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## Study abroad: an essential part of language acquisition

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Running head: STUDY ABROAD- AN ESSENTIAL PART OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa  
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### **Introduction**

I chose to study abroad for similar reasons as the majority of second language students. I presumed that living fully immersed in the language would shower me with knowledge and I would come back fluent and sounding like a native speaker. As Pellegrino admitted (1998, para. 1), “Students, teachers, and researchers alike commonly agree that one of the most effective and efficient means for becoming proficient in a second language is study abroad.” In addition, like most students, upon my return people were surprised I was not perfectly fluent in the language. What I did gain was far more than I had ever expected. It was this personal change I underwent while studying abroad that caused my desire to investigate the trends between studying abroad and language acquisition. After studying abroad, my interest in Spanish came alive.

I lack words to convey what I gained from studying abroad. I may not be able to explain just how much I learned or I saw, but everyday something reminds me of my time abroad. I know that as a person I grew an inexplicable amount and as a second language learner I communicated more than I ever thought was possible. My experience studying abroad challenged me to want to know more about the process of my own second language acquisition.

The present qualitative study will demonstrate and provide evidence from personal interviews that other students had similar invaluable experiences after studying abroad. Two direct quotes from these interviews portray the impact studying abroad had on them. Lisa, a participant in the present study, stated, “It is impossible to explain to someone the emotions of living in a strange place with strange people and learning to love them in such a short amount of time.” Another participant, Rachel, expressed that, “You have lived experiences nobody here can ever understand, and you made memories you can try to share with people, and it is not going to be the same.” These personal changes that students undergo while studying abroad affect their

language acquisition process and growth in the language. After carrying out my research, I discovered that the personal growth a student undergoes while abroad positively affects their second language acquisition.

This study is significant because it delves a step deeper into how study abroad affects the individual. Most studies focus solely on the communicative environment and measuring changes in oral proficiency a student experiences from their time abroad. This study reflects further on the changes a student undergoes as an individual and how it can affect their future experience with the language. This investigation into the value of study abroad is significant for the Spanish programs at the University of Northern Iowa because presently it is not mandatory to study abroad as a Spanish language student. This study provides meaningful data for faculty to promote studying abroad more extensively. On a larger scale, the research gathered can also be applied to other institutions and language programs at the university level. As an undergraduate thesis with limited time for extensive research, it leaves many avenues of research open for further exploration and advancements in the field.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Undergraduate foreign language students undergo the process of second language acquisition, which may occur at different speeds and levels of accuracy depending on both individualistic and external factors. Some of these students choose to participate in a language immersion experience abroad to supplement their foreign language study. According to Open Doors data, 273,996 United States students studied abroad during 2011, of which 15,344 were foreign language students. The Spanish speaking countries of Spain, Costa Rica, Argentina,

Mexico, Chile, and Ecuador were all in the top 25 list of destinations for these United States study abroad students (Institute of International Education, 2012).

According to the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom is the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages. This overall goal emphasizes one of the council's five standards—communication. "Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom," is what should motivate second language learners (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). This shift in emphasis toward communication makes studying abroad even more important. One of the foremost goals of communication is real interaction. Real communicative interactions means students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions in the target language. (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999)

Students undergo changes while studying abroad that affect their second language acquisition. The acquisition of language during this study abroad period can be quantitatively assessed using measurable gains, however it can also be viewed through the learner's perspective in a more introspective approach. When investigating language acquisition in the latter manner, it may be harder to draw large generalizations as participants' own perceptions of their language and learning process are examined, however this type of qualitative research allows a different, more in-depth study. It allows one to understand language acquisition with emphasis on personal growth and impact of the experience on the participant (Pellegrino, 1998). Although these qualitative studies can be highly telling, one must also be careful not to assume them to be a vast and far reaching representation of reality.

### **Existing Research in the Field**

One method of studying the students' changes is through quantitative testing. Numerous studies have used various aptitude tests in order to gauge improvement during the students' time abroad. Barbara Freed (1995) has spent much time attempting to quantify students' gains by employing the Oral Proficiency Interview scale, which is a standardized assessment of speaking ability. This study of second language students concluded that studying abroad is beneficial in terms of oral proficiency. A major collection of similar quantitative studies can be found in Barbara Freed's (1995) *Second Language Acquisition in a Study-Abroad Context*. Most of the studies compiled in the book conclude that students studying abroad experience larger gains in speaking and listening rather than reading and grammar (Freed, 1995). Collentine (2004) quantitatively measured gains in grammatical parts of speech such as verbs and subordinate clauses. Collentine (2004) found that study abroad participants experienced an increase in vocabulary and could produce more semantically dense sentences. Due to the nature of the research, a larger emphasis will be placed on literature that has a more qualitative style than that of quantitative.

Much of the qualitative research carried out previously studied students pursuing other languages, but the parallel research could also be applied to the UNI students studying Spanish. An elaborate study by Ginsberg and Miller (1995) was performed on a group of students learning Russian. This study had two parts: aptitude tests before and after studying abroad, but also an in-depth study of students' perceptions of their time abroad to uncover the ideas that students have about language and language learning (Ginsberg and Miller, 1995). During their time abroad students were asked to record detailed reports of a variety of language situations in diaries, journals, and oral narratives. This allowed for the study of the student's perception of his or her own learning and gains. Students may think that they are not learning because they tend to have

more narrow ideas of language acquisition, however in interviews they may share stories or anecdotes that better represent a more communicative-based competency, one is able to better understand how their time abroad more completely affected the process (Ginsberg and Miller, 1995).

Miller and Ginsberg's research acknowledged their students' perception of language to be a fixed system with only one correct way to say things and whom based their success on grammatical correctness. They found that this way of thinking might have restricted the student's ability to gain communicative flexibility while studying abroad (Ginsberg and Miller, 1995). Many times students think about language learning in a more linguistic competence with a classroom-based view instead of learning the language with a communicative goal (Ginsberg and Miller, 1995). This means that when gauging how much they have learned, students think more about how grammatically correct their statement was instead of whether it communicated the message properly.

Lennon (1989) said that his students felt study abroad pushed them to speak and interact with native speakers who gave the students a more colloquial, native like, idiomatic experience than available in the classroom. The students reported strong improvements in speaking and listening (Lennon, 1989).

Another study with a more qualitative emphasis was that of Dekeyser (1991), who studied a group of students during their time abroad in Spain, while simultaneously studying a control group at a home. He gave the subjects both pre-tests and post-tests, but he also spent time observing interactions and spoke with the subjects. He found no significant differences between the grammar and oral proficiency of the two groups at home and abroad. However, while focusing more on individual differences and how learners compensate for gaps in their

knowledge, he noted different communication strategies that were carried out in the students abroad while interacting with native speakers, which hinted at greater overall fluency (Dekeyser 1991).

More and more researchers are beginning to question the guarantee of fluency and automatic improvement from study abroad. They are beginning to suggest an outcome affected by numerous factors, saying that the advantages of study abroad are multi-dimensional. Wilkinson (1998) chose a qualitative method to understand the participant's point of view. Wilkinson (1998) drew attention to the "language myth" which suggests that study abroad will automatically lead to language acquisition because of the sheer number of hours students are exposed to the language. She found that for her participants the second language was usually not the language of choice, and the students had difficulties communicating with native speakers (Wilkinson, 1998). When she analyzed her recorded conversations with students spending a summer abroad in France, she found that when learning about all of the out of classroom experiences the students underwent, it seemed the participants were in actuality taking the classroom with them and engaging in instructor-student like roles with native speakers. Also, she found that most of the communication problems came from cultural differences rather than linguistic problems. Wilkinson's data confirmed the complexity and variables that interact in the learning process the students undergo (Wilkinson, 1998).

In order to better understand the multi-faceted issue, new research has emerged which studied more specifically how variation in learning contexts during study abroad affects students' outcomes. Numerous factors affect what is gained from the time abroad. These extra linguistic factors are harder to study when carrying out simply a quantitative study. Isabelli (2002) studied the extra linguistic factors such as motivation, contact with the host culture beyond the



classroom, and attitude toward the host culture. Her study showed that highly invested and motivated learners with more extended social networks, experienced greater linguistic gains (Isabelli, 2002). Duration of stay is another factor that may affect learning gains. Engle and Engle (2003) suggested the difficulty of comparing language outcomes when the range of programs offered differ tremendously. They classified the numerous types of programs and the elements that each offered, including length and housing. They urged the creation of a standardized classification system across the board, so that students are better prepared and receive a more uniform experience. They believe that it would also help linguists to better gauge language learning (Engle & Engle, 2003).

Most research on study abroad focuses on linguistic and language gains the students' undergo. Of particular interest to this study is research regarding personal growth and study abroad. Bicknese (1974) found that study abroad participants experienced considerable personal changes. He stated his participants were able to deeply penetrate the host culture, experience a liberal education, and create a more objective view of the world (Bicknese, 1974). Warden et al. found similar personal gains in his study abroad participants (1995). His participants reported developments in personal growth, independence, and knowledge of the native culture and people (Warden et al., 1995). Laubscher's participants reported gaining independence and self-reliance and especially becoming more confident in their own abilities for speaking a second language (Laubscher, 1994).

### **Conclusion**

The extensive research carried out in this field has many different potential directions. One can test linguistic improvement by using aptitude tests before and after studying abroad, or one can simultaneously compare a group studying abroad to a group studying at home, finally one

can perform in-depth interviews to better understand the learning experience by one individual. No matter the route taken, an array of extra linguistic factors exist that will affect the language gains. By acknowledging these factors as a part of the experience one can better understand the individual's acquisition process. Much of the existing quantitative research suggested that students studying abroad experience greater language growth in speaking and listening skills rather than grammar and reading skills. This means that the students' communicative ability increased. Existing qualitative research suggested that understanding the language gains is not straightforward. Many of the qualitative studies found that numerous factors played into the students' success while abroad. They affirmed that communicative gains were likely, however the amount of gains depended highly on the learner's motivation and experiences while abroad. Other factors like lengths of stay and living situations also may have affected the outcome.

Existing research suggested that participants studying abroad all experienced personal growth. Of this research none of the studies tried to connect how the personal growth affects the participant's language acquisition. It will be the goal of this study to explore this gap in the research. By using a qualitative method of study, I will gain background information on the participants and hear a first person account of different dynamics that affected their learning. I will strive to understand how the personal growth students experience while abroad along with constant exposure to the language affects their language acquisition process.

## **Methods**

### **Research Questions**

Given the large variety of research existing surrounding study abroad, the current study seeks to explore the value of study abroad for the Spanish programs at the University of Northern Iowa by asking the following research questions:

1. How do the situations and experiences that the students are exposed to while abroad affect second language acquisition?
2. How does personal growth a student undergoes while abroad affect their second language acquisition?

### **Participants**

After receiving IRB approval, an email was sent to all Spanish majors and minors from the assistant department head including a brief description of the research study and my email contact information. After receiving numerous replies, I chose two participants from each of three different study abroad locations. The participants were selected using a purposive strategy since I intentionally screened the participants (Esterberg, 2002). I did this because I wanted to research findings on study abroad in a Spanish-speaking country in general, and I did not want to limit my research to only one country.

Next, I elected to interview participants who had spent a variety of times abroad from 2 months to 8 months. Again, I wanted my findings to be more universally applicable and not focus on the length of study as a contributing factor. Finally I chose two males and four females with age ranges of 20-24. My screening process was to select interviewees with all types of experiences and backgrounds in order to place less emphasis on length of stay, age, and study abroad location. After selecting participants, I met individually with each of them in a study room and voice recorded the interviews. The interview was open ended, but I followed an interview guide included below in Appendix D. The format begins with more general questions and gets somewhat more specific, but also proceeds in a logical, and chronological order. The interviews were then transcribed to allow for further analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I performed qualitative research, which was gathered by carrying out semi-structured interviews with second language students who have studied abroad. Language acquisition has no finite end—rather it is a process. This means variability in results will exist. Measuring someone's improvement in this process is difficult to recognize. By conducting individual interviews, the participants can knowingly give real insight into their own learning and growth, but possibly may unintentionally reveal valuable information. Only six people were interviewed, which is a small number, but when dealing with qualitative research it is more about the depth of the interactions. I fully acknowledge that I investigated the perceptions of these six individuals, but by choosing participants with a wide range of experiences, I created a group that could be an accurate representation of the student population at UNI. I chose qualitative research because it allows more individualistic study, and I can formulate in-depth conclusions based on the participants' experiences, and not just touch the surface by relying on simple surveys or tests. This method of interviewing allowed the interview to be tailored to the participant, so that they could express his or her own experiences and ideas (Esterberg, 2002).

### **Results**

This study will highlight the real communicative interaction and personal growth that the students underwent while abroad. It will then relate how these changes affect the students' language acquisition process. This study focuses on students' recollections of the language acquisition process. I am comparing perceptions in the present of events that took place in the past as they relate to an unfinished process.

The students reflected on their own experience before studying abroad in order to understand what was gained abroad. In this case, the majority of the participants' Spanish language experience prior to studying abroad came from the home institution classrooms at the

high school and university level. Studies like this can be particularly challenging because every student has a different experience while abroad. Students may have different motivation levels and goals, and every student experiences a variety of situations in the language. It is doubtful two students could ever have the same experience.

However, from the students' perceptions, I did learn about what they perceived to have gained during their time abroad, especially from the perspective of the interface between personal growth and language acquisition. This information can be useful when we consider the research questions. The results of the study confirm that the situations and experiences the students had while abroad allowed for constant real communicative interaction with proficient speakers. This communication allowed for an increase in vocabulary, exposure to slang and more colloquial language, and beneficial feedback from native speakers. All of these findings meant that the students were forming relationships and memories within the language, which aided in the creation of a new language self. The students also underwent personal growth and large gains in confidence, which is reflected in the language self. The language self that developed from this growth abroad cultivates a newfound desire to continue and excel within the language causing further language acquisition.

### **Real Communicative Interaction**

Initially, my study set out to determine how continuous exposure to the language affected second language learners. I knew that the participants would be with the language all hours of the day, and I wanted to investigate how this would affect language acquisition. My data did confirm that this communicative interaction was extremely important, however after conducting the interviews my findings suggested that something even deeper existed. It is still appropriate to address the data uncovered pertaining to real communicative interaction because this interaction

is what invoked the personal changes in the participants that was found to be even more significant in this study. Throughout the results sections direct quotes from participants are labeled with identifiers. The pseudonyms: Karen, Lisa, Ben, Mark, Carly, and Rachel were used.

No matter the length of time spent abroad, the types of courses taken, or the level of proficiency they started with all of the students interviewed spoke about the importance that actively communicating every day can provide. One of the foremost goals of communication is real interaction. Karen's impressions, taken from an interview after spending time abroad, captures what real communicative interaction can provide a student, "You learn how to use the language and not just the general structure and the formal way they say it." This real communicative interaction that all the participants experienced allowed the students to begin forming their language self. By absorbing themselves in the whole experience of the language, the participants underwent personal changes, which in turn affect their language acquisition.

I discovered that while studying abroad, the students were able to appreciate the language as something more fluid and interactive. When asked about previous experience with the Spanish language, all of the students reported that the majority of their exposure to the Spanish language was in home institution classrooms. All of the students had taken 3-4 years of high school Spanish. One student only had two university level Spanish courses before studying abroad, while all of the rest of the students had 4-6 semesters of Spanish courses at the university level. According to the participants' perceptions of their experience with Spanish prior to study abroad, they were not confident interacting and conversing in the language, however they all felt fairly confident when it came to reading comprehension, writing, and grammar.

### **Students' situations and experiences.**

The situations and experiences the students were exposed to during their time abroad allowed for constant real communicative interaction with proficient speakers. These interactions brought about an increase in the students' vocabulary, colloquial language, and valuable feedback from the proficient speakers. These outcomes meant the students had formed relationships and memories within the language that aided in the creation of a language self. This language self is responsible for further language acquisition.

When discussing their time abroad the students spoke about two different types of encounters that affected their language acquisition experience. The first type the students' acknowledged was the classroom interaction while abroad. This study worked to understand what the students gained abroad, and so a comparison between classrooms was not investigated. However, the second type of encounter that influenced the student's acquisition of second language was their out of classroom experiences. The interaction with the Spanish language that they experienced was of a completely different style than prior experience, which previously came solely from the home institution classroom. Their real world interactions were allowing them to witness the language first hand and to better understand that Spanish is not something set in stone yet something that is constantly changing and malleable. Rachel spoke about the out of classroom exposure, "I realized you couldn't stop learning."

While abroad the students learning did not stop when they got out of their classroom and the language exposure continued with host families, friends, and locals. The students stated that before studying abroad they did not have access to this type of exposure. All of the students in the study lived with host families, however two students were placed with other English speakers and one student in a more apartment style situation with other English speakers. This type of arrangement consists of a host family that has created separate living quarters to cater to

numerous foreign exchange students at one time. In this set up the students are more isolated from normal familial interactions and it creates an atmosphere that is more like English speaking students living together.

After living and interacting in numerous Spanish-speaking cities, most of the students made Spanish-speaking friends with whom they were required to converse in Spanish. One student was in an intimate relationship with a native, which allowed her to interact with all of his friends. Another student attended numerous church services and youth groups each week that allowed her interaction with a variety of people. Some host families introduced the students to other native speakers. Finally, when out in the city carrying out small tasks such as buying a bus ticket or speaking to a waitress, the students were able to expose themselves to even more speakers. Commonly, taxi drivers and bus drivers allowed for tremendous interaction as few spoke English and frequently the students found themselves slightly lost and were forced to interact. In these types of situations the student had to seek means to exclusively interact in Spanish. All of this additional exposure to the language allowed for the students to witness and use the language first hand. These types of experiences taught the students that with a language comes flexibility as they were placed in situations that were unpredictable and new.

### **Vocabulary.**

These out of classroom experiences allowed the students to be constantly exposed to and interacting with highly proficient Spanish speakers, and more importantly they were not able to fall back into English. Vocabulary was a topic that commonly came up throughout the interviews. The students reported that there was a vast amount of vocabulary that they had never had to use; yet these words were in fact very common words in everyday language. Ben recalled



an example of this type of daily vernacular, “little vocabulary words like steering wheel or shoestring.”

Over and over again I heard that students’ conversational vocabulary skyrocketed. When forced to adapt quickly they were able to soak up an abundant amount of vocabulary that was important for these everyday encounters. They learned this vocabulary from the communicative interaction they experienced. Instead of searching through dictionaries, they were asking or finding these words through everyday interactions. Ben remarked on the progress of his vocabulary during his time abroad, “It expanded ten-fold I am sure.”

### **Colloquial language.**

A side effect of the constant interaction with proficient Spanish speakers for the students was the realization that people communicate differently. Countless times the students reported that slang was one of the most difficult problems they faced when trying to speak with proficient speakers. The students learned that colloquial words or phrases are vast and highly transient depending on location and age group. Carly noticed that her host mother would use slang for one thing and then the younger generation would use different slang to describe the same thing.

Some of the students noticed that proficient speakers would drop endings or add their own, which illustrates that in a language there can be differences in pronunciation. Other students noticed that some speakers used diminutives and others have the lisp, which illustrates another facet of the language—differences in usage. Not only do they have their own words, but also they have “modismos” or sayings that are also regional. Ben was constantly confronted with the greeting “pura vida” and had to learn the message it presented. This type of interaction with proficient speakers again emphasized that the language itself is something more fluid and less fixed and uniform.

These types of realizations allowed them to understand that the goal of language is communication not perfection. Combine the slang with the quick speaking native accent and problems and panic could arise, however the students reported that they learned to think quickly on their feet and combat this in order to not get lost within the language. Students reported ways in which they managed to communicate effectively without being able to communicate perfectly, as they found themselves switching topics, pantomiming, or circumnavigating the word searching for another explanation.

### **Feedback.**

In addition to exposure to the host language and observing proficient speakers use it, the consistent and long-term interaction in the target language by the student caused further gains in acquisition. The communicative setting helped the student to develop oral proficiency and it allowed the students to receive large amounts of feedback on their language skills beyond just what they were receiving inside the classroom. All of the students spoke about their experience in gaining feedback from the proficient speakers whether it was their professors, host parents, or friends. They all felt that these corrections were essential in helping them to improve their language skill. The students expressed that before studying abroad, they were more apprehensive taking risks with the language. When having to speak every day to get by they were forced to speak more impulsively and not over think. This meant making mistakes, but in their mistakes they found learning. Lisa's statement emphasized this point, "Someone would actually point it out to us and that was the most helpful to me because if I don't get corrected I'm not going to know." Similar thoughts were expressed by all of the students and can be found under Appendix A.

The participants did admit to speaking English when together some of the time and a few participants noted the struggle to meet native speakers, however all of the participants did say they had valuable interaction with proficient speakers and constant practice with the language.

### **Personal Growth and Confidence in Second Language**

Upon carrying out my interviews, I observed something very noteworthy. The students spent the majority of the interview discussing the personal changes that they experienced studying abroad. I began to deduce that obviously the amount of exposure and interaction they experienced abroad was important in their progression with the language, but these personal changes that they all spoke about with such self-assurance and excitement had to hold a key to language acquisition as well.

The students I interviewed all had goals of increasing language and cultural proficiency, but none of the students predicted the individual growth that they underwent. Again, I asked the students' perceptions on their growth, so I asked them to differentiate between two specific points in time: before study abroad and after study abroad.

All of students expressed struggles and frustrations. The students stated that many of the struggles commonly came about due to cultural differences. Many of the students noted that timetables and manners were completely different from the United States. Mark expressed that he was frequently used to receiving exact itineraries and plans, and when they were faced with little organization and spontaneity he was forced to adapt. Every student reported getting lost at one point in their city and many reported feeling alone and afraid at least once. Two students were robbed and in danger. These struggles were very minor in comparison to all of the positive stories and experiences.

In all cases the students turned these experiences into personal gains and self-reflections. The students described the many benefits that they gained personally from studying abroad. Some of these include, “self-discovery (Mark)”, “more open minded” (Karen), and “life lessons (Ben).” More of the students’ personal gains can be found in Appendix B. The time the participants spoke about their own personal gains far outweighed that of the language learning itself.

A lot of the students felt that they were more open-minded and accepting. They learned that people from different countries may have different cultures or ways of living, but in the end they are people just like them. They take this acceptance back to the classroom and to their continued growth in the language. They will understand the material and language on a more personal level. Their personal relationship to the language now has roots and memories, which allows them continued motivation to grow and become even closer to the language and people.

Many of the students also mentioned that in unpredictable situations they are better able to think quickly and remain calm. As the students return to their language acquisition in the classroom, they have developed skills to aid them. The students are better able to answer questions or add to discussions in front of the entire class. Instead of hesitating or panicking, they are better able to remain calm. When the student is interacting in the class and the language, they are forming new connections and critically thinking. This allows for further growth in the language. Finally, all of the students spoke about confidence. Confidence is vital to language learners. The most growth comes from using the language and practicing it. If the students are more confident in their skills they will be more apt to exercise them.

All of this attests to the personal growth that these students underwent. They may not be able to isolate just how much they had learned academically, but every single student had no

problem acknowledging what they learned personally. What is really interesting is the way this personal growth is reflected in their second language acquisition. When they return to the classroom in the United States it is these personal attributes that drive their continued acquisition of the language. Nearly all of the students reported that they wish they had studied abroad earlier in their college career, so that they could reap the benefits in the home classroom upon return.

When asked how it feels upon their return to the classroom their responses clearly illustrate their growth. Mark reported being able to recognize his classmates who had not been abroad. All of the students report that they are much more invested in the classes now that they have been a part of a Spanish speaking culture. They expressed the classes seem more applicable and realistic to them because of their memories and experiences based in a Spanish language identity. Karen who stayed nearly a year identified herself as somewhat of a local and considered the Spanish-speaking country as her home. Carly who only stayed two months still identifies with the culture of the Spanish speaking country but to a lesser degree. They all made roots in the culture and upon their return they are more motivated to help it grow.

### **Confidence.**

The students' reported on a variety of personal growth traits and individual changes, but it is notable to continue on specifically with one aspect of personal growth—the language learner's confidence. All of the students stressed that their confidence in the language improved, so it holds a surprisingly large role in this study. Although not predicted at the onset of the study to be such an important outcome of study abroad, I found it to be a significant part of every interview. Confidence was found to be something gained across the board and I propose this to be something that learners bring back to the home institution which aids them in their further language endeavors and pushes them to continue sustaining their language self.

When performing qualitative research, quantifying or explaining gains in learning is difficult because it is based solely on the learner's perspective and most second language learners don't know how their skills have developed. I encountered this when analyzing the statements I collected from students in my research. Most of them struggled with describing specifically what they gained linguistically. Although the students weren't able to describe just how much they learned about specific parts of the language they were able to describe their feelings toward the language. The feeling that recurred over and over was confidence in the language. These are some of the statements that the students reported about their confidence levels. Karen commented, "I got to a place where I was confident in my language and could make jokes and have fun and I was more myself in the language." Ben said, "My biggest improvement was my confidence level and not caring if I made a mistake."

All the students had similar feelings that can be found in Appendix C. The students after returning, express that they speak the language with much more confidence and attempt to produce more complicated ideas even if they are unsure. This risk taking allows for the students to continue progressing with the language. After living in an abroad setting where nearly everything depended on the language, the students had to take gambles with the language. While pushing themselves further in the language and creating a language self their confidence grew.

## **Discussion**

### **Impact on Language Acquisition from Students' Experiences Abroad**

The students' situations and experiences abroad create a unique learning environment. This learning environment is one that allows for constant exposure and interaction within the target language. Real communicative interaction causes the students to form relationships and memories within the language that aid in the formation of a language self. A language self is an

alternate identity that the learner may develop during their immersion because they are searching for their own place within the language. This language self is implicated in personal relationships and experiences with the language, and it has unique personality traits tied to the manner in which they were developed. The language self positively affects second language acquisition because the students have a deeper investment with the language and want to continue to see it grow. The new person that they create within the language promotes the desire for further language learning.

I would claim that participants did not simply gain language acquisition from exposure alone, but all of the listening and real communicative interaction did help them in their discovery that the Spanish language is more than just what is presented in class or textbooks. More importantly, the real communicative interaction allowed the students to create meaningful relationships with people. As the participants interacted and formed relationships, they were undergoing internal changes.

When students are studying language abroad, their learning experience transforms into one that does not shut off. When a student begins to understand the fluidity of the language they are able to begin to produce more complex and spontaneous thoughts themselves, which is a characteristic of higher proficiency. The communicative setting of study abroad allows the students to develop their language skills. Continuous communication in a large variety of situations allowed for the students endless practice with the target language. These findings show that the students realized just how complex, chaotic, and unpredictable the language can be. While abroad, their lives took place in the language. Their lives were just as variable as the language, and so living in a communicative setting with the language allowed for experiences and interactions that can't be recreated. This takes learning to a new level, but it also aids in the

formation of a language self that has further language acquisition implications. It is in the chaos and unknown of an immersion experience that one can grow personally.

### **Impact on Language Acquisition from Personal Growth and Confidence**

The students underwent personal growth and gained confidence while studying abroad. They as individuals changed, matured, and grew. This personal growth was accompanied with real communicative interaction. During this time of immense personal growth, the students transformed into a second language self within the target language. The language self is different than the person who left to study abroad, and it is the language self that has a positive impact on language acquisition upon returning. The students do not wish to lose their language selves and instead have a strong desire for expansion and advancement.

I chose to carry out qualitative research because I wanted to find things I was not necessarily looking for. All of the students reported on how much they grew as individuals. I would argue that personal growth is just as important for students as language growth during the time abroad. Personal growth powers further language acquisition upon return, through the development of the language self.

I have established that through their constant exposure and interaction with proficient speakers in a communicative setting, the students were developing meaningful relationships and participating in experiences that allowed them to build the foundation of their Spanish-language identity. The personal growth accompanied with their time abroad solidified and became a part of their language self, or the person that they were creating while abroad. When they return to the United States the students have a desire to keep their language self alive. They have a desire to use it and fuel it to continue to grow. It is this language self that spurs a new elevated interest



in the language. They have a desire to continue the relationships and experiences that their new self developed while abroad.

They went from second language speakers who were passive, hesitant, and fearful of making mistakes to confident speakers who realized mistakes come with learning a language. Their goal of language learning shifted from staying within the formal lines of the Spanish they were taught to one of being able to communicate with native speakers quickly and effectively. Meaningful relationships and experiences within the language allowed them to find their own unique personality and niche within the language. This personal growth and confidence helped the students to develop a personal, profound, life-changing interest in the language. They became themselves within the language and were able to self identify as a person within the target language. This new relationship and understanding of oneself within the language is an important component of their future language acquisition.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study was carried out to better understand language acquisition for second language learners after studying abroad. I was interested in investigating how constant exposure to the language and living daily life in a real communicative setting affected a student's language acquisition. I was also interested in looking into how the personal growth a student undergoes after studying abroad affects language acquisition. I chose to carry out qualitative interviews to learn personal stories and details about the students' time abroad. Previous research had focused heavily on quantitative gains measured using oral proficiency tests before and after. I contacted possible interviewees via email and screened the participants to fit my study. In this case I selected participants that had a wide range of experiences to cultivate a more universally

applicable study. I then carried out interviews with the selected participants and analyzed the data.

After listening to the experiences of the students from their perspective, I began to see trends in the data. The students spoke about the importance that came from being surrounded by the language at all times, which is what I had expected to find. The students were carrying out their lives in the language. Life is unpredictable and disordered, so for every student the experience varied. Every daily event meant another chance to practice their second language whether it was by listening or interacting. The students experienced new situations, which meant using the language in a new way. It also meant building relationships and developing oneself within the language. As the students grew personally, this real communicative interaction allowed them to develop a new personality or language self within the language.

The students all commented on the personal changes they underwent as individuals. These changes will go on to affect many aspects of their lives, however since they are second language students the individual changes will also affect their continued language acquisition. Personal growth and confidence is crucial to continued language acquisition. The language self that developed from this growth abroad cultivates a newfound desire to continue and excel within the language. As the student begins to experience individual changes it is reflected in their language acquisition. They begin to relax, exude confidence, and be more active in the language. They connected to the language on a high level while abroad, and upon returning must constantly strive to maintain that connection and by doing so continue to grow in the language.

The students' experiences and situations occurred within the target language causing developments in personal growth and confidence. These factors allowed for the formation of a second language identity in which the students came into themselves in another language. The

language self affects second language acquisition as the students strive to keep their new identity from fading. The students return from time abroad with an immense desire and passion to maintain their language self and not to lose the person they became while abroad. The investment the student has with the language is far deeper and personal. The students after studying abroad have just come alive within the language and yearn to preserve it, and this is when further language acquisition can thrive.

### **Limitations of Study**

The students that were interviewed have no particular education on language acquisition. This means that from all of the interviews carried out I was receiving the students' perspectives and perceptions. Of course perceptions are not believed to be true for everyone across the board, they can be helpful to begin to understand ideas that are held by the particular group being studied. When studying perceptions, one must know that they are highly affected by attitudes and impressions. Therefore, I want to question some of the perceptions that the students' held in order to challenge their outlooks.

This study did not specifically differentiate between factors that could have largely affected the outcome, but rather it used general statements to gather information from the group as a whole. There were only six interview participants, so if the data was split by length of time abroad, level of proficiency, or other modes it would drastically lower the amount of information gathered in certain areas. Instead I chose to use the group as a whole, which allowed me to gather information from all six participants to illustrate my claims. If time permitted a further larger scale qualitative study allowing for individuals to be divided by certain factors would be preferred.

Because I carried out my interviews after the students had returned home, they might hold certain attitudes that affect their perceptions. They may reflect back on their time abroad with exaggerated fondness since they now find themselves back in the midst of the typical stress and frustrations of real life. This may affect the study as they may idolize or place undue admiration upon thoughts when thinking about their time abroad.

Finally, the students may disregard the home institution classroom setting and glorify their interactions and experiences while abroad. The students may perceive that their in classroom time is not as important as being with the language, but I would like to argue that they both hold importance when learning the language. If the students chose to go abroad before taking any classes in an at home institution it is highly unlikely I would have seen the same results. They would not have been able to thrive, improve, and engage with proficient speakers if they had no prior classroom training in controlled setting. When interacting out of classroom while abroad there are a vast number of variables that the student must deal with. If they have no foundations in the language they will not be able to harness the exposure and benefit from it.

### **Further Research and Significance**

In the end, this study has left more questions than answers. Originally, the study was to investigate from a more linguistic viewpoint. The beauty of qualitative research was that I uncovered something underlying that exists and affects language acquisition. It is something the students perceive to be highly important and therefore deserves to be further investigated. Within the bounds of this study I was unable to delve as deeply into this investigation as it deserves. Had I known that all of the participants would lay such emphasis on their individual changes, I would have been able to cater the interviews to learn more. This study is highly significant because existing research has validated that students undergo personal growth while studying abroad, but

very little research has looked into the effect that this change has on language acquisition. It is especially significant for language instructors because it supports study abroad as means to cultivate a language self. Upon return, the student has a desire to use that other self and what they learned to grow. This will create stronger language programs with active and engaged students.

This study opens a door into additional research such as a study designed specifically to investigate personal growth while abroad. Other variables may also be tested including length of stay or living situations' affect on personal growth. The nature of this study did not probe into the possible differences and perceptions of the acquisition process based on living conditions, but rather the experiences the students had with the families. It would be interesting to propose a study comparing the language acquisition of those students who were the only student in the house with the host family, to students living with host families but in a more apartment style set up with other English speakers. Additional studies need to be carried out to understand how the personal growth is affecting language acquisition.

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## Appendix A

## Feedback

“She knew exactly what to say to us when we made a mistake.” (Ben)

“They were always telling us what we did wrong.” (Ben)

“They’ll correct you and they’re not scary about it.” (Ben)

“Someone would actually point it out to us and that was the most helpful to me because if I don’t get corrected I’m not going to know.” (Lisa)

“She would explain what I did wrong.” (Lisa)

“People will correct you, I learn a lot more from my mistakes.” (Karen)



## Appendix B

## Personal Growth

“Expanded my world view” (Ben)

“You can make friends anywhere you go.” (Ben)

“How to stay level headed and calm” (Carly)

“Self actualization” (Ben)

“I matured.” (Lisa)

“More open minded” (Karen)

“Life changing” (Karen)

“My mind is so much more open.” (Karen)

“I felt like the minority for the first time.” (Karen)

“Quick thinking” (Rachel)

“People are people no matter where you go.” (Rachel)

“People go about real life in slightly different ways—and that is beautiful.” (Rachel)

“The people is what make the place, the places I saw were beautiful but they didn’t change me, but the people I met are what changed me. You won’t be changed in a Spanish classroom.” (Rachel)

“Self-discovery” (Mark)

“Independence” (Mark)

“Life lessons.” (Ben)

## Appendix C

## Confidence

“It helped my confidence in speaking Spanish” (Lisa)

“The confidence thing it was huge. Even though I know I don’t speak perfect Spanish I have confidence.” (Ben)

“I was almost timid in the language before, now comfortable. I have more courage”  
(Ben)

“I got to a place where I was confident in my language and could make jokes and have fun and I was more myself in the language.” (Karen)

“My biggest improvement was my confidence level and not caring if I made a mistake.” (Karen)

## Appendix D

College Student Interview

I'm going to ask you some questions about your time abroad. For some responses I will ask you to use a rating scale from 1-5, with 1 being the worst, and 5 being the best.

- 1) Where did you study abroad?
- 2) For how long?
- 3) How many classes of Spanish did you take before you left?
- 4) How confident did you feel speaking the language, 1 being very insecure and 5 being completely confident? Reading? Writing? Understanding native speakers?
- 5) What was your living situation while abroad?
- 6) How often did you converse with native speakers outside of the home and classroom?
- 7) What were your goals before going abroad?
- 8) How motivated were you to learn Spanish, scale of 1 to 5?
- 9) What were your classes like while abroad?
  - a. Do you feel like you learned a lot from your classes, scale 1 to 5?
- 10) What was the hardest part of communicating while abroad?
- 11) What did you feel unprepared for while abroad?
- 12) What were common communication errors that you made while abroad?
- 13) Did you have problems with vocabulary? Examples?
- 14) Did you have specific problems with conjugation or grammar? Examples?
- 15) Did you have problems with pronunciation?

- 16) When you didn't know a word or how to express something, what communication strategies did you use?
- 17) Did you gain language awareness for the region you were studying? (Sociolect) Examples?
- 18) How was your listening and comprehension when conversing with native speakers?
- 19) What did you feel you improved the most on during your time abroad?
- 20) What did you take away from your study abroad experience and what was your overall impression of the experience?
- 21) What, if anything, do you feel you learned abroad that you wouldn't in a university level language class?
- 22) Would you go abroad again? If yes, what would you do differently?

This Study by: Emillie Kenne

Entitled: Study Abroad—An Essential Part of Language Acquisition

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
University Honors

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Date Jennifer Cooley, Honors Thesis Advisor, Department of Languages and Literature

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