

# Intercultural Competence and L2 Acquisition in the Study Abroad Context

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## **Abstract:**

This paper discusses our state-of-the-art knowledge of the role of intercultural competence in L2 acquisition in the context of study abroad programmes. As participation in study abroad programmes intensifies it is pertinent to ask whether and how such instructional context benefits language learners. Challenging the popular assumption that immersion contexts suffice to trigger acquisition, current research points to the role of intercultural competence before the sojourn in increasing chances for success. To explain this role, intercultural competence is presented in this paper in relation to other variables both linguistic (proficiency level, input and output opportunities) and non-linguistic (age, aptitude, motivation, willingness to communicate, and personality). The most popular data collection tools are also discussed and conclusions are offered.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, L2 acquisition, study abroad

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## **1. Introduction**

In this article the interaction between intercultural competence and L2 acquisition is investigated in the context of study abroad (SA) experience. If the study of second language acquisition (SLA) is to be understood as a scientific analysis of how foreign languages are acquired in different contexts (ranging from formal in-classroom instruction to informal out-of-classroom settings), then SA may be perceived as a context for L2 acquisition which combines elements of both formal instruction and immersion. The challenge for SLA in investigating SA is to understand the relationship between how learners process L2 and the sociolinguistic and sociocultural factors that influence this processing. Research results accrued so far (Baker-Smemoe et al 2014, Marijuan & Sanz 2018) suggest that intercultural competence is the strongest predictor of L2 gains during SA, but as will be evidenced in the present article, more variables play a part.

Studying abroad (SA) is a context in which learners enrol on an exchange programme in order to live and study in a host country (Pérez-Vidal 2014a: 20). SA has not been so far defined in terms of the length of the exchange but most studies encompass a length of stay between 3 and 12 months. A common belief is that SA provides unparalleled opportunity of immersion in a target culture and a target language. It is generally accepted that learners return from their SA programmes with improved linguistic abilities, a greater intercultural sensitivity, and a stronger motivation to learn languages. Indeed, some areas of their L2 communicative competence improve and many learners report increases in their motivation to learn languages and cultures, however, as we will discuss further in this paper, the picture of an average sojourner is not as clear as might be expected and further SLA research is needed to help us better understand the relationship between SA and L2 acquisition.

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SA has thus far been investigated by scholars interested in foreign language education with a view to building a theory of SLA in immersion contexts. One of the first attempts to understand how SA can be framed within SLA research enterprise was Freed's (1995) volume devoted to linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of SA in European and North American settings. Its contribution was in presenting how the benefits of SA differ from that of formal instruction contexts. Collentine's (2009) research summary published nearly two decades later identified three main themes running through analyses at the junction of SA and SLA: a) cognitive processes connected with L2 acquisition in SA contexts, b) sociolinguistic processes connected with input and interaction while abroad, and c) sociocultural aspects of language learning which witnessed a shift from language-centred to learner-centred perspectives. Consequently, two important volumes on the relationship between SA and SLA by Kinginger (2014) and Pérez-Vidal (2014b) testify to the diversity of SA and open new avenues of inquiry. Among others, they present how non-linguistic individual differences such as foreign language anxiety (FLA) or willingness to communicate (WTC), may in fact influence success in SA-based L2 acquisition.

The aim of the present article is, on the one hand, to demonstrate SA as an SLA research context and, on the other, to discuss intercultural competence as an important research variable to be taken into account in designing relevant studies. This will be done by outlining research areas, tools, and results reported by scholars interested in the influence of SA on L2 acquisition. To begin with, the article looks at terminological considerations and reviews current literature of the field.

## **2. Terminological considerations**

Even a cursory literature review demonstrates many discrepancies in the terminology used by scholars working in the field of SA and SLA. In this section, the terminology used in the present paper will be unified and clarified.

### **2.1 Study abroad (SA)**

SA is known in the relevant literature also as "stay" or "residence" abroad, "in-country study", "overseas language immersion", "academic migration" (Coleman 1997), "student mobility", or even an "L2 sojourn" (Jackson 2016). It refers, very broadly, to various types of study at foreign institutions. The primary division is into whole-programme and within-programme mobility (Coleman 2013: 21), the former denoting studying abroad in a full academic cycle for a degree, the latter denoting educational mobility for obtaining credits.

The understanding of SA depends on the context of the research and professional interest of researchers. Although Kinginger (2009: 29) refers to it as a sub-field of applied linguistics, SA attracts not only the attention of linguists, but also scholars concerned with educational policies, economics, psychology, social identity, etc. (Dervin 2011). Most definitions of SA, however, emphasise the educational context of the phenomenon, pointing to it being a component of a university programme (Coleman 1997), undertaken for educational purposes (Kinging 2009) in a hybrid communicative-learning context (Collentine and Freed 2004). This lack of unanimity across scholars leads to difficulties in comparing relevant research and makes drawing generalisations difficult. Nonetheless, in the present paper, SA is conceptualised as the experience of crossing borders in order to live and learn in a foreign country.

### **2.2 Formal instruction (FI)**

SA is very often contrasted with formal instruction (FI). In fact, some researchers (e.g., Pérez-Vidal 2014a) present the two in sharp contrast as ends of a continuum. SA is seen as a naturalistic context allowing for nearly total immersion in the target language and the target culture that is characterised by massive opportunities for sociolinguistically varied L2 input

and interaction. FI, on the other hand, is understood as conventional L2 classroom context, i.e. a place in which learners' attention is drawn to language form and meaning, but which gives nearly no opportunities for out-of-classroom L2 interaction. Yet, as research findings unfold, a less black-and-white picture of SA/FI contrasts begins to emerge. For one thing, learners make a lot of use of their previous FI in SA contexts. Second, they do not always benefit from the linguistically rich context of SA accessible to them, since some of them do not look for L2 interaction opportunities available to them, preferring to stick to their native-speaking sojourners (Devlin 2014). Moreover, SA in accordance with its name entails FI especially in countries where the language of the instruction is the language of the target culture (i.e., when sojourners participate in classes conducted in the language of the target country, unlike the situation when e.g. Polish students of English philology travel to a non-English speaking country but take their classes in English).

### **2.3 Intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence is both a very broad term and one for which many definitions have been put forward. According to Bennett and Allen (2003: 237), intercultural competence means the ability to 'transcend ethnocentrism, appreciate other cultures and generate appropriate behaviour in one or more different cultures.' Wilczyńska (2005: 22) suggests that intercultural competence should consist of three elements, namely:

- (1) the general knowledge of culture as such together with its mechanisms
- (2) intercultural sensitivity which allows for appropriate interpretation of cultural behaviours, and
- (3) cultural mediating, i.e. the skill of overcoming communication boundaries.

In short, then, intercultural competence denotes a range of skills that allow successful interaction with a foreign culture. The success of such interaction can be measured by one's ability to establish bonds with people from another culture.

### **2.4 Second language (L2)**

L2 will be understood here as the language which is not a person's native language and which is used outside their country. L2 will therefore be used henceforth to denote a foreign language, in particular the language of SA participants' target country, so the language which is acquired/learned during the stay abroad. Unless otherwise stated, the term L2 encompasses here also L3, L4, etc.: i.e., non-native languages acquired by a person who already possesses communicative competence in one or more foreign languages (see Cook 1995). This is, as very often happens in European contexts, because the language of the target country is not the language of the instruction, for example, when students from Romania study English philology in Poland. The situation creates both difficulties and opportunities. For one thing, it becomes difficult to communicate in and live surrounded by Polish, but at the same time it creates opportunities to learn more than one L2.

### **3. SA and intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence as such, has been repeatedly reported to significantly improve the outcomes of L2 acquisition as intercultural contacts positively impact on L2 learning motivation (Byram 1997, Corbett 2003, Dörnyei & Csizér 2005). Research into the links between intercultural competence and SA has shown that cultural differences, or rather the inability to overcome them, may severely impede the success of one's stay abroad as a result of losing opportunities for interaction with native speakers (e.g., Allen & Herron 2003, Block 2007). A lack of intercultural competence will result therefore in lesser motivation to learn L2 (e.g., Twombly 1995, Wilkinson 1998, Isabelli-García 2006) and more difficulties integrating

into the target culture (Baker-Smemoe et al 2014). On the other hand, openness to new cultures and willingness to communicate with them has been proven to be of great value to L2 acquisition leading to significant L2 gains during SA (e.g., Segalowitz & Freed 2004, Isabelli-García 2006, Martinsen 2010, Martinsen et al 2010).

We now have hard data from a wide range of studies that when SA participants experience inferiority or anxiety towards the target culture it impedes their interactions with native speakers. For instance, in an early study Twombly (1995) highlighted how making friends in a foreign culture was difficult for the sojourners, and that SA students did not really know how to do it. In the new cultural context of Spain, SA students from America lacked common interests with their classmates, observed a different social structure, and different attitudes toward leisure time, and as they found more dissonance than expected, they reverted to their country-mates and kept in closed groups, sometimes even deciding to leave the country. Wilkinson (1998) also reported how the experience of American students studying in France had not been a short cut to linguistic proficiency, but turned out to be a source of a lot of frustration. Suddenly, English was not perceived as a mode for communication, and the sojourners felt reduced to (1) a minority group and (2) membership in a French-for-foreigners class. As a result, instead of making the most of language learning opportunities, the SA participants in both studies felt troubled and confused, had difficulty integrating into the target culture and thus fewer L2 interaction opportunities.

Likewise, Allen and Herron (2003), who investigated the development of oral and listening skills of American students travelling to France, as well as their integrative motivation and language anxiety, reported that possessing higher levels of intercultural competence helps the participants to make fuller use of the SA experience. The participants faced two main sources of anxiety while abroad: linguistic insecurity and cultural differences. This anxiety increased while interacting with native speakers leading to fewer L2 gains. However, as time passed, the participants demonstrated a significant improvement in their linguistic skills and a decrease in language anxiety. Their integrative motivation remained unchanged. This suggests, that more emphasis should be put during the pre-departure phase on non-linguistic factors, such as intercultural competence, that would help reduce foreign language anxiety. Of note, intercultural sensitivity and cultural adaptation seem to develop more significantly during the second half of the one-year stay, i.e. the longer the stay the more chances for increased intercultural competence (Engle & Engle 2004, Medina-Lopez-Portillo 2004), although even a short-length stay allows almost all students to develop their intercultural sensitivity and to have a better understanding and acceptance of cultural differences (Jackson 2009).

What seems constant in these studies is the fact that although SA participants have the options to establish relationships with and learn language from the local people, they often prefer to spend time with their compatriots. Block (2007: 871) observed that many SA students finish their stay with the realisation that they could never be taken seriously as speakers of the target language. At the same time, those students who do manage to establish successful relationships with the locals and become members of these communities of practice are more likely to move beyond their ethnocentrism toward intercultural sensitivity and ethno-relativism. Isabelli-García (2006) rightly points out that the sheer fact of being surrounded by the target language does not guarantee linguistic development, but that informal relationships contracted by individual learner play a vital role.

Research has repeatedly highlighted the fact that successful immersion in the target culture is of great value to L2 acquisition, particularly with regard to the development of oral proficiency (Collentine 2004, Segalowitz & Freed 2004, Isabelli-García 2006, Martinsen 2010). For example, Baker-Smemoe (et al 2014), having conducted a large scale study of more than 100 native English speakers who took part in SA programmes in China, Egypt,

France, Mexico, Russia, and Spain found that the strongest predictors of L2 gains were cultural sensitivity and social network variables. Those students, who scored high on pre-departure Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003): that is, who displayed higher intercultural sensitivity, were the ones who reported greater L2 gains. These findings corroborate with earlier studies (e.g., Segalowitz & Freed 2004, Martinsen 2010, Martinsen et al 2010) which also uncovered the relationship between intercultural competence and SA L2 acquisition success. Even short-term programmes can benefit linguistic development if students are able to deal effectively with the target culture (or other cultures in general). Martinsen (2010) showed how only pre-departure levels of intercultural competence predicted students' L2 gains and Martinsen (et al 2010) confirmed that there is a positive relationship between speaking time with the locals and linguistic gains during short-term immersion programmes.

In consequence of these observations, many American and European universities offer pre-departure orientation sessions to prepare learners for their intercultural experiences. These sessions for students accepted into SA programmes take different forms in different institutions. They may include:

- using (online) digital resources such as videos, podcasts, infographics or presentations which students later discuss with their mentors or complete questionnaires about them
- individual or group sessions preparing students for the experience of culture shock, informing them on the strategies for maximising the potential of their stay abroad, or simply discussing with them how to maintain good health
- country-specific orientation providing succinct information about their respective destination and the academic system
- reading orientation handbooks that provide information on living and travelling abroad safely, experiencing culture shock.

Participants are sometimes asked to prepare “home ethnography” projects to hone their ethnographic skills that might help them get through the initial stages of denial to acceptance of the foreign culture (e.g., Jackson 2006). Pre-departure intercultural training may also include ethnographic projects, experiential learning, exploiting cultural texts, and comparative approaches (Róg 2014). The effects of pre-orientation sessions are usually measured with Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003), showing how participants' inflated opinions of their own intercultural competence and readiness to enter a foreign culture diminish as the sessions progress (Jackson 2009, 2018; Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012).

#### **4. Other variables influencing L2 gains during SA**

The following overview addresses variables that are related to L2 gains during SA. These include language-related variables such as L2 threshold level, the amount of L2 input, and interaction opportunities and 6 non-linguistic variables such as age, aptitude, motivation, willingness to communicate, and personality.

##### **4.1 SA and linguistic variables**

A substantial body of SLA research has been gathered on the effects of linguistic variables on L2 acquisition during SA (Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg 1995, Lafford & Collentine 2006, Kinginger 2013, Jackson 2016, Marijuan & Sanz 2018). Researchers have primarily focused on the effects of SA on the development of oral proficiency showing how SA participants' L2 speaking skills developed significantly after the sojourn (e.g., Allen & Herron 2003, Collentine 2004, Martinsen 2010, Mora & Valls-Ferrer 2012), which reflects the fact that oral

proficiency is seen as the most desirable outcome of L2 acquisition and, as DeKeyser (2007: 208) observes, the main goal of study abroad.

SA has been found to push the development of fluency and discursive abilities (Collentine 2009). For example, SA participants' speech rate and mean length of turn seem to improve significantly (Towell, Hawkins & Bazergui 1996), and so do their listening (Kinginger 2009) and reading abilities (Dewey 2004). Sociolinguistic aspects of language use and learners' pragmatic abilities have also been shown to improve during SA (Perez-Vidal 2016). Among the most-researched linguistic variables are the relationships between initial L2 proficiency and its influence on potential L2 gains during SA, as well as the problem of measuring input, output, and interaction. These two areas are discussed below.

#### **4.1.1 SA and L2 threshold level**

Numerous studies have explored the interaction between SA participants' initial L2 proficiency and linguistic gains during their stay abroad. It seems that pre-departure L2 proficiency plays a significant part in whether SA students achieve L2 gains or not. The threshold level for grammatical competence of SA participants was first suggested by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1995) who found that grammar and reading scores were best predictors of the acquisition of Russian as a foreign language during SA. Intermediate learners may therefore need a well-developed lexical and grammatical base but also a better working memory capacity so that more input can become intake (Lafford & Collentine 2006: 117). Otherwise, they tend to focus more on the meaning and ignore the form which results in neglecting many L2 grammatical markers. As regards more advanced learners taking part in SA programmes, they may have more cognitive resources and better lexical and grammatical competence to focus on and acquire the L2.

Segalowitz and Freed (2004) investigated oral production skills and cognitive abilities of forty university students, 22 of whom received FI in Spanish as a second language, and 18 studied in Spain for a semester. The study looked at changes to their speed and automaticity of lexical access and speed and efficiency of attention control. The SA participants displayed gains in oral fluency, however, it could not have been ruled out that out-of-classroom context was the sole factor responsible for this. The SA participants received formal instruction while abroad and the improvement was hypothesised to be attributed to students' learning abilities and the higher than the at-home group's number of instruction hours. Segalowitz and Freed (2004) concluded that a certain threshold level of L2 lexical access and word recognition is needed for SA participants to benefit the most from the experience. Earlier, Payne and Whitney (2002) hypothesised that the capacity to retain longer segments of input and hold longer strings of language for output may also be key to L2 acquisition.

Smemoe-Baker (et al 2014) having reviewed a number of studies hypothesises that, while a certain proficiency threshold is needed, it should be low enough for short-term stays abroad to be measurable. Learners beginning their SA programmes with advanced levels of oral proficiency (measured by OPI, discussed below) appear to benefit less than those starting at intermediate levels. Likewise, Muñoz (2010) found that less proficient siblings improved significantly more than their older and more proficient siblings during year's stay abroad with a family.

#### **4.1.2 SA and input, output, and interaction**

Despite the fact that some learners (particularly those at intermediate levels at the programme onset) manage to achieve significant linguistic gains while abroad, some research highlights how SA does not always lead to greater gains than FI (DeKeyser 2007, Collentine 2009, Sanz 2014). The picture remains however unclear as it is extremely difficult to capture the amount, the nature, and the variation in input received by SA participants. As Pérez-Vidal (2017) observes, it is almost impossible to measure the quality and quantity of language interactions

that SA students engage in while abroad with instruments other than self-reports which are more often than not unreliable.

One attempt to record L2 contact was Freed's (et al 2004) Language Contact Profile (LCP) questionnaire which evolved over the years and became a widely used instrument in various studies and in various contexts (also in academic classrooms and intensive domestic immersion). The pre-test includes questions about language learning experience prior to the departure, while the post-test version requires of learners to assess, among others, the amount of time devoted to learning a foreign language, the number of hours devoted to filling in target language forms, having conversations, etc. The LCP is a fine attempt to record opportunities for input and interaction, yet, as Pérez-Vidal (2017: 649) observes, it "does not lend itself to providing an exact quantification of time on task with target language".

A different research tool is one for measuring ethnic identity (Laroche, Pons & Richard 2009). In one of the parts of the questionnaire the authors ask learners to assess the degree to which they used their L1 and L2. These measures are operationalized as the percentage of usage of both languages for media (e.g., radio, TV, and newspapers) and for interactions with other people. Using the constant sum scale procedure, the authors ask the participants to distribute 100 points between L1 and L2 for each activity.

A yet different approach is the adoption of contact diaries (e.g., Coleman 2015). The input and interactions are tracked by asking learners to meticulously document the frequency of exchanges with the target language speakers, later these reports are visualised through plot diagrams.

These tools, however, still rely on self-reports. Even if they tell us something about the quantity of input and interactions, they say very little about their quality. Put simply, the greatest challenge for researchers is monitoring all the possible exchanges while abroad. The alternative, as Dervin (2014: 25) suggests, might be to connect the participants to microphones that would record their exchanges, but the idea is more than controversial and it is doubtful whether anybody would agree to take part in such research.

The situation is further complicated by the fact, that in most cases, SA programmes such Erasmus+ in Europe or Community Development, Language and Culture in America offer their participants courses in countries, where the academic programme is conducted in a language (usually English) different to the official language of the country. For instance, when Polish students travel to a Spanish-speaking country they take their course in English and communicate with other students in English, yet the linguistic landscape (language displayed on public and commercial signs) and the language used outside their educational institution that surrounds them is Spanish. This creates additional research challenge as it is extremely difficult to disentangle the amount of exposure in a given language that each student receives.

Yet the input and interaction opportunities in both the academic and the official language are much greater than those for at-home students. To simplify the matter, while the at-home students may take their whole course in the target language (similarly to foreign language philology students), they are not pressed to communicate with other students in the target language outside their classrooms. SA students, on the other hand, unless they speak the official language of the country, must still resort to the target language *if* they want to interact with their hosts. At the same time, they find themselves immersed in the naturalistic context of the official language and the culture of their target country.

Yet, surprisingly, recent research shows that many SA students do not avail themselves of such interaction opportunities (Devlin 2014, Pellegrino 2005, Jackson 2008, Mitchel et al 2015). It appears to run counter to the whole idea of studying abroad, but in fact they avoid interacting with their hosts and resort to sticking to their country mates or other international students as it easier for them to get together with them than with the locals. Because of this,

SA programmes sometimes come under criticism or at least scepticism from more socially-oriented researchers (e.g., Block 2003) who point out to cases where the benefits of SA are lost on students and the whole experience becomes nothing more than just a vacation.

#### **4.2 SA and non-linguistic variables**

SA and SLA research has shown that the non-linguistic variables that SA participants bring with themselves to the experience may greatly influence L2 acquisition. Understanding them may help make sense of the variation in proficiency outcomes. Research results accrued thus far suggests that intercultural competence is, apart from social networks variables, the strongest predictor of L2 gains yet other variables are at stake.

##### **4.2.1 Age**

Although the relationship between L2 acquisition and age has a long research tradition, the impact of age on L2 acquisition during SA has been investigated by only a handful of studies. Most research so far has focused on older learners, which naturally reflects the trend in the available SA programmes in that there are more adult than young sojourners. The known research compared differences between children and adults (Llanes & Muñoz 2013) and between older and younger children (Muñoz 2010). The L2 gains have been assessed by measuring oral and written fluency, lexical and syntactic complexity, and accuracy. These studies have shown that younger learners are at an advantage when it comes to naturalistic contexts. SA proved more beneficial for children ages 10-11 than for adults aged 19-31 (Llanes & Muñoz 2013). Also, younger children were at an advantage over older children displaying greater L2 gains (Muñoz 2010). Llanes (2012), who compared an at-home group of young learners to their SA peers during their 2-month stay, reported that SA benefited the 11-year-old children in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

##### **4.2.2 Aptitude**

The construct of aptitude includes a number of components such as phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, and memory capacity. The scarce studies regarding the role of aptitude in the context of SA seem to confirm our general knowledge of the role of aptitude in L2 acquisition in that the speed of lexical access and memory control are strongly related to L2 gains. For instance, as regards working memory, Sunderman and Kroll (2009) asked SA participants to complete a translation recognition task and a picture-naming task in order to investigate lexical comprehension and production for learners with and without SA experience. It turns out that a certain level of working memory is needed to reach L2 accuracy in the context of SA (Sunderman & Kroll 2009). Phonological memory appears to be a predictor of oral gains while abroad (O'Brien, Segalowitz, Freed & Collentine 2007) while speed of lexical access and its efficiency (or word recognition and automaticity) have been reported to be related to oral proficiency and fluency (Segalowitz & Freed 2004). Taguchi (2008) also observed that the speed of lexical access and contact hours were correlated with comprehension.

##### **4.2.3 Motivation**

Research on motivation and attitudes during SA revealed generally that learners' willingness to stay and/or live in a foreign country increased after their stay abroad, whereas linguistic self-confidence and the effort to learn languages was higher in FI learners who stayed at home (Pérez-Vidal 2017), although individual case studies of former SA participants' growing motivation to continue learning L2 have also been reported (Róg 2017a, 2017b). SA participants also display a greater motivation to travel, to meet new cultures, and expect better career prospects (Allen 2013, Juan-Garau & Trenchs-Parera 2014). Also, L2 anxiety has been

reported to decrease significantly after SA experience (Allen & Herron 2003; Michiko & Takeuchi 2015).

#### **4.2.4 Willingness to communicate**

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is understood as a learner's drive to seek opportunities to interact in the L2. WTC is dynamic and context-dependent. In SA contexts, WTC has been initially shown to be positively influenced by the experience of studying in a foreign country (Dewaele & Wei, 2013) but most studies relate it to the sense of equality/ inferiority with the target culture (Du 2015, Furuta 2015, Róg 2017a). For example, Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pietrzykowska (2011) report on a survey conducted among Polish students of English philology concerning WTC with other cultures. Apparently, despite Polish students' positive disposition towards other cultures and their aspirations to travel and study abroad, that they do not necessarily wish to become involved in intercultural relations (2011: 130). Polish students proved to be rather unwilling to initiate conversations in a foreign language (e.g., while standing in a queue) as they felt inferior to other cultures, however, the authors (2011: 130-131) point to the fact that this state of affairs could also be true for their mother tongue.

#### **4.2.5 Personality**

Many SLA studies emphasised that aspects of a learner's personality (e.g., openness to experience, extroversion/ introversion, or risk-taking) may influence how they acquire L2. In SA contexts, unsurprisingly, having an open personality and willingness to engage in new experiences were found to be prerequisite for L2 acquisition. It has been demonstrated that openness and extroversion were strong predictors of heightened L2 use and that openness was particularly predictive of linguistic proficiency (Ożańska-Ponikwia & Dewaele 2012). Also, while some learners display lesser extroversion and lesser openness, certain SA programme designs may in fact push them to more L2 use and thus greater L2 gains (Dewey 2012, Dewey et al 2014). Some studies found no relationship between personality and L2 success (Baker-Smemoe et al 2014) concluding that perhaps learners with different personality traits employ different learning strategies.

### **5. Data collection tools**

Traditionally, SA research tools encompass questionnaires and interviews as primary data collection sources. More currently, research landscape changes as scholars make good use of digital technology, such as recordings, (audio and video files), using interview transcripts (coded with e.g. NVivo software), e-surveys (e.g., Google Form or Qualtrics), narratives (SA blogs, online diaries, essays), illustrations provided by SA participants (digital drawings, maps, mind-maps, sociograms) (Jackson, Chan & Tongle 2018). SA students may be contacted by researchers using computer-mediated communication (e.g., Facebook, Skype, or Whatsapp) (Back 2013).

As regards intercultural competence, its level is often measured with the use of either The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennet 1986) or its evolved version the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003). L2 proficiency is usually measured with the use of oral proficiency interviews. These three tools are described below.

#### **5.1 The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity**

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity has been developed by Bennett since 1986. Its aim is to provide a framework for explaining how people embrace intercultural differences. A participant's current state of intercultural sensitivity is placed on a continuum of increasing intercultural competence. With increasing understanding and acceptance of cultural differences individuals move from ethnocentrism (understanding of one's culture as

being central to reality) towards ethnorelativism (understanding of one's culture as one of the elements organising reality). In this way, they can reflect on foreign values, beliefs and identities, and reshape one's own and integrate new perspectives into their identities in order to become intercultural mediators.

Denial    Defence    Minimisation    Acceptance    Adaptation    Integration →

The progression on this continuum may not be linear and participants may revert back to previous stages. This may follow unsatisfactory intercultural experiences or a prolonged time without intercultural contacts. The DMIS has been found useful by researchers working in the field of SA (e.g., Anderson et al 2006, Jackson 2008).

### **5.2 Intercultural Development Inventory**

Numerous researchers (e.g., Engle & Engle 2004, Medina-Lopez-Portillo 2004, Berg 2009, Jackson 2009, Baker-Smemoe et al 2014) also used Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) developed by Hammer, Bennet and Wiseman (2003). IDI assesses the development of intercultural competence during a 20-minute test comprised of 50 questionnaire items. Each item is placed on a 5-point Likert-type scale. IDI identifies five stages of the development of intercultural competence based on the DMIS: denial, polarisation, minimisation, acceptance, and adaptation. The score, therefore, reflects the current stage of a participant's intercultural sensitivity. IDI is suitable for self-adaptation.

### **5.3 Oral Proficiency Interviews**

Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) are used to track changes in SA participants' spoken L2 accuracy and fluency. Although they are very useful for teaching practitioners, as they provide holistic scores, they are not very useful for researchers. Marijuan and Sanz (2018: 188) explain that for one thing, OPIs include multiple language components, and secondly, they may not be sensitive enough to track progress made by more advanced L2 learners. Therefore, OPIs are used by researchers mainly to measure changes in learners' developing fluency, understood as the ability to combine words and sentences into smooth speech (Baker-Smemoe et al 2014).

Most studies (e.g., Allen & Herron 2003, Baker-Smemoe et al. 2014) use mainly American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview, which is a 20-minute face-to-face interview between a certified ACTFL tester and an examinee. It is a globalised and standardised functional speaking test during which the tester evaluates the examinee on a scale from Novice (1) to Superior (10). Although these scores do not reflect linear gains in proficiency, they are easily translated into numerical values, which allows for statistical analysis.

## **6. Conclusions**

As transpires from the studies reported above, no one L2 acquisition context is superior to others. Learners in formal instruction (FI), study abroad (SA), or immersion contexts display various linguistic outcomes which seem to be related to individual differences between them rather than the learning situation. It is those individual differences that should therefore be studied in relation to different L2 acquisition contexts.

Some consistent research findings with regards to the role of intercultural competence in SA as a learning context may, however, be identified:

- (1) There is a significant positive relationship between the level of intercultural competence and L2 acquisition, namely the higher levels of intercultural competence, the higher L2 gains.

- (2) Individual outcomes of SA are highly variable. A simple exposition to the target culture and the target language guarantees neither increased intercultural competence nor improved L2 acquisition. Success seems to depend on individual differences, such as a learner's attitudes towards the target culture, their willingness to communicate, and their proficiency level on arrival (the threshold level discussed earlier).
- (3) Pre-sojourn intercultural training helps increase SA participants' intercultural competence and may consequently add to success in L2 acquisition.
- (4) SA experience pushes mainly the development of learners' oral fluency and discursive abilities. As participants engage mostly in oral interactions in different sociolinguistic and sociocultural settings their speech rates and awareness of social discourse increase.
- (5) Measuring the amount of L2 input and output during SA remains a challenge for researchers. Among the still imperfect data collection tools are Language Contact Profile (Freed et al 2004), Language Use in Assessing Ethnic Identity (Laroche, Pons, & Richard 2009), and contact diaries (e.g., Coleman 2015).
- (6) Oral fluency is measured usually through oral proficiency interviews such as ACTFL's OPI.
- (7) Changes to SA participants' intercultural competence level before, during, and after study abroad are usually measured through the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett 1986) and Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003).
- (8) New research tools that help scholars achieve a better insight into the development of intercultural competence and L2 during SA include audio files video files, interview transcripts, SA blogs, diaries, essays, illustrations, written reports, and e-surveys.

The idealistic notions that it is enough to travel abroad and immerse oneself in the language to acquire it have been challenged by current research. Sending learners abroad without enough intercultural guidance is, more often than not, setting them on a collision course with the new culture. A need for a stronger link between SA and SLA research remains an issue.

If, as evidenced above, increased levels of intercultural competence denote more openness towards the target culture and the target language, then efforts should be made to enhance intercultural competence levels before learners embark on their journeys. Pre-sojourn orientation sessions which are aimed at preparing students for SA seem to be best opportunities for intercultural training. Optimising pre-sojourn preparation may allow SA participants to make the most of their journeys, both in terms of intercultural contacts and L2 acquisition. Classroom intervention should be aimed, on the one hand, at preparing learners for culture shock, providing country-specific information, and teaching them culture-learning strategies and, on the other hand, at developing their L2 skills in order to achieve the required threshold level that would maximise interaction opportunities during SA.

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