

Predictors of Language Learning Achievement: Study Abroad Programs as Language Learning Contexts (Part I)

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Abstract

The present study includes a literature review of relevant research on Study Abroad (SA). The first part synthesizes language learning predictors and SA program design features. It includes macro factors (input, interaction and output), micro factors (age, gender, aptitude, strategic competence, motivation and attitude, beliefs and intercultural sensitivity) and specific program features (such as length of stay, living conditions, employment opportunities, onset language level, pre-departure preparation, point in the curriculum, academic assignments or debriefings upon return).

Keywords: Predictors of Language Learning, Study Abroad, Learning Contexts

Título: Factores para Predecir el Aprendizaje de Lenguas: Programas de Estudio en el Extranjero como Contextos de Aprendizaje (Parte I).

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta una revisión de la investigación relevante en el ámbito de los programas de estudio en el extranjero. La primera parte sintetiza factores para predecir el aprendizaje de lenguas y características del diseño de un programa de estudio en el extranjero. Incluye macro factores (interacción, recepción y producción del lenguaje), micro factores (edad, género, aptitud, competencia estratégica, motivación y actitud, creencias y sensibilidad intercultural) y características propias de cada programa (duración de la estancia, alojamiento, oportunidades de empleo, nivel lingüístico inicial, preparación previa a la salida, fase del plan de estudios, trabajos académicos o entrevistas a la vuelta).

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de lenguas, Contextos de aprendizaje, Estudio en el extranjero.

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INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) learning is a complex process that can be affected by a series of predictors that range from the amount of input learners are exposed to, to their motivation or language aptitude. These factors are relevant in all learning contexts and settings, and hence they are also relevant in Study Abroad (SA) programs, which also show their characteristics with respect to a series of program design features. A SA program is one in which the learner lives in a host country other than his/her own for a period of time and usually takes part in courses and varied activities there, thus acquiring the status of naturalistic learner (Howard, 2005, in Pérez-Vidal, 2014)

The aim of this work is to present a literature review of relevant research on Study Abroad (SA). The first part offers a synthesis of research findings of both potential language learning predictors as they apply to SA and SA programs design features. This is followed by a review of empirical studies on SA dealing with productive skills, both writing and oral, and how they may be affected by a study abroad experience (Part II). Part I consists of descriptions of the general categories and sections devoted to each factor, whereas Part II includes a review of the central elements of ten selected articles published in prestigious venues in the field of Applied Linguistics, namely: aims and research questions, methodology and results and discussion.

PART I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I.1. Study abroad as an area of SLA research and an L2 learning context

SA programmes were not given attention in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) until Freed published a seminal volume on the matter in 1995 and then it became a central part of SLA research agendas. Not only has SA theoretical and empirical research increased, but also education abroad as a whole has increased dramatically as well, probably "as a consequence of globalization and the push for internationalization on campuses across the globe" (Jackson, 2013, p.1, quoted in Pérez-Vidal, 2014). One of these SA programs is the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, also known as the Erasmus program, an exchange program created in 1987. It is generally believed that the Erasmus program and similar initiatives provide the L2 learner with the adequate conditions for the improvement of their language skills but not much attention is paid to the underlying factors that may influence potential language learning outcomes. The SALA project, a longitudinal SA research programme on the interaction between individual differences and contexts of learning conducted at the University Pompeu Fabra, in Barcelona, resulted in a volume edited by Carmen Pérez-Vidal (2014). Pérez-Vidal identifies three categories for classifying these factors: macro factors, micro factors and specific exchange program design. This classification will be adopted for the present analysis.

I.2. SA as a type of L2 learning setting: Macro and micro level features of specific learning contexts

I.2.1. Language learning settings

Language learning occurs "within specific social contexts", each one characterized by a series of factors that "exert an influence on why people learn, how they learn and what they learn" (Manchón & Murphy, 2002, p. 135). These social contexts are usually divided into educational settings and naturalistic ones. Educational settings are those in which the student learns the language in a classroom setting in their own country, "within the context of their own culture [and with] limited opportunity for interacting with native speaker interlocutors" (Regan, Howard & Lemee, 2009, p.9). Learning can be both incidental and intentional and learners are externally guided, having access to both positive and negative evidence, like error correction. On the other hand, naturalistic settings are those contexts in the country where the target language is spoken, which provides learners with contact with native speakers and offers them the possibility of taking part in different communicative situations (Manchón & Murphy, 2002). The type of language internalization in naturalistic settings is mostly incidental learning, which leads to language acquisition rather than language learning: the learner is not externally guided and receives mainly positive evidence while participating in the life of the community.

Ellis (1994, cited in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) classifies naturalistic settings into three categories. The first type is "second language learning in majority language contexts", in which the L2 is either the native language or one of the native languages of the country; the second is L2 "learning in official language contexts", where the L2 functions as the official language; and the third type is "L2 learning in international contexts", settings in which the L2 is neither a native language nor an official one, but used for interpersonal communications. Therefore, study abroad programs can be classified as naturalistic setting of the first type, resulting in second language acquisition as opposed to the kind of foreign language learning associated with educational contexts. As Regan et al. (2009) argue, SA programs allow the learner "to acquire 'pseudo-naturalistic' status, by engaging in more informal acquisition in the TL community, through naturalistic contact with the L2 in everyday social situations" (p. 20).

I.2.2. Macro level features: Sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic variables

As Pérez-Vidal argues (2014), SA language learners are "immersed in the target language and culture with potentially massive amounts of input, output and interaction opportunities available to them" (p. 23). Input, output and interaction are classified as macro level features of SA and have been discussed in relation to Formal Instruction (FI) contexts from the point of view of the sociolinguistic axis and the language acquisition axis. On the one hand, a SA context has a great contrasting quantity and quality of macro level features in comparison to FI contexts, which potentially allows the learner to use the language in different situations and social domains, as well as assuming different social roles (Kasper & Rose, 2002, cited in Pérez-Vidal, 2014). On the other hand, the language acquisition axis is related to Stephen Krashen's (1985) debated Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and the benefits of acquiring the language in a naturalistic setting. Nevertheless, Valls-Ferrer (2011, p.3, quoted in Pérez-Vidal, p.24) claims that even though "FI tends to focus on aspects

such as grammar and metalinguistic awareness, this does not imply that the learning of certain features is context-specific but rather (...) that different linguistic outcomes can be expected for each learning context". Pérez-Vidal (2014, quoting Collentine, 2009) adds that there is, nonetheless, a major flaw within SA research, the lack of data on the real amount of input learners are exposed to, which may result in the SA learning context being an idealized one.

1.2.2.1. Input

Input is considered one of the main components involved in SLA and it refers to the language that the learner is exposed to, whether through reading, listening or even through a gestural medium (Gass & Mackey, 2006). As Smith (1994, quoted in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) explains, input is the "potentially processable language data made available to the learner"(p.8).

Ellis (2005) and Ortega (2009), among others, argue that the mechanisms involved in SLA are very similar to those in L1 acquisition, in which children build a grammar using the input they receive from parents and caretakers. Consequently, amount and quality of input play an important role in both L1 and L2 acquisition. For this reason, one of the main advantages of SA programs is the amount of input expected to be available to the learner, particularly outside the classroom and produced by native speakers. This contact with native speakers leads to different types of input, which we can classify into comprehended input and comprehensible input. Comprehended input is a term coined by Gass that refers to "the input that is actually understood by the learner" (Manchón & Murphy, 2002, p.20, quoting Gass and other authors). Conversely, comprehensible input is a term used by Stephen Krashen (1985) and refers to the input that is available for acquisition.

Krashen (1985) proposed the Input Hypothesis, or Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, which argued that for acquisition to take place, input must be slightly above the learner's current stage of development, "beyond our current level of competence" (p.2). In order to further develop his hypothesis, he coined the term "i+1", arguing that if i is our current level, the desirable input should only be *i+1*. This is because we are "able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, our knowledge of the world and previously acquired linguistic competence" (p.2).

Following this idea of comprehensible input, authors such as Mackey (1999) argue the interaction that uses premodified input can provide better comprehension since learners do not have to adjust and negotiate for meaning. One of the registers that provide premodified input is known as foreigner talk, and it is the language used by proficient speakers when addressing non-native speakers (Ferguson, 1971, quoted in Gass & Mackey, 2006). Nevertheless, the problem with this register and premodified input in general is that consequently the input the learners receive from their interlocutors may "not reflect actual L2 pragmatic forms" (Hassall, 2012, p. 3) and could be considered artificial at times. However, the great amount of input available in SA settings, in comparison to FI contexts, makes up for the risk of the input being premodified sometimes and will provide the learner with the aforementioned L2 pragmatic forms. In general, it could be said that the potentially abundant amount of input available to the learner is one of the main traits and advantages of the SA context over the FI one.

1.2.2.2. Interaction

As Ortega (2009) argues, most of the input learners receive "comes in the midst of oral interaction with one or more interlocutors, rather than as exposure to monologic spoken or written discourse"(p. 60), so we should not only focus on input but on the interactions that input may arise from. Michael Long (1996, in Ortega, 2009) agreed with Krashen on giving importance to input and comprehension but chose to focus on interaction since he argued that the best possible comprehensible input is the one interactionally modified, "adjusted after receiving some signal that the interlocutor needs some help in order to fully understand the message"(p.60).

Thus, he proposed the Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasises the importance of conversational interaction and states that interaction provides language learners with opportunities to compare the language they produce with that produced by the interlocutors (Gass & Mackey, 2006), who are native speakers in the case of a SA sojourn. Long argued that interactionally modified input was potentially more conducive to language learning than unmodified or authentic input since the latter may not be comprehensible, and also better than pre-modified input, since pre-modified input implies simplifying the language and that simplification could go too far (Ortega, 2009). Regarding interactionally modified input and negotiation of meaning, Mackey (1999) explained that "as linguistic units are rephrased, repeated and

reorganized to aid comprehension, learners may have opportunities to notice features of the target language". This negotiation of meaning may come in the form of clarification requests, comprehension checks or confirmation checks and force the interlocutors to rephrase, repeat and highlight words in a systematic way (Regan et al. 2009).

Closely related to the idea of negotiation of meaning is that of feedback, which Gass and Mackey (2006) define as "a form of negative evidence, or information that a particular utterance is deviant vis-à-vis target language norms"(p.7). A common form of feedback is the recast, defined by Long (1996, p.434, cited in Gass & Mackey, 2006) as "utterances that rephrase (another) utterance by changing one or more sentence components while still referring to its central meaning". Thus, during a SA experience, learners are going to be able to interact with native speakers who can potentially provide feedback. However, as Regan et al. (2009) argue, "feedback is not effective if the learner is not aware of it"(p.8). This idea is related to Smichdt's Noticing Hypothesis, according to which input does not become intake unless it is noticed and consciously registered (Schmidt, 2010).

In its application to SA contexts, it has been posited that higher proficiency learners may gain more in SA experiences simply because they interact more than lower proficiency ones (DeKeyser, 2007). As Collentine (2009) argues, this could be explained by the fact that "self-preservation (face-saving) needs effectively impede learner's contact with native speakers"(p.226), consequently reducing opportunities for interaction and improvement. Interestingly, Varonis and Gass (1985, cited in Swain, 1993) found out that negotiation of meaning may occur between non-native speakers more often than between a non native speaker and a native one, probably because learners do not feel inferior to the other interlocutor.

1.2.2.3. Output

Output is any language that the learner produces and it comes as a result of the acquisition/learning process (Manchón & Murphy, 2002). Merrill Swain, who proposed the main hypothesis on the topic, the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, quoted in Ortega, 2009), claimed that "producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning" (p.249).

Swain formulated the Output Hypothesis, also referred to as Comprehensible Output Hypothesis or Pushed Output Hypothesis, in 1985 and revised it in 1993 distinguishing four main functions of output, or ways in which output played an important role in language learning. First of all, output and language production is an opportunity for meaningful practice of one's existing knowledge, allowing the development and automatization of linguistic resources. She also pointed out that output "may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing", paying attention to grammar. Output may also allow L2 users to process specific input and learn from it more effectively once they focus their attention on it. The third argument is that producing language is a form of hypothesis testing, "trying means of expression and seeing if they work" (1993, p. 160). Finally, since output may trigger interaction, it generates feedback from the interlocutor, which is a language learning facilitator, as discussed above. Ellis (2003, quoted in Ellis, 2005) added that output can be regarded as well as "auto-input" so that the learner's production works as input and has the same benefits as regular input. Ortega (2009, p. 63) summarised Swain's tenets by stating that "by encouraging risk-full attempts by the learner to handle complex content beyond current competence, such conditions of language use may drive learning".

Nevertheless, the Output Hypothesis is not without detractors and critics, a matter discussed in Muranoi (2007, quoting other authors). Advocates of the Input Hypothesis argue that the only use of output is to generate input from the interlocutor and Krashen (1985) further argued that learners can attain high levels of proficiency without output and that there is no evidence that output is linked to language acquisition. Furthermore, Ellis claims that production only plays a limited role in language acquisition and it is not clear "whether production practice can result in the acquisition of new linguistic features" (Ellis, 1994, in Muranoi, 2007). These claims, however, have been questioned by Swain in more recent research. Whether output really plays an important role in SLA or it is not beneficial (nor harmful), the SA experience provides students with varied opportunities to produce output and develop their productive skills in their everyday life.

1.2.3. Micro level features: individual variables

Given the aforementioned lack of primary data on the amount of input students are exposed to in SA programs (1.2.2), another way of determining encounters which foster the three macro level features is studying individual differences of the learner, which are classified as micro level features. This approach is explained by the fact that "those learners who engage in more interactional encounters should be in a better position to learn", as Pérez-Vidal explains (2014, p. 25).

Attitude and motivation are the individual variables most related to this ability for interacting with native speakers but the SALA project includes more features, such as age, aptitude, gender, beliefs, intercultural awareness and strategic competence. These variables, however, are not restricted to the SA context and play a role in every language learning context.

I.2.3.1. Age

As Manchón and Murphy (2002) mention, age-related differences are some of the most popular and controversial topics in SLA research. The common misconception is thinking that "the younger, the better" but that's an oversimplification and does not reflect available empirical findings in. Manchón and Murphy use the case of Spain as a good example of how first languages were first introduced at the age of 11, then at the age of 8, an age that will probably be reduced in the future. Manchón (1992, quoted in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) grouped the existing research findings on age related differences into three categories: level of final attainment and rate of development, language abilities, and the relationship between age related differences and contexts of acquisition.

In terms of final level of attainment, she argued that in naturalistic settings, starting age determined the level of accuracy achieved, especially in pronunciation, being younger learners the ones with a higher level of attainment (Muñoz, 2006). As for rate of development, it is affected by age both in naturalistic and classroom settings, and older learners seem to progress more rapidly in areas such as vocabulary acquisition and grammatical development. Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978, quoted in Muñoz, 2006), however, provide evidence that the older learners' advantage in naturalistic settings disappears after 12 months and Krashen et al. (1979, quoted in Muñoz, 2006) argue that this rate superiority is limited to morphological and syntactic aspects. Regarding language abilities, Manchón (1992) explains that no age group seems to have an advantage in terms of rate of development but those who have contact with the L2 from an early age seem to attain a higher level of pronunciation, as stated by Ortega (2009), who claims that "post-pubertal learners are not likely to perform in the native speaker range" (p. 29). As for morphology, syntax and vocabulary acquisition, older learners progress much faster than younger ones. Finally, in terms of learning contexts she concludes that in natural contexts both age and length of exposure can be predictors of success, whereas in foreign language contexts older learners are apparently superior in both rate of development and final attainment, since younger learners lose the advantage they seemed to have in naturalistic contexts.

The most important hypothesis related to age differences in SLA is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which stated that "there is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language, be it L1 or L2, to normal native like levels" (Birdsong, 1999, p.1, quoted in Manchón & Murphy, 2002). Evidence supporting this hypothesis includes neurological, cognitive, motivational and contextual reasons. Nevertheless, as Muñoz (2006) summarises, although the long-term advantage of early starters seems to be proved, the CPH does not seem to have unanimous support for now.

Most SA programs include students between ages 18 and 20, which may be an older age than desirable in terms of final attainment of pronunciation. However, students at those ages are still relatively young while already having the developed cognitive abilities of adults, which allows them to count on the advantages of both age groups. Furthermore, in terms of extra linguistic factors, it is an age in which students gain independence and start university, which makes it a good stage in their lives to enrol in the SA experience.

I.2.3.2. Gender

Gender-related differences in SLA has been a problematic topic since results are difficult to interpret, as pointed out by Manchón and Murphy (2002): studies have produced contradictory results, they have investigated different age groups and they have studied different areas using different methods.

On the one hand, Manchón and Murphy (2002) quote other authors and report an overall advantage for female L2 learners, who have been found to be better in areas such as accent discrimination and memorisation tasks. They also acknowledge that, concerning listening tasks, some studies seem to give the advantage to male learners and others seem to posit a female superiority. On the other hand, Dewey (2007) reviews relevant research on the topic and reports that men were more likely to make gains in listening and oral proficiency. Conversely, Mathews (2000, cited in Dewey, 2007), argues that females benefit linguistically from interaction more than males and they develop their listening and speaking skills more successfully. Despite these contradictory results, research on conversational behaviour seems to provide

common results: males tend to interrupt more and consequently produce more output, which may explain better results in speaking tests, whereas females seem to initiate more meaning negotiations and receive more comprehensible input, which may explain the aforementioned advantage in discrimination and listening tasks.

These differences are influenced by variations in attitude and motivation between males and females, the latter being thought to take more advantage of this in both naturalistic and tutored settings. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005, cited in Dewey et al., 2014) suggest that women are more motivated to learn second and foreign languages and show a more positive attitude towards it. As Ellis (1994, cited in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) explains, this may reflect employment expectations and other languages have a vocational value for women. He also argues that women stress cooperation and are more ready to face identity issues raised by L2 learning. Nevertheless, these apparent differences and explanations may be influenced by sexism, as reported by Dewey (2007). He quotes other authors and summarises sexist behaviours their female participants encountered, which prevented them from interacting or making friends. They also spoke less and intervened less than males in language classes, particularly "in various cultures and among minority communities (that) often limit linguistic exposure based on gender", as reported by Dewey et al. (2014). This attitudes towards women, however, seem to be improving in the 21st century as noted by Davidson (2010, cited in Dewey et al., 2014), for example, who reports that gender is no longer a significant factor in language acquisition in Russia, a country in which much previous research had been carried out with negative results. Still, these differences in attitude and motivation seem to account for the great amount of female students enrolling in SA programs in comparison to their male counterparts. (See II.3.1)

I.2.3.3. Aptitude

It has always been believed that some people have "a special gift for learning foreign languages" (Ortega, 2009, p. 149) which in fact correspond to language aptitude, defined by Carroll (1981, quoted in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) as a "current state of capability of learning (a) task, if the individual is motivated and has the opportunity of doing so" (p.107). Research shows that intelligence, first language ability and foreign language aptitude are connected and overlap (Ortega, 2009).

The two main approaches to aptitude have been proposed by Carroll and Skehan. Carroll (1981, in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) posited four abilities affecting aptitude: phonetic coding ability, which relates to being able to recognise sounds and remember them later; grammatical sensitivity, which involves being able to recognise grammatical functions of words; inductive language learning ability, which refers to being able to infer and induce rules; and rote learning ability, the ability to form associations between sounds and meanings. Skehan (1998, in Ellis, 2005) proposed his model later as a means of updating Carroll's existing approach and reduced it to three abilities: he kept phonemic coding ability, he grouped grammatical sensitivity and inductive language learning ability into language analytic ability and he renamed rote learning as just memory. A third model proposed by Stenberg (2002, in Ellis, 2005) distinguishes three types of aptitude: analytical intelligence, creative intelligence and practical intelligence.

Ellis (1985, cited in Manchón & Murphy, 2002) points out that aptitude affects rate of development but not route of development. He also argued that it may be age related, which was the same conclusion DeKeyser (2000) reached, claiming that aptitude matters for adults and adolescents but not younger learners. Ross et al. (2002) agreed that aptitude will matter more for learners with a later starting age (both cited in Ortega, 2009). Therefore, aptitude can play an important role in SLA for students in their early twenties, as mentioned in I.2.3.1. While younger students may not benefit from it, students that go on a SA experience will see their gains affected by their linguistic aptitude.

I.2.3.4. Strategic competence

Strategic competence is one of the components of communicative competence, along with grammatical competence, discourse competence and sociocultural competence. Canale and Swain (1980, quoted in Wood, 2012) report that strategic competence is "made up of verbal and non verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence" (p. 30) Le Pichon et al. (2010, quoting other authors) classify them in four categories: metacognitive strategies, like anticipation or planification; cognitive ones, like code switching; social ones, such as cooperation or asking for assistance; and affective strategies like maintaining a positive attitude to communicate.

As mentioned above, communication strategies (CS) are the main element of strategic competence and they are a way of keeping the channel of the exchange open for communication. Konishi and Tarone (2004, quoted in Wood, 2012) argue

that CS can be divided into reduction strategies (used to avoid a problematic referent) and compensatory strategies (used to allow the speaker to refer to it despite his difficulties). To this classification, Celce-Murcia (1995, in Wood, 2012) adds time gaining strategies, self-monitoring ones and interactional ones. Le Pichon et al. (2010, quoting several authors) summarised the benefits of using CS, as research suggests that those learners who make use of CS display a higher degree of processing control as well as autonomy and independence. It has also been posited that the more languages a learner knows, the more strategies he will use when learning the new one. Finally, Willems (1987, cited in Wood, 2012), argues that learners who study abroad in an immersion setting become better users of CS since they interact with native speakers and can mimic their strategies both consciously and unconsciously, an idea related to the amount of input students are exposed to in SA experiences.

I.2.3.5. Motivation and attitude

Motivation, in relation to language learning, can be defined as "a psychological trait which leads people to achieve (the mastery of the language" or as "those affective characteristics which orient the study to try to acquire elements of the second language (including) the desire the student has for achieving a goal and the amount of effort he expends in that direction" (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 219-220; Gardner, 1979, p. 197; both quoted in Manchón and Murphy, 2002). Motivation, attitude and orientation are related terms that are used almost interchangeably by different authors. Ellis (2005), however, argues that orientation particularly refers to long range goals that the learners have in relation to learning a language.

Gardner distinguished two types of orientations towards language learning: the integrative orientation, or integrative motivation as others authors refer to it, is a personal interest in the L2 and the L2 culture. Conversely, instrumental motivation reflects an interest in learning a new language because the learner acknowledges the practical value of knowing the language and wants to use for a functional purpose. Manchón and Murphy (2002, quoting other authors) explain that there are two type of factors that initiate motivation: motivation is intrinsic when the reasons for performing an action lie within the activity itself, because that activity is "enjoyable and satisfying to do" (Noels et al., 2000, quoted in Ellis, 2005). On the other hand, motivation is extrinsic when the reason to perform an action is to gain something outside the activity, in order to achieve some instrumental end, as Noels et al. explain. They also consider the term amotivation, which is the absence of any motivation to learn.

A recent, yet interesting, theory about motivation was posited by Dörnyei (2009, cited in Ushioda, 2013), who developed the idea of the "L2 Motivational Self System", which pays attention to how people see themselves in the future. The concept of ideal self is used to refer to the attributes that we believe we would ideally desire to possess and the concept of ought to self represents those attributes that we believe we need to possess. Consequently, according to this theory, our main aim should be to reduce the gap between our current self and these future self states. This is what happens to SA learners, who, according to Freed (1990, quoted in Regan et al. 2009), are at the upper end in the scale of motivation. Among these motivated learners, Hernández (2010, quoting other authors) explains that these with a higher integrative motivation tend to interact more with native speakers. Nevertheless, Day (1987, quoted in Martinsen, 2008) points out that students may not achieve as much as they had hoped for while abroad because they may "overestimate their level of motivation to put forth the effort required or underestimated the effort required itself" (p.1).

I.2.3.6. Beliefs

Beliefs, in relation to language learning, are notions about learning that learners have and can affect their confidence in learning a language. As Kuntz (2010) points out, a common belief is that teachers will design a language course based on the students' previous knowledge but it is not always the case and such an assumption can even be detrimental to the learning. Consequently, identifying beliefs held both by students and teachers would be helpful for teachers and curriculum coordinators in order to improve program design, instructional techniques or teaching methods.

Furthermore, Juan-Garau et al. (2014) claim that beliefs as an individual difference related to learner behaviour is gaining importance and those students with strong beliefs in the effectiveness of a SA program will actually benefit more from the abroad experience. Nevertheless, they also explain that there is not enough research yet to link beliefs to language success.

I.2.3.7. Intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural awareness, also referred to as intercultural sensitivity or identity, can be defined as "sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behaviour on language use and communication" (Tomalin & Stemple, 1993, p. 5, quoted in Merino & Avello, 2014). As Pérez-Vidal (2014) argues, the learner has to overcome cultural differences for successful communication both with native speakers and non-native speakers of the language, intercultural and transcultural communication respectively.

Following this idea of intercultural sensitivity being related to interaction, Isabelli-García (2006, quoted in Dewey et al., 2014) explains that student's willingness to interact and communicate with native speakers in the target culture may be directly related to their intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, Wilkinson (1998, in Dewey et al., 2014) found out that students with less intercultural awareness reacted defensively to most cultural differences, preventing them from interacting and using the L2. If a low level of intercultural sensitivity does not impede communication completely, it can still affect learners, who abandon their role as language learners as such, which impedes their development (Collentine, 2009). Martinsen (2011, cited in Dewey et al., 2014) demonstrated the opposite, however: interaction with native speakers proved to be an important predictor of intercultural sensitivity.

Given the importance of this factor, there are special courses known as cross-cultural training (CCT), which according to Levy (1995, quoted in Puck et al., 2008), are "a cohesive series of events or activities designed to develop cultural self-awareness, culturally appropriate behavioural responses or skills, and a positive orientation toward other cultures"(p.1). Puck et al. explain that CCT can be differentiated in terms of intellectual learning, which uses didactical methods, or experimental learning, including hypothetical and experience-based exercises. Thus, students with a higher intercultural sensitivity will benefit more from SA experiences and these sojourns will, in turn, develop their intercultural sensitivity at the same time.

I.3. Exchange program design features.

Apart from the macro and micro level features which play a role in every learning context and that have been discussed above, each exchange program is designed differently and has a series of characteristics which make it unique. As Pérez-Vidal (2014) puts it, several authors have attempted to "systematize diversity" in the design of exchange programs given its importance in measuring language learning while studying abroad. The SALA project relies on Paige et al. (2002) and previous work by Pérez-Vidal, and distinguishes eight variables which can be further classified into two macro-groups. On the one hand, length of stay, living conditions, employment opportunities and onset language level are related to input opportunities and the initial language level. On the other hand, pre-departure preparation, point in the curriculum, academic assignments and debriefing upon return are more related to academic aspects of the program.

I.3.1. Length of stay

Wang (2010, quoting other authors) points out that research on length of stay of S programmes has provided contradictory results: while some researchers argue that a short-term SA experience yields minimum gains, others claim that even five or six week programs can make a difference. Most studies, however, seem to point in the same direction: the longer, the better. This is the case, for example, of Dwyer (2004, quoted in Llanes & Serrano, 2011), whose study concluded that after one year abroad, students not only improved their linguistic skills, but they also used the language more often than their "at home" (AH) counterparts and had more self-confidence.

Llanes and Serrano (2011) explain that research on the matter is problematic since most studies tend to focus on a particular area of the L2 rather than global proficiency. That being said, they quote Llanes and Muñoz (2009), who observed that a one week sojourn already proved to be significant. Hoffman-Hicks (2000, cited in Hassall, 2012) argued that learners acquire pragmatics early in their sojourn and they can be much more competent within two or three months. Finally, Brecht et al.(1995, in Wang, 2010) indicated that a semester's SA is needed for students to acquire an advanced level of proficiency in speaking. Taking into account research like this and in order to "bring both systems (SA and AH) into proper alignment"(Beattie, 2014, p.65), the Erasmus program established a minimum 90 day period, which corresponds to a regular 13 week trimester. While longer experiences are a possibility, "within the Erasmus exchange format a stay of fewer than 90 days is not contemplated" (p. 65).

I.3.2. Living conditions

As Rivers (1998, p.492, quoted in Regan et al., 2009) accurately puts it, "the SLA community has long held the homestay environment as the sine qua non of language study abroad". For example, Kaplan (1989, quoted in Regan et al., 2009) found that while living with a family seemed to provide many opportunities for interaction, living in a residence offered no compensating advantages. Similarly, Mancheno (2008, quoted in Wang, 2010) claimed that homestay provided more opportunities for negotiation of meaning and language gains in general. Sugiyama (1990, quoted in Wang 2010) also reported that students who went abroad and stayed in a homestay setting were more sociable, extroverted, self-confident and independent.

Nevertheless, Rivers' results indicated that homestay learners were actually less likely to improve their speaking and listening skills than their reading skills. The participants in his study reported a great limitation in the amount of real interaction within the family environment. Rivers suggested that learners may have been overwhelmed by the constant amount of input and retreated to their rooms where they would read and consequently improve their reading skills. Furthermore, Dewey (2007, p. 252, citing Frank, 2007) explained that "interaction with the host family frequently involved simple and redundant exchanges and often centered on television watching." Similarly, Lafford (2004, cited in Lafford & Collentine, 2006) found a negative correlation between the time spent with host families and the use of communication strategies. These results may be backed by those reported in section I.2.2.2 since, according to Varonis and Gass (1985), there may be more negotiation of meaning among non-native speakers, such as other learners in a residence, rather than with a native host family.

I.3.3. Employment opportunities

Very little is known about whether or not a work placement can be more beneficial than a course of classroom instruction when abroad, as Regan et al. (2009) point out. However, they quote other authors whose research seems to reflect the benefits of working during a SA sojourn. Among these authors, Willis et al. (1977) found a higher proficiency level in those students in working placements, Coleman (1997) suggested that these higher levels reflected sociobiographic characteristics such as higher motivation and more positive attitudes and research by Meara (1994) and Opper et al. (1990) similarly explains that students themselves hold exchange programs in lower esteem than work placements and consider the latter more beneficial for the acquisition of language.

I.3.4. Onset language level

Onset language level, which is the level of proficiency before departure, has been linked by researchers to a threshold level, "which learners must reach in order to benefit fully from the SA context of learning"(Collentine, 2009, p. 221). Collentine quotes other authors who suggest that "preprogram linguistic (grammar, vocabulary, accuracy) and metalinguistic (self-corrected errors and sentence repair) levels"(p.221) predicted which SA students would acquire a higher level of proficiency. Other result pointed in the direction that "an initial threshold level of basic word recognition and lexical access processing abilities may be necessary for oral proficiency and fluency to develop abroad significantly"(p.221). Lafford (2004), also cited by Collentine, argues that while novices must pay attention to meaning, more advanced learners can then focus on form. Finally, Freed (1990, cited in Dewey et al., 2014), found that differences in onset language level affected the type of activities learners engaged in: while lower level learners tended to seek out social interactions and practising their basic communication and productive skills, more advanced ones tend to benefit more from receptive activities.

DeKeyser (2007) links this threshold level to the concepts of proceduralisation and automatization of linguistic knowledge, arguing that "if they know how to use rules for communication, (...) they will become much better at using the through repeated practice abroad. If not, they will spend their time practicing formulaic knowledge and gathering new declarative knowledge, not automatizing proceduralized rule knowledge"(p. 217). As he points out, the transition from the classroom to the SA contexts coincides with the transition from declarative to procedural knowledge but the transition in skill acquisition that should with going abroad is actually automatization. He concludes that "students should have the functional knowledge of the grammar that is assumed to be known at intermediate level. only then can they spend their time abroad (...) completing the process of proceduralization and making substantial progress towards automaticity" (p. 217).

I.3.5. Pre-departure preparation

This preparation can include general orientation sessions dealing with details and issues involved in the exchange program as well as with information about the selection process. (Beattie, 2014). It can also include the drafting of the "Study contract" or academic learning agreement, which ensures the student will be receive recognition in his degree for what he has studies abroad. Beattie points out that the pre-departure tutoring process not only insists in the implications of the sojourn in terms of formal academic expectations, but also contributes to the self esteem of the learner, who may be nervous about the new experience. Cross cultural training, explained in section I.2.3.7. is also part of the usual pre-departure preparation.

I.3.6. Point in the curriculum

Beattie (2014) explains that originally students would go abroad in the third term of their second undergraduate year. Nevertheless, with the standardization and gradual semesterisation of British universities, it became impractical since there was little teaching from the Easter vacation period onwards, what used to be the third term. For this reason, in order to align the student's own degree and the exchange program, the norm in Europe now is to go abroad in the third year. Thus, not only do they avoid the problems of going abroad in the previously usual period, they also go with a higher onset language level, from which students can benefit.

I.3.7. Academic assignments

Lafford and Collentine (2006) point out that there is actually little information on the type of instruction in SA contexts and it is one of the weakest aspects of SA research. In addition to this, they quote Brecht and Robinson (1995), who showed that while some students apply what they learn in class, others do not see the connection between what they learn in class and the reality of the target culture. Furthermore, 91% of students in Pellegrino's study (1997, quoted in Dewey, 2007) agreed that they learned much more from native speakers in out of class interaction than from the classroom. Nevertheless, quoting Miller and Ginsberg (1995) and Wilkinson (2002), Dewey explains that some learners "expect classroom-like exchanges in their out-of-class interactions with native speakers"(p. 254). They expect speakers to provide feedback and facilitate communication like their instructors, which can lead to frustration and negative attitudes.

Nonetheless, as Kruse and Brubaker (2007, quoted in Wang, 2010) argue, "the best immersion opportunities in SA will not be effective if the core of the program, the academics, is not effective". Brecht and Robinson (1995, in Lafford & Collentine, 2006), in spite of the bad attitudes of students towards instruction, identified four aspects in which it was valuable: it helps learners establish goals for language use and provides them with tools to achieve those goals, it transforms passive to active knowledge, it provides information about vocabulary and grammar the students may not get in more natural input and it provides a forum to discuss and analyse problems and experiences with native speakers out of class.

I.3.8. Debriefing upon return

Debriefings upon return are a good way of getting first hand input from students, who reflect on their SA experience and can provide feedback. As Beattie (2014, p 72) explains when describing the SALA project, students were asked "to meet with their tutor and to provide him with evidence, oral and written, of their personal evaluation of the exchange experience (and) they were invited to discuss their class work as to quality and quantity". In this particular case, they also completed a questionnaire in which they assessed their experience abroad in terms of orientation and tutoring inputs before going abroad, satisfaction with the host institution in a variety of parameters such as welcome programs and accommodation, and their degree of satisfaction with their SA in general terms. Although the debriefing may seem unimportant at first since the SA program has already ended, it is paramount in order to tweak and improve future SA experiences for other students.

3. CONCLUSION

With the advent of the 21st century came a massive globalization, fostered by the development and standardization of the Internet. It seems that nowadays we can get access to English very easily, whether it is on television, through music or on the Internet, via reading and watching videos online. Therefore, those means can help us develop receptive skills to

some extent, but what about productive skills? This is where FI and SA programs come into play. Research over the last twenty years shows that the SA context is particularly beneficial in terms of macro factors, providing the best opportunities for input provision, and opportunities for interaction and output production. As for micro factors, living in the country in which the language is spoken, far from home, helps develop strategic competence or intercultural sensitivity among other skills, apart from being a good opportunity for personal development and the acquisition of independence.

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