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Near-Term Effects of Short-Term Study Abroad: A Longitudinal Examination of Learner Perceptions

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Abstract

A relatively small body of research has been conducted on the near- and long-term effects of study abroad (SA) to date. This existing research suggests that SA effects on language skills tend to be volatile, while the impact on various aspects of learners' personal, academic, and professional development may be longer-lasting. Yet, learner perspectives on the dynamics and durability of such effects, in particular in the context of short-term SA programs, remain largely unexplored. This study hence investigates the near-term impact of short-term SA programs as experienced by students within the first months and years following their sojourns. A qualitative case-study design is employed to examine the accounts of four American students of German, who studied abroad in Austria for four weeks and were interviewed repeatedly over a period of up to 40 months after their sojourns. The results suggest that, from the students' perspective, many effects deteriorate in the near term, although the overall sojourn experience still appears influential.

Abstract in German

Nur wenige Forschungsvorhaben haben sich bislang den mittel- bis langfristigen Auswirkungen studentischer Auslandsaufenthalte gewidmet; die bisherige Datenlage deutet jedoch darauf hin, dass die Auswirkungen auf sprachliche Kompetenzen eher unbeständig sind, wohingegen die persönliche, studiums- und berufsbezogene Entwicklung der Lernenden länger von einem Auslandsaufenthalt beeinflusst wird. Die Dynamik und Beständigkeit derartiger Auswirkungen wurden jedoch kaum mit Blick auf

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kurze Auslandsaufenthalte (\leq acht Wochen) sowie aus der Perspektive der Studierenden erforscht, was die vorliegende Studie insbesondere hinsichtlich mittelfristiger Effekte fokussiert. Mittels eines qualitativen Fallstudiendesigns werden die Interviewdaten vier amerikanischer Deutschlernender untersucht, die sich vier Wochen in Österreich aufhielten und in einem Zeitraum von bis zu 40 Monaten nach ihrem Aufenthalt wiederholt befragt wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass viele Auswirkungen eines solchen Aufenthalts aus studentischer Perspektive mittelfristig verblassen, auch wenn der Auslandsaufenthalt im Gesamten weiterhin als einflussreiche Erfahrung wahrgenommen wird.

Keywords:

Short-term study abroad, near-term effects, language and cultural learning, qualitative content analysis

Introduction

In light of increasing costs associated with post-secondary education, the traditional junior year abroad no longer presents a feasible option to many American students looking for an opportunity to study abroad (SA). While the number of U.S. students studying abroad has steadily increased over the last three decades, financial constraints, work commitments, and unstable future employment prospects may be just some of the reasons why approximately two thirds of sojourners nowadays opt for short-term programs of eight or fewer weeks in duration (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019)¹. Considering the high opportunity and monetary costs of even short-term study abroad (STSA) programs for students, parents, and educators, it seems vital to understand what impact these programs have on students' personal, academic, and professional lives.

The overall growing numbers of students studying abroad are reflected by a broad body of research studies conducted in this area, with the foreign-language (L2)-related outcomes of sojourns being a particularly prominent area of interest (e.g., DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995; Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Kinginger, 2009, 2013). Despite drawing a generally encouraging picture of the impact of SA on sojourners' L2 and interactional skills, intercultural awareness, and personal growth, existing research reveals two

¹ It needs to be noted, however, that this steady trend was suddenly interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent travel restrictions. During the academic year of 2019/2020, the enrollment numbers of many SA programs at U.S. institutions declined dramatically, with short-term programs being most affected (IIE, 2021). It remains to be seen what effects the pandemic will have on the long-term development of SA program participation.

characteristics that may lead to more cautious claims about the effects of SA programs. First, as Kinginger (2013) states, “[o]ne of the most common findings of studies measuring outcomes is of significant individual differences” (p. 5). While quantitative investigations often fall short of explaining these individual differences, qualitative studies may offer a deeper understanding of the nature of the SA experience and the way the individual learner engages in its learning opportunities. Thus, Coleman (2013) demands that SA research should “see its subjects not just as language learners, but as rounded people with complex and fluid identities and relationships which frame the way they live the study abroad experience” (p. 17). Second, the often quantitative, experimental nature of SA research projects along with funding constraints results in most studies comparing pre- and during sojourn data with those collected within a few weeks of students’ return to their at-home (AH) environment. Only few empirical projects have investigated the near-term (1 to 5 years post-SA) and long-term (more than 5 years post-SA; Paige et al., 2009) effects of student sojourns (Coleman, 2013; Dwyer, 2004; Huensch et al., 2019; Isabelli-García et al., 2018). Yet, especially near-term investigations could “serve a very useful purpose for educational institutions seeking to determine goals for student learning and institutional investment” (Paige et al., 2009, p. 31) and, one may add, for students to gauge whether this investment may yield desirable results in the foreseeable future.

Thus, the present investigation aims to better understand what effects of studying abroad students experience upon their return to their AH environment, and how these perceptions may develop in their dynamics and durability over time. By adopting a qualitative, near-term perspective (up to 40 months post-SA), this study examines the cases of four American students of German studying abroad for four weeks in Austria as part of a STSA program focusing on language and cultural learning. Overall, this study aims to shed light on the nature and development of personal, academic, and professional near-term effects of STSA from sojourners’ perspectives while they are either still enrolled in or have recently graduated from college. The results of this investigation may thus inform future program development and course design.

Literature Review

Near- and Long-Term Effects of SA Programs Geared Toward Language and Cultural Learning

Over the last decades, a growing body of research has investigated the immediate and short-term effects of language learners' SA experiences through a variety of lenses. While learners' linguistic gains and developments, their perceptions of the L2 learning and SA experience, as well as their intercultural development and personal growth constitute prominent strands of research (Llanes, 2012), there are only very few studies focusing on the durability and dynamics of such changes in learners' skills and perceptions. The limited amount of research, in turn, exacerbates the attempt to draw reliable conclusions with regard to the near- and long-term effects which different SA durations and program settings have on learning outcomes and learners' perspectives.

With regard to the first strand of research interest, learners' L2 gains and developments, the results of near-term investigations in different skill areas remain indeed rather inconclusive. Regan (2005), for example, finds benefits of studying abroad even a year after the SA experience as the participants, Irish learners of French who spent an academic year in France, maintained their sociolinguistic gains in the form of "the native speech pattern of variation in relation to *ne* deletion" (p. 205). Similarly, Sasaki (2011) reports that Japanese SA participants with varying lengths of overseas experiences outperformed AH students regarding the near-term development of their English writing abilities and motivation. L2 French and Spanish sojourners in Huensch et al. (2019) maintained gains in fluency and oral proficiency even four years after studying abroad, although "there was a lot of individual variation in the group coded as limited exposure" (p. 120). This outcome also highlights the importance of other learning factors, such as amount of L2 contact and use post-SA as well as proficiency attained at the end of SA.

Other investigations, however, report fewer positive results: Llanes (2012) finds mixed outcomes in her examination of Spanish children studying abroad in Ireland for a duration of two months. While the SA participants in this study exhibited greater L2 gains than the AH group in the post-test and delayed post-test 12 months after the sojourn, "most of the SA participants' oral and written scores in the post-test are ... higher than their scores in the delayed post-test" (p. 184). Howard (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) also find regressions of the SA-related L2 gains in the

near-term. Howard's case study focuses on the use of L2 morphology for the expression of past time in an Irish learner of French who studied abroad for a year at a French university and did not retain the increase in accuracy exhibited shortly after her return during the delayed post-test one year later. Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau come to similar conclusions with regard to the improved L2 writing skills they found in Catalan/Spanish students of English who spent a trimester in an English-speaking country. The delayed post-test 15 months after the sojourn revealed "the mid-term effect of a SA period in the four domains of written competence results in lack of progress and even some losses. Students write less fluently, with slightly more errors and poorer vocabulary" (p. 290), which stands in stark contrast to one participant's impression of steady improvement in his/her writing skills over the examined time period. Regarding oral fluency, Huensch and Tracy-Ventura (2017) suggest that particularly those measures which are slower to develop while abroad are more likely to show signs of attrition in delayed post-tests. Further studies, such as Raffaldini (1987, as cited in Howard, 2009), Coleman (1996), Mehotcheva (2010), and Pizziconi (2017) also report patterns of regression or limited progress in learners' proficiency development following their sojourns. Overall, the results of previous research on SA programs of different durations establish a rather inconclusive picture, but oftentimes suggest that SA effects on L2 skills tend to be volatile in nature.

Also, in the second and third strands of research interest, namely L2 learners' general perceptions of SA experience as well as intercultural development and personal growth, only very few investigations adopt a near-term perspective. Despite the differences in sojourn durations and program settings, these areas of research interest, often focused on in combination, draw a more optimistic picture. Jackson (2008), for example, examines the narratives of four Chinese learners of English studying abroad and living with host families in England for the duration of 5 weeks. The data collection in this study starts almost one year pre-SA and concludes almost one year post-SA. Jackson (2008, p. 129) finds that:

five weeks in the host speech community ... [may] provide L2 speakers with the opportunity to become more aware of Self and Other, offer exposure to the host language and culture in a variety of informal settings, and stimulate personal expansion... .

The study also stresses the importance of providing extensive pre-sojourn preparation as well as socioemotional support during the sojourn. However, while demonstrating that STSA programs may affect students on a variety of levels in the near term, this study does not allow to discern how students'

post-SA narrations developed over time, as data gathered at different post-SA times are merged in the discussion of effects.

Moreover, Allen (2010) investigates the effects of a 3-week SA program in France on 30 U.S. teachers of French. In her data collection 4 months post-SA, Allen finds that the participants reported gains with regard to not only their L2 proficiency and cultural insights, but also their personal and professional activities in their home environment: “The teachers became more proactive in seeking out opportunities to speak and listen to French. They created a valuable network among their fellow participants and shared their experiences with colleagues at departmental meetings and at professional conferences” (p. 103). Thus, similar to Jackson (2008), Allen also points to noticeable personal, language and cultural learning, as well as professional effects which SA participants report in the months following their sojourns. In both of these studies, however, temporal effects on the nature and durability of these post-SA perspectives remain uncharted. Also, although the collected data span over several months post-SA, they still qualify, strictly speaking, as short-term effects (< one year post-SA).

A long-term perspective, in particular with regard to the effects of study abroad on (future) L2 teachers, is offered by Ehrenreich (2006) who interviewed 22 German language assistants teaching in English-speaking countries between shortly after and 8 years post-SA. Her study finds that the most prominently felt effects of SA concern the area of personal growth, in particular with regards to participants’ personal lives. Due to a lack of appropriate curricular integration of the SA experience pre- and post-sojourn, the participants could, however, not fully benefit from the experienced linguistic, cultural, and professional gains.

While not tracking individual learning trajectories, one study illuminates the dynamics and durability of near-term effects L2 sojourners perceive at different points in time post-SA. In her investigation of Austrian learners of English studying abroad for one to two semesters in English-speaking countries, Steinwiddler (2016) focuses on the development of learner perceptions of the short- and near-term post-SA effects. Through qualitative interviews, her study investigates the perspectives of 12 learners, grouped according to the time passed since their return to Austria (1-6 months, more than one year, and more than two years, respectively). In her results, Steinwiddler finds that “SA participants believed that their SA was a valuable experience for their personal, social, cultural, and linguistic development. Overall, ... the SA experience was seen as a milestone in

students' learning development" (p. 18). Variables judged as particularly persistent by students included their perceived increases in self-confidence, self-awareness, travel-related self-efficacy, and intercultural development, as regards, *inter alia*, their open-mindedness and tolerance. Yet, other aspects, such as students' sense of independence, personal growth, and identity constructions, appeared more volatile and dependent on the sociocultural environment students returned to — a finding also supported by some of Jackson's (2008) data. The linguistic benefits of studying abroad, in contrast, seemed to be of a rather short-lived nature as students perceived deteriorating effects, especially with regard to their speaking skills. This latter result is particularly noteworthy as it supports the findings of several of the linguistically driven studies outlined above and thus further extenuates the often-optimistic outcomes of language-focused investigations comparing pre-SA data to those collected within a few weeks post-SA. Although Steinwiddler adds two important dimensions to the study of post-sojourn effects, namely their dynamics and durability, her data (a) stem from mid-length and long-term SA programs, which may not be directly comparable to the effects felt by students in STSA programs; and (b) do not illuminate changes in perceived effects within individual students, but rather compare the post-SA accounts of different cohorts, thus leaving individual learning trajectories and developments of perceptions unexplored.

Near- and Long-Term Impact of SA Programs with Mixed Disciplinary Cohorts

The body of SA research reviewed above points to varying, at times deteriorating, near-term developments of L2 skills, as often found by researchers and perceived by students. Yet, it suggests that near-term effects of SA on learners' personal, intercultural, and academic/professional developments and trajectories may be more durable, as researchers illuminate by emically investigating learners' perspectives. These latter results are mirrored by related research studies, which focus more broadly on the near- and long-term effects of SA as experienced by students from various disciplinary backgrounds and SA program settings.

A major investigation into the near- and long-term SA effects has been conducted within the Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE) research project (Paige et al., 2009). The large-scale investigation surveyed over 6,000 students at different U.S. universities who studied abroad between the years

of 1960 and 2005. The study finds that studying abroad positively impacted ex-participants':

civic commitments in domestic and international arenas; knowledge production of print, artistic, online and digital media; philanthropy in terms of volunteer time and monetary donations; social entrepreneurship, meaning involvement in organizations whose purpose and/or profits are to benefit the community, and the practice of voluntary simplicity in one's lifestyle. (Paige et al., 2009, p. 30)

Moreover, the researchers state that "study-abroad experiences can profoundly influence individuals' pursuit of further graduate studies, career paths and global engagement" (Paige et al., 2009, p. 42) and were viewed as the most impactful undergraduate experience by the subjects.

Drawing in parts on the SAGE project (Paige et al., 2009), but including a control group with no SA experience, DeGraaf et al. (2013) investigated 354 former college students. About half the participants had studied abroad between the years of 1987 and 2007, while the other half had not. By employing an online survey and interviewing selected subjects, the researchers confirm the results of the SAGE project with regard to alumni's civic engagement, including aspects such as simplicity in lifestyle, social entrepreneurship, and global engagement. Further, DeGraaf et al. find that the professional and academic impact of the sojourn, as well as its influence on language skills and intellectual curiosity, varied somewhat based on students' academic discipline, with Spanish majors reporting a greater impact than students not majoring in foreign languages. Also, students who sojourned within the last ten years indicated a stronger influence from their study abroad semester on their attitudes, behavior, relationships, and civic engagement, than respondents who were more than ten years removed from the experience.

Overall, the researchers conclude that "[a]lthough some respondents talked about how difficult the experience was at times, no one spoke of negative impacts of the experience, only the overall positive impacts they experienced" (DeGraaf et al., 2013, p. 56), as regards sojourners' global awareness, maturity, self-confidence, sense of accomplishment, the formative nature of the experience, and its academic and professional impact. These results also mirror the findings of other studies on near- and long-term effects of SA programs on various attitudinal and behavioral variables and have also been reported outside the North American context: Besides the ability to speak other languages, former sojourners appear more likely to have strong personal or professional connections to, interests in and

knowledge of other cultures, often form internationally focused aspirations, appear more interculturally competent and/or more likely to recommend studying abroad to their children (e.g., Hadis, 2005; Hansel, 2008; for the EU-based ERASMUS program see Bryła, 2015; Engel et al., 2009; Fidan & Karatepe, 2021; Nada & Letgutko, 2022).

Concomitantly, DeGraaf et al. (2013) caution against interpreting these seemingly positive effects as a direct result of studying abroad since

it is difficult to measure causality or determine whether students who were already more inclined to civic engagement are also those students most likely to study abroad in the first place, or whether the semester abroad is the determining factor of their increased civic engagement. (p. 47)

Establishing causality may appear particularly difficult if pre-SA data are not available. However, it seems likely that pre-existing interests in foreign cultures and languages were at least strengthened through the SA experience and, in turn, led to corresponding life changes and career choices. A solution to the causality question may be found in Alred and Byram (2002, 2006) who investigated 12 former British participants of a year-long SA program in France 10 years post-SA. As part of their results, the researchers identify the SA experience as a significant reference point in their participants' lives, "a sufficiently bounded and identifiably different experience to serve as a lens through which to consider some current experience" (Alred & Byram, 2002, p. 351), even if the SA experience itself is perceived negatively (Alred & Byram, 2006). Rather than trying to establish clear causality between past and current life events which may be related to having studied abroad once, the SA experience offers students a possibly long-term frame of interpretation which may help relate current life events and choices to this specific experience, whether or not a clear line of causality can be drawn. Hence,

learners' SA learning objectives and outcome assessments need to be conceptualized as part of a narrative performance in which learners interpret their sojourn experiences so that they support their investment in a coherent life narrative and desirable construction of self. (Müller, 2017, p. 43)

Altogether, existing research suggests that participants of different types of SA programs perceive noticeable near- and long-term effects on their language and (inter-)cultural learning, but also with regard to their personal and academic development as well as professional activities. While the effects of SA on participants' language skills often appear to be rather

short-lived, certain elements of learners' intercultural, personal, and academic/professional development appear to benefit longer from having studied abroad, a finding which seems to affect foreign language majors in particular. Even in the long term, the sojourn seems to serve as a powerful frame of reference and interpretation, despite a gradual fading of the perceived SA effects. However, the current body of research leaves the dynamics and durability of the effects of specifically STSA programs largely unexplored, does not comprehensively illuminate the relationship between post- and delayed-post SA data in individual learners, and stops short of considering the impact of different learner profiles, as regards especially their prior exposure to target language and culture. The present study thus aims to address these desiderata by comparing individual language learners' perceptions held at different points in time, spanning from their immediate return from a STSA program to up to 40 months post-SA. By adopting a qualitative case-study design, the accounts of learners will be analyzed in depth to investigate how students' SA-related perspectives develop in the near term, particularly with regard to their personal, academic, and professional lives. In contrast to existing research, which mostly adopts a pre- vs. post-SA design and thus examines the direct impact of SA, the present investigation rather draws the focus to the post-sojourn time frame to enrich current insight into the near-term development of students' impressions and interpretations of their SA experience.

Methodology

Participants and SA Program Features

This investigation focuses on four undergraduate students from a U.S. university studying abroad in Austria as part of a four-week chaperoned program. The participants were students of the humanities and social sciences at their AH institution and exhibited different learning biographies prior to studying abroad, as regards in particular their exposure to German-speaking environments and German language skills (see Table 1).

Pseudonym	Kayla	Alan	Sara	Jacob
Gender	female	male	female	male
Age range	19 – 24 years of age			
First language	English			
Classes of German taken prior to SA	three language classes (beginners' and intermediate)	one junior seminar (placed out of language sequence)	four language classes (beginners' and intermediate)	one language class (beginners')

Time spent in German-speaking environment prior to SA	one week in Germany as a tourist	six years in Germany during childhood; two months while studying abroad in Germany as a teenager	none	occasionally when visiting grandparents in the U.S. (German being spoken in U.S. community)
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TABLE (1): PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC AND LANGUAGE LEARNING BACKGROUND

The SA program entailed participation in two pre-sojourn meetings at the home institution, a four-week intensive language course at an Austrian language institute usually during weekday mornings, and an Austrian culture course led on-site by a professor from the American home institution usually in the afternoons and over some weekends, including excursions and a variety of cultural exploration activities. While the Austrian culture course was organized in an insular way, bringing the SA group together, the participants were placed in different language courses according to their test results, allowing them to meet students from a variety of countries and backgrounds. The students stayed in apartment-style dormitories, partly with other students from their AH university as their roommates, partly with international students from different countries.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data selected for analysis stem from semi-structured interviews with two cohorts of SA participants. For cohort 1 (Kayla, Alan), the selected interviews were conducted between one and 16 months post-SA; for cohort 2 (Sara, Jacob), the selected interviews were conducted 20 and 40 months after the sojourn (see Table 2), thus extending the time frame to be examined and allowing for insights into the further delayed perceptions students may have of the sojourn impact.

Pseudonym	Kayla	Alan	Sara	Jacob
Return interview	one month post-SA (7 th semester)	one month post-SA (3 rd semester)	---	---
Delayed post-SA interview	4 months post-SA (7 th semester)	4 months post-SA (3 rd semester)	20 months post-SA (11 months post-graduation)	20 months post-SA (8 th semester)
Final interview	16 months post-SA (7 months post-graduation)	16 months post-SA (5 th semester)	40 months post-SA (31 months post-graduation)	40 months post-SA (19 months post-graduation)

TABLE (2): INTERVIEW TIMES SINCE SOJOURN AND IN RELATION TO INDIVIDUAL DEGREE PROGRESS

The interview procedures followed the principles of the episodic interview (Flick, 2016; Lamnek, 2005). Specifically, through narrative

incentives and questions, participants were encouraged to reflect on meaningful situations and experiences, eliciting both narrative and argumentative data. The interviews were audio-recorded and vary in length between 47 and 121 minutes. The dominant language of all interviews is English, interspersed with varying, albeit limited, amounts of German on behalf of both the interviewer and the interviewees. At the beginning of the first interview, each interviewee was also asked to fill out a learning history questionnaire, mainly collecting information given in Table 1.

The data analysis was driven by the following research question: How do students, as a result of STSA, describe and evaluate their:

- I) Personal development (including, for example, lifestyle, personality, and post-SA feelings),
- II) academic learning (including, for example, language, (inter-)cultural, and discipline-focused learning), and
- III) the development of their professional plans?

Following the principles of Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2010; Schreier, 2014), a coding frame was inductively developed, consisting of three main categories (personal development, academic learning, professional/future plans) and several subcategories each. Subsequently, the coded data were used to create in-depth descriptions of each participant's accounts, to be found in the following section Research Results. Finally, prominent results from each main category were summarized and discussed on a cross-case basis (see section Discussion).

Research Results

Kayla

Return Interview

Immediately after Kayla's sojourn, she reports several changes to her personality due to studying abroad. She feels more independent and confident in terms of her radius of movement and ability to travel by herself, she narrates that her environmental awareness and recycling habits improved and finds that she understands culturally based actions better through observation and comparison. Although she believes that these cultural comparisons may become skewed over time, she also thinks that her memories of Austria will continue to influence her observations of daily life in the U.S.

Academically, Kayla finds that the monolingual German classes she attended during her sojourn improved mainly her listening skills and overall comfort with the German language. At the same time, she believes that her

speaking skills as well as her vocabulary and grammar knowledge could have improved more had German native speakers not practiced their English as much with her and had she not been inhibited by her own perfectionism and introvert nature. Nevertheless, she notices a tendency to code-switch between English and German in her speaking and thinking and feels overall more motivated to study German, even beyond her current program requirements:

But when you go and you actually see, okay, this language is being used ..., then there is definitely more of that push, it's like I want to learn this to be able to communicate in this country. Yeah, I definitely think there's that switch from hobby to actual skill set and actual communication. (return interview)

Professionally, Kayla focuses on a career in writing with a possibly nomadic lifestyle, which would allow her to conduct research in foreign environments and collaborate with speakers of other languages. Knowing German and having lived in Austria may thus benefit her career plans and widen the range of options, she hopes.

Delayed Post-SA Interview

At the end of her first post-SA semester, Kayla still feels a desire to travel more and reports greater environmental awareness. Additionally, she feels a sense of belonging to the group she traveled with, as she still meets up with group members and shares memories and an interest in learning German with them. Also, she now believes that the sojourn made her more self-aware and confident, thus encouraging her to take steps toward becoming the person she wants to be. Especially, she feels that her anxious and perfectionist nature made her timid and reliant on people she was familiar with, and she sees the SA experience as a way to break out of this mindset and become more independent, for example through allowing herself to code-switch and go out more often. In this interview, Kayla also reports a greater interest in politics and the development of a political opinion, which she believes is based on what she experienced in Europe. Also, she reflects more in-depth on cultural aspects she observed during her sojourn and concludes that (a) this real-world cultural experience may distinguish her from other students who have not (yet) studied abroad and (b) she fits in better with the Austrian society. The latter aspect may be related to the emotional dip she noticed during the first two months post-SA: "when you come back from a big trip like that because there's so much stimulus, and this happened to me, there's almost like a withdrawal period"

(delayed post-SA interview). To overcome these emotions, Kayla starts to focus more on her hobbies and tries to rationalize those feelings.

Academically, Kayla still appreciates the monolingual German lessons she experienced in Austria but mentions that her instructor did allow for some English in class. Also, Kayla reflects on informal learning situations with her classmates, in which she assumed the role of the grammar expert whereas others helped her with pronunciation or vocabulary. Overall, she still believes that her timid nature and English native-speaker status prevented her from speaking more German but mentions that her habit of responding in English may have been part of the problem. Thus, she feels that she could improve her receptive skills, language learning motivation, and general understanding of linguistic and cultural elements, but not so much her productive skills. She mentions that she felt a motivational dip prior to studying abroad, which she was able to overcome thereafter: Now she strives for professional communicative skills in German, purposefully uses her sojourn memories for motivational boosts, and participates in political discussions. Moreover, she voluntarily takes German classes beyond the language requirement of her program of study and plans to continue her language learning through watching movies and reading children's books.

Professionally, her aspired career in writing changed to a rather long-term plan. In the near term, she intends to work for her family's business after graduating from college and possibly build a writing portfolio for applications to graduate programs. Hence, she is less sure what role her language knowledge will play in her professional future.

Final Interview

16 months after her SA term and approx. half a year after graduating from college, Kayla reports that studying abroad changed her on a personal level in terms of gaining a greater global perspective, environmental and cultural awareness, as exemplified by her recycling habits and a humbler stance toward her own culture. She still finds it important to meet up with some of her SA friends and keep her interest in anything related to Austria alive. Although she generally does not see drastic changes in life based on her sojourn, she still perceives the trip as an achievement which bestowed more confidence on her and cemented her interest in foreign languages and cultures.

Academically, Kayla now reports that English was in fact used as a lingua franca in language learning situations and criticizes the heavy workload caused by daily classes, seemingly repetitive assignments, and

excursions. She narrates that she often tried to use German in daily interactions, albeit with hesitation and by relying on more proficient friends for help, which often prompted responses in English. However, she believes that she stopped caring about making mistakes during the sojourn and that it was important to lose that fear. Thus, she still assesses that her speaking skills did not advance much, while especially her listening comprehension skills improved. As a student, she feels the sojourn increased her motivation, independence as a learner, and real-life cultural and contextual knowledge. Nevertheless, she believes that her SA experience was rather irrelevant for her post-SA college time:

Occasionally, I'd mention it [the SA experience] in class, but I don't know ... if anybody else brought it up. ... I didn't really mind it so much ... Even though you know it wasn't in the coursework itself, I still had the experience, so I was still able to use it even if nobody else was bringing it up. (final interview)

Professionally, she estimates that the long-term benefits of SA entail an international experience on her résumé and her own willingness to look for opportunities to travel abroad as part of her work. As planned, she works for her family's business, while preparing a writing portfolio and researching different graduate programs. As a more stable option, she also considers teaching English abroad, which she perceives possible due to her own international experience.

Alan

Return Interview

Like Kayla, Alan believes studying abroad helped him to mature and become an independent adult. Within a month of his return, he notices better planning, scheduling, and decision-making skills, and he feels more confident as he was able to fend for himself in a foreign environment during SA. At the same time, his unique starting position, based on his childhood years and previous sojourn in Germany as well as advanced language skills, influences his perceptions of the current sojourn and partly serves as a point of reference: Overall, Alan draws several comparisons between Germany and Austria during the interview and reports that he now views Germany through the lens of Austria. Returning to a German-speaking country also made him realize that he feels more at home and would rather spend his future there than in the U.S. Yet, when being mistaken for a German during SA, he clarified his American descent to elicit compliments on his language skills while shuttling between different aspects of his identity:

Some people I met, they were like “Oh, you speak really good German, are you from Germany?” ... That was weird ... but it was kind of cool. ... I would always end up saying that I’m American, because then people are more shocked, because of like “Oh, wow, you’re American and you pronounce things so well”. ... So, it kind of emphasizes that ... an individual can have different identities sometimes. (return interview)

Academically, Alan narrates that he expanded his vocabulary and knowledge of differences between the varieties of German as spoken in Germany vs. Austria. While he used many opportunities to speak German, he believes that his in-class learning was less successful because he was placed in a level too advanced for him and was not very motivated to complete his homework regularly, resulting in him failing his language class. Yet, this experience of failure prompted him to change his mindset toward schooling: He now tries to overcome feelings of laziness and to come to class prepared and focused. In addition, he plans to change one of his programs of study to better account for his increased interest in different cultures, history, and politics.

On a professional level, he intends to return to Austria to complete his graduate studies there and would like to live in Germany afterward.

Delayed Post-SA Interview

After completing his first post-SA semester, Alan reports, like Kayla, that he felt terrible coming back home, but is slowly adjusting again. He misses the lifestyle he experienced in Austria and believes that he can better relate to people there as he prefers the ostensibly quieter, less hectic lifestyle and the more focused mindset of the Germanic people. Experiencing this lifestyle, in turn, taught him to remain calm and self-confident in stressful situations. Moreover, Alan’s extensive international experience again triggers questions of home and identity, but this time he concludes that he does not have an actual sense of home and can fit in both the U.S. and German-speaking countries:

Maybe it’s ... trying to find, like what really is home to me. Just because I’ve grown up in different places, I sort of don’t have a sense of home somewhere. ... I have a U.S. passport, I speak English, I could be any regular American, but I spent most of my time growing up in other places. ... I’m still an American, I can function in society pretty well, I would say. The people in Austria thought I was a German. (delayed post-SA interview)

Also, he explains that he now has a better grasp of the differences and complexity of the German-speaking world, while also recognizing that all humans are rather similar overall.

Academically, he feels that he better understands the phonetic and lexical differences between the Austrian and German varieties of German and has become more fluent when speaking German. Also, he still notices a more structured, motivated, and enthusiastic approach to his studies which was in part triggered by the more liberal teaching style he experienced in Austria, which placed the responsibility for his learning on him. Overall, studying abroad made him more open-minded, confident, and self-aware as a student. As planned, he switched programs of study, which he believes was initiated by his sojourn.

Professionally, he still wants to live in Germany in the future and possibly work for a U.S. company or complete graduate studies there.

Final Interview

16 months after his sojourn, Alan displays a prominent new topic with regard to how the SA trip influenced him on a personal level. Inspired by his sojourn, Alan decided to research the concept of ‘third culture kids’ (e.g., Fail et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2020) as part of a class project. As a result, he feels he can better legitimize the experience of personal growth and self-awareness that took place in Austria, leading him to embrace diverse aspects of his identity, as related to his parents’ and his own socialization in different parts of the world, and reconciling his search for ‘home’. By studying abroad, he now realizes he tried to counteract the possibility of losing the ‘German part’ of his identity:

So now I feel a lot more at peace and I’ve identified, yes, there are hardships that come with moving around ... I feel that if I don’t get to ... use only German, I feel like that part of me withers away and that scares me, because I ultimately want to go back and live in Germany. ... Because that’s the country that I had my most early socialization in, and ... I would say, my biggest ultimate fear is to go back to the place I feel most at home, and then I feel like an outsider. (final interview)

Thus, he views Austria as the place where he was able to establish himself, to feel significant and legitimate as the Austrians recognized his German upbringing. Moreover, he believes to have a broader understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity and interconnectedness of the German-speaking countries. Even though he still feels adaptable to new surroundings

due to his international upbringing, he now perceives the U.S. rather negatively as a materialistic and unsafe society, in contrast to Europe, which appears more liberal and focused on public welfare. Hence, he narrates that reverting to the U.S. mindset upon his return was a debilitating and frustrating experience.

Academically, he believes the teaching style in Austria was more thorough and liberal, and he regrets neglecting his schoolwork due to not being used to this teaching style. At the same time, the experience of failure gave him a more goal-oriented positive outlook, and he enjoys contributing to class discussions with first-hand experiences from his sojourn.

In his professional future, he envisions himself attending graduate school in Austria or Germany and strives for advanced language skills to teach German, possibly to migrants, because overall he seeks a career path that benefits from his upbringing as a ‘third culture kid’.

Sara

Delayed Post-SA Interview

On a personal level, Sara extensively reflects on how studying abroad changed her stance toward traveling. Since she had never traveled before the sojourn, she was terrified of her first trip outside the U.S. Now she reports she never wants to stop traveling, has already traveled alone within in the U.S., and perceives herself as more independent and responsible. Along with this change, she also appreciates her privacy more and wants to be less reliant on her parents, prompting her to cook more often, to take care of daily matters by herself, and to make decisions against her parents’ advice. She narrates that she was not comfortable moving back in with her parents when returning from Austria, where she lived by herself. Moreover, she believes to be more aware of both other people’s cultural backgrounds and mindsets, and her own mental well-being. She also speaks fondly of different places in Austria, which partly reminded her of her American home environment in terms of atmosphere and diversity, causing her to appreciate her home more than she used to. Yet, she still misses Austria, especially the public transportation system, and still tends to pronounce new words she comes across in German rather than in English.

On an academic level, Sara reports that she developed a more focused work attitude due to the lack of internet and distraction she experienced during the sojourn; however, she feels her new studying habits have faded ever since she graduated from university about a year ago. She also believes that her understanding of German vocabulary, grammar structures, and

colloquialisms improved, as well as her pronunciation. While she thinks of herself as timid, she feels more confident overall speaking German and finds her writing, albeit the most difficult skill for her, improved, as well. Thus, even though she found her language teacher tough, she values the immersive and highly interactive setting and enjoys connecting with other sojourners over the common experience.

On a professional level, Sara would like to work in a diplomatic or governmental capacity in Europe for a few years in the future, a desire she developed during her sojourn. At the very least, she seeks a job that allows for frequent travels:

Flights, train stations, all of it it's amazing to me. I love traveling so much. And once I got that taste for it, I knew I was going to get a job that involved a lot of traveling. If not, I'm gonna make enough money where I can travel in my spare time. So, I know for a long-term goal, that's what I wanna do. (delayed post-SA interview)

Final Interview

40 months post-sojourn, Sara is certain that her desire to travel, which she developed as part of her sojourn, will never fade. She has continued to travel within the U.S. and has made a bucket list of further places to visit. Also, she reports that cooking, delving into foreign cuisines, and spending time in cafés have become stable hobbies, reminding her of her time abroad. She believes that living by herself during the sojourn helped her realize that she is capable of living and making decisions by herself, allowing her to become more self-aware and independent. In addition, she developed an interest in global issues and reads global news on a daily basis. Although she still fondly remembers her SA time and believes that her American home is not the same to her ever since, she now reveals certain difficulties and regrets. She reports that she felt very jet-lagged, homesick, and uncomfortable with speaking German at the beginning of her sojourn and wishes she had gone out more to experience the SA environment.

Meanwhile, she remembers that she became more comfortable, also with speaking German, over time, which she attributes particularly to the immersive language course setting. She now assesses that her grammar, which was her weakest point pre-sojourn, improved significantly, along with her speaking and reading skills. She regrets, however, that she has fallen out of practice ever since and speaks English when talking to friends from the trip. Nevertheless, she remembers that she felt more confident as a student and speaker of German post-sojourn, as she had first-hand experiences with using the language in a natural setting. Overall, she finds that studying

abroad improved her focus on schoolwork, increased her interest in architecture and German/Austrian culture, and caused her to take additional German language/culture classes upon her return to learn more about Germany, Austria, and their perspectives.

On a professional level, Sara started building a career in a travel-related industry and explains that knowing German proved to be a useful asset to her employer. Nevertheless, she would still like to eventually work for the state department, assisting in diplomatic or global matters, a wish she attributes to having studied abroad: “Every year I realize how much it’s [studying abroad] really changed my life. It’s made me want to do more than ever ... I really wanna go out there now and help people around the world” (final interview). In the meantime, she is saving money to visit Austria as a tourist again.

Jacob

Delayed Post-SA Interview

20 months after his sojourn, Jacob reports that studying abroad caused him to generally place a greater emphasis on leisure time and on enjoying both life and the college experience, which he traces back to experiencing a rather laid-back atmosphere in Austria. He is more open toward new adventures and finds that his life and travel skills improved due to his time abroad. As part of these changes, he learned to cook, he better regulates his sleep and finances, and he started journaling to document his daily life. Also, since his sojourn, he has visited different places in North America. As a result, he believes he has a broader understanding of world issues, a greater appreciation for architecture and public transportation, and an increased interest in Eastern Europe. At the same time, he reports having gone through reverse culture shock upon his return to the U.S., mainly because of trying to balance his studies, part-time job, and plan to have more fun in life.

Academically, he thus concludes that studying abroad negatively impacted his work ethic and grades, but also improved his time management and note-taking skills:

I would say that it actually hurt my work ethic in a university setting ... just getting back into the rhythm, just literally only doing homework all day long. ... But I think it also was helpful in terms of time management that after I got past that shock, I kind of reflected on my values ... in terms of school. So, I did find a way to actually

enjoy myself during the week as opposed to before where I would just do nothing but homework. (delayed post-SA interview)

Since he had only taken one language course prior to studying abroad, he felt that he had to adjust his learning expectations during his sojourn. In daily interactions, other speakers often switched to English, and he regrets not insisting on using German. Only in classroom-based interactions, he frequently used German and feels that he gained a solid foundation, better understanding of grammatical concepts, and thus greater comfort with using German in daily interactions and, upon his return to the U.S., in intermediate language courses at university.

Overall, he states that he often reflects nostalgically on his sojourn experience and plans to move to Germany or Austria within the next five years to work in governmental or social areas. In particular, he is interested in working as a counselor for asylum seekers in the German-speaking countries, which would allow him to use his language skills professionally.

Final Interview

40 months after his sojourn and approx. 1.5 years after graduating from university, Jacob temporarily works in the hospitality industry, while looking for a more stable job with a governmental agency. On a personal level, he continues to pursue a more relaxed approach to life, as he observed that Austrians place a greater emphasis on enjoying their leisure time:

I still kind of have that desire to get all my work done and then be just kind of done with it. ... I used to work 6 AM to 3 PM, just so I could have the whole day off, and do whatever I wanted in the afternoon. Or I would take lunch breaks and go fish I'd say it's [studying abroad] definitely left a lasting impact. (final interview)

Also, he still focuses on traveling, which allows him to utilize the cultural understanding, language and travel-related skills gained during his sojourn. In general, he finds studying abroad changed his outlook on the world as he (a) feels more confident in his abilities to access foreign locations and communicate with people, and (b) feels a greater love for European history, urban planning, and architecture.

When reflecting on his learning experience in Austria, he remembers that speaking German was nerve-wracking, and he often used English in daily encounters and with other students outside of class. Yet, in class German was the main medium of communication, and he concludes that he learned most rapidly during his sojourn and gained an overall confidence in using a foreign language, which helps him speak Spanish with his co-

workers now. Upon his return to the U.S., he remembers that he lost focus on his studies and neglected his homework, as he tried to have more fun in life.

Nevertheless, he considers pursuing a graduate degree in European history or urban planning. His initial plan to move to Europe, on the other hand, appears rather unrealistic and too difficult now, and he thinks of staying in the U.S.

Discussion

Effects of STSA on a Personal Level

In line with existing research (e.g., DeGraaf et al., 2013; Ehrenreich, 2006; Jackson, 2008; Steinwider, 2016), the participants in this study perceive strong effects of their STSA experience in the area of personal growth, as it relates to gaining more maturity and independence, the ability to fend for themselves, and claiming more self-determination. Examples of these effects include learning how to cook, plan effectively, and make decisions independently, as well as feeling more confident and self-aware, which can be found in the students' accounts both immediately after their return from SA and from a more distant time frame.

As part of their changed selves, students also report changed perspectives, allowing them to claim more open-minded, 'worldly,' and progressive stances. In this context, they narrate a greater interest and involvement in political, environmental, cultural, global, and socioeconomic issues, a love for traveling, and an increased awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity. These changes, however, seem to be more dynamic in nature: Some appear to persist, but are modified or narrated with varying degrees of detail and relevance over time, such as Jacob's impression of a broader understanding of world issues and interest in Eastern Europe, which appears to shift toward the wish to pursue graduate studies in European history or urban planning. Meanwhile, other changes are mentioned only during the follow-up interviews, such as Kayla's greater interest in politics and Sara's newly formed habit of reading global news every day. It hence may be possible that current changes in habits or mindset are attributed to the SA experience, whether directly related to the experience or not. Overall, the STSA experience is thus constructed as a significant life event, in parts even as a turning point in life toward an 'improved' self and future, which serves as a powerful frame of interpretation for the SA experience itself and current life events (see also Alred & Byram, 2002; Müller, 2017).

Besides these general trends, students' individual backgrounds and prior experiences with living in different places and being exposed to foreign languages may cause individually different trajectories and perceptions of the sojourn impact. For example, despite its rather limited duration, STSA appears to trigger questions of home and identity in sojourners and often causes emotional turmoil and a changed perception of home upon their return to the AH environment. Yet, for students with extensive prior experience in the SA environment, the perceived identity work and readjustment to the AH context may be particularly challenging and complex, as can be observed in Alan's case. He appears to use his sojourn to come to terms with having grown up in different parts of the world, coupled with the wish to strengthen his feeling of belonging to German-speaking communities. The emotional turmoil Alan notices post-SA, in turn, leads him to purposefully search for answers to help him rationalize and legitimize his feelings and experiences as a 'third culture kid'. While negative feelings and readjustment difficulties form prominent themes also in the narratives of less-experienced travelers like Kayla and Jacob, students may also gain a new appreciation of home in this process, as they strive to align their altered perspectives and selves with reality in their AH environments: As a student with no prior travel experience, Sara constructs the sojourn as a liberating moment in her life, which awakened her love for traveling and allowed her to find and recreate elements of her travel experience in her AH environment. While Kayla's and Alan's accounts suggest that students feel the emotional turmoil most strongly during the first months post-SA, all participants construct their sojourns as a catalyst for negotiations of self and home. Also, all students report they (eventually) successfully readjusted to home, even though the perspectives gained while studying abroad may continue to influence their lives.

As part of recounting their perceptions of their SA and AH environments, sojourners partly display a tendency to generalize and stereotype their experiences with cultural difference and diversity, including, for example, the ostensibly laid-back lifestyle in Austria. Meanwhile, in other instances, students, such as Alan, focus strongly on the commonalities of humanity across cultures, as if attempting to 'even out' such differences. Hence, after the complex experience of living in a foreign environment moves away and students are confronted with the struggles of changed perspectives and selves, the sojourn memories may be situationally reduced and generalized to provide coherence to their overall narrative and validate the described feelings and perceptions. While the SA experience

provides, as described above, an overall frame of reference and interpretation post-SA, it thus seems that these memories are at times also shaped to make sense of life events and emotions upon sojourners' return.

Effects of STSA on an Academic Level

A prominent theme in students' learning-related accounts concerns their perception and evaluation of language learning while in Austria. In general, all students believe to have improved their language skills and general grasp of the German language and its linguistic varieties, even though the specific areas and degrees of perceived improvement may vary depending on sojourners' individual starting points and learning backgrounds. In particular, students appreciate the immersive and highly interactive setting inside and outside of class, which helped them feel more confident in utilizing their L2 skills. While the specifics of students' linguistic development as a result of SA are a frequent area of research interest (Llanes, 2012), the in-depth accounts in this study offer a more complex view of students' self-assessments and may deliver further insight into the above noted common finding of individual differences (Kinging, 2013). In particular, despite positive assessments of their language learning overall, some students concomitantly regret not fully taking advantage of learning and socializing opportunities due to various reasons, including personal inhibitions (Kayla), difficulties getting used to the new environment (Sara) and different teaching style (Alan), as well as other speakers preferring English (Kayla, Jacob).

These reasons, in turn, may be related to students' different backgrounds: While those sojourners with limited or no prior international experience and beginners' to intermediate language skills may find it difficult to overcome feelings of shyness, foreignness, and inhibitions in using the L2, more advanced and internationally experienced students may observe obstacles to their learning or socializing only in domains new to them, such as the specific teaching style Alan witnessed in Austria. As a result, some students note that STSA may only lead to limited improvements overall, leading them to adjust their learning expectations during their sojourn, as Jacob reported. Interestingly, as time passed, some students, such as Kayla, appear to shift in their explanations of their limited improvement/sojourn results, displaying a greater readiness to accept their own role in missing out on learning opportunities and to reflect on their SA experience in a more self-critical, less idealistic way. For example, in follow-up accounts, the reported amount of spoken English appears higher, and students reflect more often on their own role in provoking English replies.

Moreover, similar to Steinwiddler's (2016) findings, the student accounts in the present study corroborate the trend from linguistically oriented research (e.g., Howard, 2009; Llanes, 2012; Mehotcheva, 2010; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009; Pizziconi, 2017), showing a decrease in language skills over time, possibly impacting students at lower skill levels (Jacob) and with fewer opportunities to use the L2 post-SA (Sara), in particular. While the experienced loss of L2 skills becomes particularly pronounced once students graduate from university, sojourners may, as in Jacob's case, nevertheless find the intensive L2 learning experience and building of confidence transferable when learning further languages at later points in their lives. Besides judging their commitment to L2 learning during SA and their L2 development post-SA more negatively over time, some students also appear to become more critical of the overall SA learning experience in later interviews, as regards, for example, perceptions of their workload and the relevance of assignments.

Along with gains in their L2 skills as an immediate result of SA, the sojourners notice increased degrees of motivation for and, at times, a stronger identification with studying German. In Kayla's, Sara's, and Alan's cases, the SA experience even caused them to change their plans of study or degree programs to incorporate more German courses or account for an increased interest in foreign cultures. In addition, the students also narrate that SA changed their mindset and overall student behavior, as they feel more in charge of their own learning. As part of this effect, some students (Kayla, Alan, Sara) report approaching their learning in more motivated, structured, and goal-oriented ways, while others (Jacob) place a higher emphasis on leisure activities to achieve a better work-study-life balance, even if their grades suffer as a result. Alan attributes this change to experiencing a different teaching style in Austria, which places greater responsibility on students; Jacob, on the other hand, strives to emulate the ostensibly more relaxed work-life-balance he observed in Austria. In Kayla's and Sara's cases, however, this catalyzing effect of SA with regard to language learning, motivation, and the approach to their studies, appears to decrease over time, as priorities and life plans shift in different directions upon graduation.

Thus, at first glance, the findings of this study draw a rather optimistic picture of the effects of STSA on students' academic lives while they are still enrolled in college programs. Once students graduate, the SA experience itself and students' approach to SA is more critically judged, the L2-related gains, motivational boost, and improved learning behavior seem

to decrease, and the academic effects of SA lose in relevance. However, traces of this decline can already be found in students' accounts of their post-SA university time. While students appreciate the personal connections with fellow SA participants, the first-hand cultural experiences, and improved L2 skills, they often do not evaluate the overall SA learning experience as relevant for their subsequent studies. This result reflects the lack of curricular integration noted by Ehrenreich (2006) with regard to assistant teachers and underlines the necessity of a more thorough curricular integration of SA programs into AH language programs beyond utilizing sojourners' improved language knowledge and skills (see also Jackson, 2008).

Effects of STSA on Career Planning and Professional Development

Shortly after SA, students often focus on future career plans that strongly incorporate their experience of living, studying, and/or traveling abroad and would allow them to put their German language skills to use. Yet, as the time of graduation comes closer, students may, as seen in Kayla's accounts, abolish their SA-driven plans of a nomadic lifestyle or moving to Europe and settle on safer choices that seem more realistic and attainable to them. As a result, SA-influenced career and life plans may be pushed into the long-term frame or reduced to the wish to travel frequently; however, in this adjusted form these plans appear rather stable, as observable in Sara's and Jacob's cases.

After their graduation, students may then start careers which are not immediately related to their SA experience or even field of study, thus partly reducing the role of SA in their lives to a mere point of international experience on their résumés. As such, however, the SA experience may open opportunities of employment which students did not consider while in college, including teaching English abroad (Kayla), working in a travel-related industry (Sara), or considering a graduate degree due to academic interests related to their SA time (Jacob).

Overall, students' professional plans seem strongly influenced by their sojourns and generally reflect the wish to utilize the SA experience at a later point in life, either through moving to Europe, traveling extensively, or settling in a professional area in which they may benefit from their linguistic skills and/or (inter-)cultural insights. This result corroborates the findings of research studies on the long-term effects of SA with mixed disciplinary cohorts (e.g., DeGraaf et al., 2013; Paige et al., 2009). Concomitantly, the longitudinal examination of learners' accounts in the present study suggests

that the immediate effects of SA may shift noticeably over time as professional plans give way to circumstances of life, job opportunities, or financial constraints, particularly once students (are about to) leave university.

Conclusions

While previous research has mainly focused on the immediate impact of SA on sojourners' learning trajectories and lives, the current findings add important insight to the slowly forming body of research on near- and long-term effects. Overall, studying abroad appears to noticeably influence students on personal, academic, and professional levels within the first years following their sojourns.

On a personal level, students report gains in their maturity and independence, increased awareness of various local and global issues, and an altered perspective toward where they come from, who they are and want to be. While these effects continue to form prominent themes in students' accounts over time, the reported changes in perspectives, mindset, and habits appear to be volatile at times and are readjusted as students get used to their AH environment again and strive to integrate both SA and current experiences into an overall coherent narrative. Similarly, on an academic level, students note gains in their language skills, increased motivation and focus, as well as a higher level of self-determination, prompting some students to seek further language and cultural learning opportunities upon their return. It seems these effects may also fade over time and, in particular, once students leave university. In addition, former sojourners tend to become more critical of their SA experience, program features, and their own roles as learners, and judge the academic impact of SA on their post-SA studies and post-graduation life as rather irrelevant at times. On a professional level, the effects of SA also gradually deteriorate, as students adjust their wishes to live and work abroad to choices that seem safer and more realistic. Nevertheless, the SA experience still appears to influence their – albeit adjusted – professional plans, leading them to pursue careers in areas in which they may utilize parts of their SA experience.

Despite these common trends, the individual student accounts reveal noticeable differences with regard to the perceived effects, their dynamics and durability. While studying abroad certainly serves as an important frame of interpretation of past and current events in life, individual learning factors, including level of L2 skills, prior exposure to the L2 environment, as well as degree progress relative to students' graduation time when studying

abroad (see also Huensch et al., 2019), impact what SA effects students narrate and how the narrated effects develop over time. The qualitative examination of four participants with different personal and academic backgrounds sheds light on this diversity and complexity of learning experiences and perceptions but is limited in its potential to establish relations between learner profiles, learning trajectories, and SA program features. Future research may thus focus more strongly on specific learner profiles and learning factors to gauge their influence on how SA affects learners after their sojourns. Additionally, there is a need for studies investigating the long-term effects of SA, particularly from an emic, qualitative angle, as well as for research implementing existing findings to allow for a better curricular integration of sojourns in students' post-SA course work (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Jackson & Oguro, 2018).

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