student Anna initially planned a 22-week exchange semester in Spain. Her stay was suddenly interrupted after seven weeks due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On advice of her family and friends and with a heavy heart, she decided to return to Switzerland. In Spain, Anna mainly had contact with people from home that she knew prior to studying abroad.

While there, she shared an apartment with a fellow Swiss student from the same home institution. She reported having established few new contacts while abroad, most of them international students as well. However, contact with the latter was markedly more limited (in terms of contact hours) than her contact with her pre-existing social network. As far as contact with the local population is concerned, this was virtually non-existent.

At home, it took Anna some time to accept the fact that her long-awaited exchange semester had ended so abruptly. However, many of her statements in the interview revolved around how she perceived the restrictions in place in Switzerland at the time. The disappointment about the premature return seemed to have faded into the background in the face of frustration over the uncertain situation at home.

The escalation of the COVID-19 situation in Spain and the related imposition of severe restrictions came as a great surprise to Anna since compared to Switzerland, Spain was affected somewhat later, and media coverage of COVID-19 was much less prominent (par. 24). Reflecting on the situation, Anna states: "At the beginning I found it very interesting, the whole situation, because it was just a lot of action and something completely new" (par. 16). After some time, Anna got annoyed by the situation because it brought a lot of uncertainty and change.

Shortly before her unplanned departure home, Anna travelled to England with her flatmate and two other friends. The fact that she did not mention any concerns regarding going on the trip underscores how quickly the situation changed in Spain and how little Anna expected such a swift turn. Until their departure to England on a Thursday, Anna's classes were still taught in a face-to-face format. Upon her return to Spain three days later, classes had been switched to distance learning.

For quite some time, returning home was not an option for Anna. She thought that as long as "everything is okay in Spain, why should I go back to Switzerland where nothing is okay?" (par. 90). Only when the situation in Spain drastically worsened did she decide to return to Switzerland. In a way, she found this decision to be strange because she knew that the situation in Switzerland would not be any better.

Her mother's ex-boyfriend, with whom she maintains a close relationship, called her while she was on her trip to England to make her aware of the current situation in Spain and implored her to return home. He also seems to have been the driving force behind her decision to return (par. 36). Apart from him, her mother and her best friend were also heavily involved in Anna's decision to come home early. Anna describes the support of these three key people as very valuable in this extraordinary situation (par. 44): "I always want to make sure that I have enough contact with them because I knew [sic] I can rely on them and I know they can tell me what I should do" (par. 44). As she maintained close contact with these three people throughout her stay, she felt "as if I was always at home" (par. 52). Shortly before her return home, contact with other people at home, however, was reduced: "(...) towards the end, I realized that I didn't have the time or the nerve to write with anyone from home, even if I had wanted to" (par. 44).

While Anna was on her trip to London, her international acquaintances in Spain decided one after the other to return to their home countries. Many left Spain within a matter of a few days: "there someone went home and there someone went back" (par. 34). Since she was in England when some of her friends left and her own departure had to be very quick, she was unable to properly say goodbye in person. One of the goals that Anna had set herself for her time abroad was meeting some local people. However, this turned out to be more difficult than she thought—even before the COVID-19 measures had been implemented. To meet local people, she registered for CrossFit training to get to know some locals while also doing sports. She was unable to put this plan into practice, however, as she was headed back to Switzerland after only two weeks of CrossFit training.

Apart from the fact that she no longer had any chance to make new contacts, the COVID-19 situation also affected Anna's language use to the extent that her opportunities to speak English or Spanish were suddenly very restricted as she only spoke these languages during online classes and even then, the opportunities for language use were limited (cf. par. 56). Returning home generally eliminated any everyday social interaction in the foreign languages. Despite these challenging circumstances, Anna was confident that she would have greatly improved her Spanish skills by the end of the semester.

During the interview, Anna remarked with a laugh that the only real crisis she had was shortly before her flight home. Anna did not manage to close

her suitcase as she had too many things to pack, and she already knew that it would end up being far too heavy. This seemingly trivial situation caused her to be so overwhelmed that she desperately called her mother and said: "Mum, I can't do this. I can't take it anymore and I don't know how to get home" (par. 106). This incident highlights how stressful the situation must have been for Anna.

Once home, Anna needed about a week to process everything she had experienced and to get herself organized. During the first week, she was repeatedly overcome by a slight resentment because she was frustrated about the premature termination of her semester abroad. In general, the whole situation annoyed her, which is why she needed some time for herself (par. 142). Over time, these feelings subsided, and Anna was able to come to terms with the fact that she was no longer abroad

Case Summary 2: Lea

The young female student Lea was staying in Finland at the time of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. What was initially planned as a 22-week stay ended abruptly with her early return home after 11 weeks. Despite her relatively short stay in Finland, Lea managed to make many friends and establish a new social network there. Nearly two-thirds of the people with whom she reported having regular contact were people she did not know before coming to Finland, many of them also international students. In the interview, Lea reported that she struggled with her decision to end her stay early and found difficulty in dealing with the consequences of the premature return home. The thoughts of missed opportunities seemed to regularly overwhelm her.

Social interaction was suddenly limited when Lea's host university entirely switched to distance learning in mid-March. From one day to the next, the Swiss exchange student's courses were transferred online, and the internship she was completing at the time was also cancelled (par. 42). The situation was quite unexpected and difficult to assess for everyone, the student describes: "Nobody knew exactly what was going on. Most of them [exchange students] did not really get any clear instructions from their home university either" (par. 42). She further reports that over the course of the ensuing days, about a third of the exchange students at her university in Finland decided to return home without further ado. However, many students were unsure whether it would be more reasonable to stay in Finland where the situation was still more relaxed than in their respective home countries. This apparently

caused many intense discussions among exchange students. Lea also struggled to decide whether to return to Switzerland. She describes how she was in contact with different people, including her parents, who gave her different advice.

During her shortened semester abroad, Lea maintained a close relationship with Samantha, another Swiss exchange student who was also staying in the same place in Finland. For Lea, Samantha was one of the people who was particularly important to her in dealing with these extraordinary circumstances. Samantha and Lea had agreed that they would either both stay in Finland or both return home. Lea described how glad she was that she was not all by herself but could share this unexpected situation and the resulting uncertainty with Samantha. In addition, she was also grateful to be able to exchange with other study abroad students, both in Finland and elsewhere, who found themselves in the same situation (par. 58).

According to Lea, the decisive factor for her decision to come home was a press conference of the Swiss Federal Council where people abroad were urged to come back to Switzerland. As soon as the decision was taken, Lea and Samantha bought a plane ticket for the following day even though they still had mixed feelings: "We were somehow unsure and yes, it was good for us at that moment to have taken a decision, but once we were at the airport, we said to ourselves: 'We actually don't really want to go home'. So, I thought twice whether I should get on the plane or not, yes" (par. 152). The uncertainty about whether she had taken the right decision occupied Lea well after her return and she continued questioning it once she was home: "In retrospect, I could have stayed there, (…) but yes. I think I am simply quite conscientious and so is my friend [Samantha], who came with me" (par. 152).

The moment she finally decided to return home, Lea felt as if "[her] whole world collapsed" (par. 126). She was not looking forward to returning home at all as "it had simply been a bit my dream to live there. I spent a wonderful time there. I had my freedom and I enjoyed it" (par. 130). Although she was extremely sad to return home, she was also relieved to have taken a decision (par. 125–126). The fact that things happened so quickly and that Lea left the country within a few days presented a further challenge for processing what was happening. As Lea puts it, "I also did not have time to mentally say goodbye to it [life in Finland] in any way" (par. 136). Once home, Lea's sadness was temporarily forgotten at the sight of her loved ones. It did not take long for it to catch up with her again, however. Overall, Lea describes her arrival back home as a shock, as the measures in place were much more drastic than those

in Finland at the time of her departure (par. 20). Soon, she started wondering if she had taken the right decision. During this time, she often asked herself: "Yes, what would I be doing [in Finland] right now?" (par.150).

For Lea, her premature return home seems to be associated with a sense of lost opportunities. For one, she felt that she was deprived of the chance to meet more new people, as many events were cancelled towards the end and she had to come home early. Because of her premature return, she also missed opportunities to improve her English language skills: "I would certainly have been able to learn a lot in the time I still had" (par. 90). Even though she continued studying at the host university via distance learning, she doubted that this setting would be equally conducive to linguistic progress. "I had the feeling that I was only writing in English, but I never heard it (par. 82). She found distance learning challenging in terms of the language use of her surroundings, because "I always heard German around me and then I had to write in English again" (par. 82).

Resettling at home did not turn out to be easy for Lea. She still felt a sense of loss even weeks after her return. Having to go back to her old life and once again moving in with her parents felt like a setback for her (par. 142). She saw the stay abroad as a chance to become more independent, but this opportunity was virtually taken away from her. The biggest challenge for Lea was the lack of a goal upon her return. She reported that she had made some plans for the summer after graduation, but due to the current situation, these plans were "quite on the brink of failure" (par. 154).

Discussion

A first common feature of Lea's and Anna's case is the suddenness of the developments related to the outbreak of COVID-19 in spring 2020. Like many people, they were unprepared for the implications of the pandemic on staying abroad and travelling. Decisions had to be made quickly and there was little room to negotiate possible doubts about the consequences. In this situation, family members and friends were important sources of advice. Both Lea and Anna report a sense of lost opportunities, for instance not being able to say goodbye before leaving or to mentally prepare for the departure. In hindsight, they also regret not having been able to make as much linguistic progress as they hoped for, or to achieve other personal goals, such as living on their own for the first time. Finally, the two students' experiences overlap in their critical assessment of distance learning for further developing their language skills.

However, the two cases differ in some interesting ways. Some of Anna's COVID-related experiences are less negative: she found the novelty of the situation partly exciting and reported the feeling of lost opportunities as annoying, but less acute than Lea. Moreover, Lea seems to suffer for a longer period, and develops a sense of a lack of prospects. There are clear differences in the two students' coping strategies. These may be related to different goals and hopes that the two students may have associated with their stay abroad and differences in terms of their social integration in the respective host countries, as Lea had managed to establish a sizeable network of new international contacts while Anna predominantly maintained contact with people that she had already known prior to her stay abroad. Accordingly, Anna remained strongly attached to the German language while Lea mostly interacted in English with her new social contacts. Drawing on van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage model, Lea's separation from her home environment was clearer than that of Anna, who kept entertaining her home contacts intensively. With regard to the transition phase, Lea managed to socially integrate well in the new environment. She also describes how she transformed and grew as a person during the time abroad. It can thus be argued that the premature termination of the stay abroad was harder for Lea, as it meant a more drastic change for her who had settled in so well. For Anna, who entertained more or less the same contacts during her stay in Spain as she did at home, returning home had less far-reaching consequences in terms of the maintenance of social networks. Also, Lea saw her stay abroad as a chance to become or to be autonomous and to develop personally, an opportunity she feels was taken from her. Due to the restrictive COVID-19 measures, Lea feels trapped at home, with too much attention from her parents and no goals. Thus, the newly acquired freedom has given way to a certain lack of perspective. Instead of being incorporated into her familiar social setting as an adult with more responsibilities, she feels like she has to transform back into her 'old self' from before the trip, which had carried the promise of transformation.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic has had massive and overwhelmingly negative effects on the lives of countless people, one might question the relevance of these student narratives. In our view, the prototypical significance of the two case studies lies in the special status of the stay abroad as a key personal formative experience and a rite of passage typically in young adulthood. Living in a foreign country, using foreign languages, creating a new social network, and maybe leaving one's parents' home for the first time can all

be seen as tasks, freighted with the potential of insecurity and conflicts. Yet, they are attractive in that they enhance feelings of personal pride once they have been completed. The pandemic instantaneously interrupted their rites of passage. It deprived them of these opportunities, including of exercising autonomy, by sending them back home to their usual social networks, including the parents on whom they depend for advice and support in this critical situation. These insights can serve as a starting point for further inquiry into one of many secondary negative outcomes of the pandemic—an era of lost opportunities for young adults.

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