

Learners' Self-perception of Target Language Study in Overseas Immersion

Okim Kang

Northern Arizona University, United States

Romy Ghanem

Northern Arizona University, United States

Abstract—Studies have supported the belief that study abroad (SA) is more beneficial than studying domestically in developing oral proficiency (e.g., Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). However, little research has focused on individual learner factors related to promoting learners' effectiveness in language learning abroad, such as an ideal point in target language (TL) study in SA contexts. The current study investigated the learner-perception of their preferred time in TL study for overseas immersion self-reported by students themselves. Participants ($N=125$) studying 30 languages in 32 different countries were recruited nation-wide. The results of students' self-reports revealed that participants preferred intermediate levels of TL proficiency than any other level of proficiency. Findings of this study, even though they are based on the self-reported data, make important contributions to SA research and to the field of international education.

Index Terms—self-perception, study abroad, immersion context, target language

I. INTRODUCTION

Language educators have been interested in identifying which aspects of language abilities are most improved by studying a target language (TL) in an immersive versus at-home context. At-home contexts, as defined by Serran, Llanes, and Tragant (2011), can be divided into three types: intensive programs (where students are exposed to 20-25 hours of language instruction/use per week), semi-intensive programs (students are exposed to 10-15 hours of language instruction/use per week), and regular programs (students are exposed to 2-5 hours of language instruction/use per week). The current paper has focused on the last type of program as it relates to the participants of the study.

Empirical studies have supported the view that studying abroad (SA) may result in more benefits for students than studying domestically in developing specific language skills such as oral proficiency (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004) as well as conversational (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004) or pragmatic (Barron, 2006) competence. Some prior studies showed that language attitudes and host families responses also affected student language learning outcomes in SA contexts (Wilkinson, 2002; Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). In this paper, we define 'oral proficiency' as knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a target language (Bachman, 1990).

Despite the positive findings above, there has been lack of research to identify individual learner factors that promote learners' ability to learn a language abroad. In fact, most of the studies are exploratory in nature and very few build up on previous research (D'Urso 1997; Knight & Schmidt-Rhinehart, 2002; Whitworth, 2006). Even though the level of students' language skills going into the SA language program is known to be an important factor for predicting language learning outcomes (Rifkin, 2005; Dewey, Bown, & Eggett 2012), the effective timing and students' proficiency level for such immersion is still relatively unknown. In addition, prior studies which investigated program gains in SA contexts often focused on students' language improvement as outcome measures, but did not necessarily look at students' cultural gains or the relationship between their overseas immersion experience and their proficiency level. Further uncertainty also remains in the relationship between students' TL proficiency and their actual SA classroom performance.

The current study sought answers to the challenges of tailoring SA language programs to various student characteristics through learners' own self-perception. The study investigated the learner self-perception of TL study in overseas immersion, by examining students' self-responses to their cultural gains, their TL classroom outcome, and the degree of their immersion in their target culture. It further linked students' self-assessment results with their proficiency levels. Although the study did not include any direct measures of learners' language gains, we believe that this self-perception approach could provide useful insights into better understanding students' needs and desires.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Attainments in SA Contexts

While the popularity of SA programs has been increasing, previous research findings may illustrate only partial aspects of SA program gains considering the complexity of SA language and culture learning. Collentine and Freed (2004) discuss various studies, which display different amounts of gain in SA and at-home (AH) contexts. Their findings suggest that the AH students increased their ability to use grammar more significantly than the SA students. DeKeyser (1991) also found that language learners in a SA context improved only equally, if not less, than their counterparts studying in an AH context in terms of their grammar usage.

Most research has demonstrated that out-of-country study programs do improve at least some aspect of the participants' language abilities. Time abroad can improve language learners' oral and conversational skills (e.g., Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004), overall fluency (e.g., Möhle & Raupach, 1983), learners' lexicons (e.g. Milton & Meara, 1995), reading and writing complexity (Fraser, 2002; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004), and pragmatic competence (Kinging & Farrell, 2004; Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). In fact, most studies often refrain from reporting absolutely no gains from SA experiences because it is somewhat unusual for a study abroad student to register no gain at all (Davidson, 2010). This indicates that SA programs may not affect a learner's overall language capability, but rather may only improve a single aspect of their language ability.

Proficiency Threshold for SA Language Learning

The good level of proficiency and the optimal time of exposure after which such immersion programs can be undertaken are largely unknown. Freed (1995) and her colleagues synthesized various study abroad research and agreed that there may be a proficiency threshold for linguistic improvements attained from study abroad experiences. That is, a certain point in a learner's linguistic knowledge could make them best suited to advance their language abilities in an immersion setting (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsburg, 1993). Lafford and Collentine (2006) also suggest there is a threshold of language acquisition learners must attain before they can reap the most rewards in a study abroad context of learning.

Davidson's (2010) study examined how different periods of study and different levels of pre-immersion proficiency in a study abroad context would affect students' acquisition of a TL (Russian). Gains were determined based on American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for three skills areas: Speaking, reading, and listening. They found that there were moderate gains in speaking. Davidson (2010) added that overall learner control and awareness of language structure correlated positively with gains in all skills, and at all proficiencies, during the study abroad experience.

Although there have been many different findings in the research regarding the good time to immerse a language learner in the TL, many researchers (e.g. Collentine, 2009; Martinsen, 2008) agree that the general consensus falls in favor of beginning-level language learners gaining the greatest amount of improvement in (especially oral and aural) communication skills. This is corroborated by the findings in Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) study where participants made greater improvements when they were at less advanced levels of language learning. Davidson (2010), however, suggests this finding may be due to the fact that the majority of research has focused on beginning and intermediate students in 4-week, 8-week, or, occasionally, semester long programs.

The idea of a threshold for language learning can be a complicated matter. As Collentine (2009) suggests, "while the general notion of a threshold level is important...there are most likely specific domains that require a particular developmental threshold for overall gains to occur" (p. 221). In that way, each experience builds on itself. Segalowitz and Freed's (2004) study demonstrated that students would need at least a basic level of word recognition and processing abilities in order to substantially improve their oral abilities. Thus, it is possible that a certain level of knowledge of the TL's phonetics would be ideal before the learner could achieve significant gains in listening comprehension. Language learners may be at a threshold to make significant gains in one area of their linguistic competence (e.g. speaking abilities), but not as proficient in another area.

SA cultural gains and immersion

Not only does linguistic knowledge of the TL indicate the good time to immerse one's self in the TL but one's knowledge of the target culture may also be a factor. SA research studies pertinent to cultural gains have focused on the effects and expectations of culture on SA participants' experiences. They are often operationalized through exit questionnaires asking participants to evaluate the impact of their SA experience on their personal traits (Hansel & Grove, 1986). However, as Sutton and Rubin (2004) argue, such a method of reporting students' own opinion of personal growth may not speak directly to issues of academic benefit. As studying abroad can accelerate students' growth along some continua of cultural/cognitive/affective development (e.g. ethno-relativism development, inter-group tolerance, global-mindedness) (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), psycho-social attainments can certainly be a desirable assessment as part of the cultural gains in the SA contexts.

Rivers (1998) examined the impact of students' language gain by comparing two Russian SA environments: (1) a homestay experience and (2) a dormitory environment. She emphasized the importance of the quality of interaction with the native Russian hosts and argued that interactions were not enough if they were limited to a basic set of daily conversation topics and television watching, or if students spent most of their time doing homework in an isolated context. Other studies (e.g., Yager, 1998) have found that greater non-interactive language contact (e.g., reading books, watching television) correlated to less language gain, especially for beginning students of a second language. Similarly, Allen and Herron (2003) urge for increased contact with target culture members in order to stimulate linguistic gains.

However, what is still uncertain is how different levels of TL proficiency may affect learner's acquisition of culture and language in an immersion setting.

It is important to note that self-reports have been deemed to be unreliable when evaluated on their own and cannot replace more rigorous forms of assessment such as proficiency tests (Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012). However, many researchers have promoted or used self-reports in combination with other forms of data collection to acquire a more robust view of the topic (Cohen, 1987; Liskin-Gasparro, 1998; Pellegrino, 1998; Allen & Herron, 2003; Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belnap, 2013). Furthermore, such reports are especially important when investigating oral skills "because of the individual and contextual factors that affect language performance" when evaluating spoken data (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998, p.161). Therefore, the approach of the current study –exploring SA students' success through various learning outcomes— can help shed more light on the process of language learning so that we can ultimately better advise students about studying language abroad.

The current study sought to answer an overarching question: When is the good time (e.g. beginning, intermediate, advanced) self-perceived by students themselves in foreign language study for overseas immersion? Then, it was guided by the following sub-questions: (1) When is the learner's most preferred time to achieve positive gains when studying abroad as self-reported by students?; and (2) When is the good time self-reported by students to achieve optimal cultural and program gains when studying abroad?

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study initially recruited 143 participants to complete the pre-survey, which was to be taken before students went abroad. Due to financial difficulty and other personal issues, eighteen participants reported that they were unable to go abroad for their SA program. Therefore, the final data set included 125 participants who had completed both the pre- and post-survey. These 125 participants included 96 females and 29 males. They were comprised of members of the following ethnicities: Caucasian (96), African-American (3), Hispanic (11), Asian American (4), and multi-racial (11). The majority of the participants (122) spoke English as their home language, while three were Spanish/English bilingual. Twenty-five of the participants had had some kind of SA experience in the past, while 100 of them had had no previous experience overseas. Participants' TLs and host countries include 44 Spanish (29 from Spain, 9 from Mexico, 4 from Costa Rica, 2 from Chile), 10 French, 1 German, 3 Italian, 5 Arabic, 6 Russian, 3 Chinese, 7 Japanese, 2 Korean, 3 Hindi (India), 2 Portuguese (Brazil), 3 Swahili (Tanzania, Kenya), 10 Marathi (India), 3 Irish (Ireland), 1 Hebrew (Israel), 4 Danish, 2 Hungarian, 2 Swedish, 2 Dutch, 1 Zulu, and 1 Icelandic. In all, 30 different languages were studied by at least one participant in 32 different countries.

Participants were recruited from all over the United States for one-academic-semester programs. We made announcements via a listserv designed specifically for Education Abroad professionals (SECUSS-L@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU) to recruit undergraduate students nationwide. Additionally, we made individual contact with directors of SA programs at various state universities in the U.S. As a result, participants were recruited from 28 different statewide colleges and universities across the nation. The study included participants who took a semester long programs, but did not include students enrolled in short-term (2-6 week) SA programs.

The participants' TL proficiency was determined based upon students' self-reports in the pre-survey about their proficiency, their current TL course enrollment, and their background information provided. Initially, the proficiency was divided into 10 levels: low beginners (31), beginners (9), upper beginners (11), low intermediate (15), intermediate (24), upper intermediate (10), low advanced (15), advanced (7), upper advanced (2), and native-like (1). The study collapsed the proficiency groups for the sake of convenience: Students from lower to upper beginners (i.e., numerical values from 1-3) became one beginning level (51: 40.8%). The same process was used to create one intermediate (49: 39.2%), and one advanced (25: 20%) group. That is, students from lower to upper intermediate (i.e., numerical values from 4-6) became one intermediate level. Those from lower to native-like (numerical values 7-10) became one advanced level. Based on students' self-evaluation on their TL proficiency, solely numerical values were used for this level collapsing process. Consequently, three levels of proficiency were used for the final data analysis.

Thirty-two of the 125 participants additionally took part in online interviews, and 10 of them attended focused group meetings. Ten instructors and SA advisors provided written reflection reports. All participants were remunerated for their participation.

Instruments

The study used two (1 pre- and 1 post-) surveys. Participants were asked to complete the pre-survey before their SA experience; it consisted of 129 items in total. Upon their return to the U.S, students were asked to complete a post-survey, which included 171 items. The pre- and post- survey instruments were designed to collect information on three aspects: 1) Background information, 2) Intercultural learning outcomes (ILO), and 3) Language Immersion — the degree to which students immersed themselves in the language. Survey items were refined through several pilot phases with SA students who participated in short-term summer programs. The revised optically scanned pre- and post-surveys were adopted for the current study.

Background information. The surveys began by asking general questions about students' language learning background, their anticipated study abroad outcomes, and their impressions about their host country. The SA outcome

questions were anchored on a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“very much”). Other questions covered prior experiences abroad and gathered basic program information such as the length of the program, the country to visit, and the TL to study. There were also open-ended questions asking participants detailed description of their SA programs.

Intercultural learning outcomes (ILO). The second part of the pre- and post- survey instruments utilized the ILO measurement (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). The ILO was created to be specific to learning outcomes derived from studying abroad. As Sutton and Rubin argue, the ILO is sufficiently generic to work across a wide variety of disciplines. The 34-item survey samples items from seven content domains with 5-point Likert scales; the content domains are: (1) functional knowledge (10 items, e.g., *I know how to use a public telephone in a foreign country*), (2) knowledge of global interdependence (5 items, e.g., *I understand how foreign manufacturing affects the prices of consumer goods in the US.*), (3) knowledge of cultural relativism (4 items, e.g., *I know enough about a foreign language and culture to compare and contrast it with my own*), (4) verbal acumen (4 items, e.g., *I know how to find different ways to express an idea that I am having trouble saying to a foreigner*), (5) knowledge of world geography (6 items, e.g., *I know the names of at least four rivers in Europe*), (6) interpersonal accommodation (4 items, e.g., *I know how to be patient when interacting with people*), and (7) cultural sensitivity (3 items, e.g., *I am sensitive to how specific settings affect my style of interacting with others*). The reliability coefficients of internal items for each of these 7 dimensions were reasonably acceptable ($\alpha > .71$).

Language immersion. The study developed the language immersion survey based upon Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, and Halter’s (2004) Language Contact Profile. The survey form adapted for this study has evolved over the last decades through studies by Seliger (1977), Bialystok (1978), and is used extensively in a number of studies (e.g., Kohro, 2001). Note that as Freed et al.’s (2004) language contact profile was originally made for acquisition of Spanish as a second language, the current study revised the language of items so that they would apply to all foreign languages, rather than just Spanish.

The pre-Language-Immersion (17 items) mostly asked students questions about their previous use of their TL, while the post-survey (81 items) asked students to quantify the amount of TL contact using the following descriptors: (1) typically how many days per week (0-7)? or (2) typically how many hours per day (from 0-1 hr to more than 5 hours)? The pre-Language Immersion survey items were grouped into two sub-constructs (with overlapping questions combined) to produce two dimensions: Speaking for Social Purposes (7 items) and Exposure to Media in the Target Language (7 items). The internal reliability of the items for the two constructs was high ($>.85$). The post-Language-Immersion survey items were much greater in number and had to be grouped into five different dimensions: Speaking for Social Purposes (23 items), Speaking for Academic purposes (13 items), Exposure to Media (19 items), Exposure to Other Languages (16 items), and Writing in the Target Language (10 items). The internal reliability of the items for each dimension was also acceptable ($>.77$).

Data collection

Self-reports. This study relied on the students’ self-reports of their experiences studying abroad. Online surveys (e.g., learning background, the ILO, language immersion) were administered to the study abroad participants prior to departure and after their return. The study undertook quantitative data analysis of 125 student questionnaires, including surveys of SA participants during the academic years. Other forms of student self-assessment included two focus group meetings (an hour each with 5 students) involving sub-sets of the population who had recently returned from studying abroad. The focus groups were comprised of individuals who had taken both pre- and post-surveys. These group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Additionally, thirty-two participants agreed to participate in on-line interviews (e.g., Gmail Chat).

Faculty and SA adviser reports. The study also solicited written reports from seasoned faculty leaders and SA advisors. Ten faculty members ($N=6$) and SA advisors ($N=4$) provided end-of-program case reports that described their observations of the effectiveness or critical incidents of their program on and about the student participants.

Data analysis

The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) When is the most preferred time to achieve optimal gains when studying abroad as self-reported by students? (2) When is the good time self-reported by students to achieve optimal cultural and program gains when studying abroad? The first research question was answered through descriptive statistics at first by comparing the self-reported times provided by the students at different proficiency levels. Then, a repeated measure mixed-factorial ANOVA2 (*Time*) x 3 (*Proficiency Level*) was conducted to investigate the effect of time and proficiency levels. As for the second research question, a series of mixed factorial ANOVAs (2 *Time* x 3 *Proficiency Level*) and subsequent *post-hoc* analyses were used for each of the seven outcome variables of the ILO.

Qualitative segments of data in the study were carefully reviewed and coded; i.e., the data were organized chronologically, and written scripts and notes were reviewed multiple times. Participants’ coded data and other written documents were used as supportive evidence to elaborate and help explain the quantitative data results (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

IV. RESULTS

Self-reports on the preferred time to be abroad

In order to answer the first research question regarding students' self-perception of TL study in overseas immersion, the study started with the first sub-question, which investigated the most, preferred time self-reported by students. See Table 1. In the pre-survey, participants' preference on their proficiency level was relatively widely distributed across level. After collapsing the proficiency groupings (from lower to upper), the study yielded three levels of proficiency (the beginner, the intermediate, and the advanced). The intermediate level weighed somewhat more heavily (51.2%) in participants' preferred language proficiency for SA experiences. The intermediate level preference was followed by the beginner level (39.2%) and the advanced level (9.6%). The fewest number of participants responded that the best time to go abroad was before they studied the TL (5.6%).

On the other hand, the post-survey responses collected after participants had their SA experience, demonstrated some changes to the pattern. Less than 1 percent (0.8%) of the respondents would choose to go abroad before studying any of their TL. Only a quarter of the participants (24%) preferred the beginner levels, whereas two third of the respondents (66.4%) selected the intermediate level as the ideal proficiency to be immersed in the TL and culture. The advanced level was still the least favored (9.6%). As shown in Figure 1, while students' preference for the beginner level decreased from the pre-test to the post-test, their preference for the lower intermediate and intermediate levels increased noticeably.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS' PREFERENCE ON THEIR PROFICIENCY LEVEL TO BE IMMersed IN TARGET LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Proficiency level	Collapsed proficiency level	Number of pre-test response (N=125)	Number of post-test response (N=125)
Before learning TL		7 (5.6%)	1 (.8%)
Low beginner	Beginner	12 (9.6%)	7 (5.6%)
Beginner		14 (11.2%)	9 (7.2%)
High beginner		16 (12.8%)	13 (10.4%)
Low intermediate	Intermediate	14 (11.2%)	26 (20.8%)
Intermediate		33 (26.4%)	42 (33.6%)
High intermediate		17 (13.6%)	15 (12.0%)
Low advanced	Advanced	6 (4.8%)	5 (4.0%)
Advanced		4 (3.2%)	5 (4.0%)
High advanced		1 (.8%)	1 (.8%)
Native-like		1 (.8%)	1 (.8%)

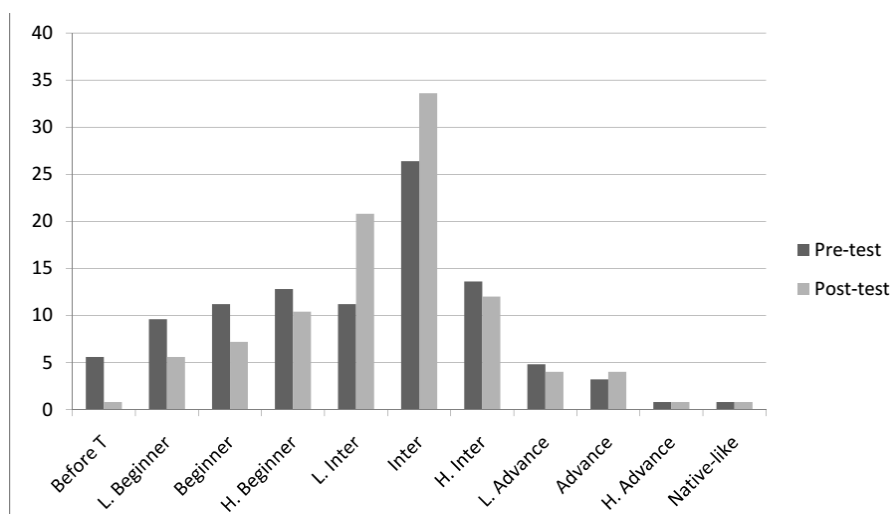


Figure 1 Percent Distribution for Participants' Preference on Their Proficiency Level in SA Immersion
Note. T=target language, L=low, and H=high.=

Participants' self-evaluated proficiency was examined for both pre-surveys and post-surveys. The study computed 2 (*Time*) x 3 (*Proficiency Level*) repeated measure mixed-factorial ANOVAs. *Time* and *Proficiency Levels* were computed as independent variables and participants' self-reports on their preferred time (1-10) were performed as a dependent variable. Participants were asked to rate their proficiency using a 10-point scale (1=low beginner and 10= native-like). Their proficiency scores were collapsed from lower to upper as one level, yielding three levels of proficiency, i.e., beginners (51), intermediate (49), and advanced (25). See Table 2 below. The means of self-reported proficiency for each level in the pre-survey were 1.60 (SD=.65) for the beginner, 3.82 (SD=.77) for the intermediate, and 5.94 (SD=1.0) for the advanced. The means of the self-reported proficiency in the post-survey were 4.12 (SD=1.75) for the beginner, 6.61 (SD=1.31) for the intermediate, and 7.67 (SD=2.05) for the advanced. There was a significant interaction effect ($F_{2, 122} = 15.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.15$) for *Time* x *Proficiency*, and a significant main effect ($F_{1, 122} = 62.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.49$) for *Time*. Tukey's HSD procedure was conducted to analyze the interaction between *Time* and *Proficiency Level*.

TABLE 2
PARTICIPANTS' SELF-REPORTED PROFICIENCY LEVELS OF TARGET LANGUAGE (N=125)

Proficiency level	No. of pre-test response (%)	No. of post-test response (%)	Collapsed Level	Mean (SD) of pre-test	Mean (SD) of post-test
Low beginner	31 (24.8)	4 (3.2)	Beginner (N=51)	1.67 (.89)	4.12 (1.75)
Beginner	9 (7.2)	7 (5.6)			
High beginner	11 (8.8)	14 (11.2)			
Low inter.	15 (12.0)	13 (10.4)	Intermediate (N=49)	4.94 (.77)	6.61 (1.31)
Intermediate	24 (19.2)	20 (16.0)			
High inter	10 (8.0)	20 (16.0)			
Low advanced	15 (12)	19 (15.2)	Advanced (N=25)	7.72(1.07)	7.67 (2.05)
Advanced	7 (5.6)	18 (14.4)			
High advanced	2 (1.6)	8 (6.4)			
Native-like	1 (0.8)	2 (1.6)			

The contrasts revealed that the intermediate and advanced levels exceeded the beginner level on the self-ratings of participants' own proficiency at post-surveys as well as at the pre-surveys ($p < .001$). Then, both beginners and intermediate learners perceived that their proficiency had improved significantly after their SA experience. The difference in the mean proficiency scores self-reported between participants' pre- and post-survey answers were significantly different ($p < .001$). In contrast, advanced learners did not find their proficiency in their TL changed after studying abroad ($M_{\text{pre-survey}}=7.72$ vs. $M_{\text{post-survey}}=7.67$). The self-evaluated mean scores of proficiency in advanced speakers slightly decreased, albeit not statistically significant.

Self-reports on optimal cultural and program gains

The second research question asked the good time to achieve optimal cultural and program gains when studying abroad. Using students' self-reports on their own progress in these areas, several items on the questionnaire were analyzed to answer this question. For the statistical analyses, each of the ILO criteria became a dependent variable, whereas the proficiency level and time remained as independent variables.

Intercultural learning outcomes (ILO). In order to better understand the optimal point in foreign language study for overseas immersion, the project investigated students' self-assessments on seven intercultural learning outcomes (ILO) with regard to their proficiency level: (1) functional knowledge, (2) knowledge of global interdependence, (3) knowledge of cultural relativism, (4) verbal acumen, (5) knowledge of world geography, (6) interpersonal accommodation, and (7) cultural sensitivity. Participants' ILO scores were shown in Table 3. Mixed factorial ANOVAs (2 Time x 3 Proficiency Level) were performed for each of the outcome variables.

TABLE 3
GROUP MEANS OF 7 ILO FACTORS FOR PRE-SURVEY AND POST-SURVEY (5 POINT-LIKERT SCALE USED)

ILO outcomes	Pre-survey			Post-survey		
	Beginner N=51 M (SD)	Inter N=49 M (SD)	Advance N=25 M (SD)	Beginner N=51 M (SD)	Inter N=49 M (SD)	Advance N=25 M (SD)
Functional knowledge	3.27 (.85)	3.23 (.68)	4.10 (.78)	4.03 (.77)	4.10 (.58)	4.34 (.46)
Knowledge of global interdependence	3.6 (.90)	3.37 (.90)	3.55 (.89)	3.7 (.89)	3.53 (.93)	3.59 (.96)
Knowledge of cultural relativism	3.84 (.75)	3.93 (.70)	4.50 (.42)	4.21 (.63)	4.37 (.69)	4.51 (.64)
Verbal acumen	3.25 (.93)	3.43 (.69)	3.96 (.88)	3.98 (.90)	4.10 (.66)	4.50 (.46)
Knowledge of world geography	3.54 (.83)	3.86 (.69)	4.06 (.79)	3.84 (.73)	4.16 (.80)	4.04 (.76)
Interpersonal accommodation	4.05 (.56)	3.98 (.65)	4.27 (.62)	4.32 (.80)	4.44 (.50)	4.59 (.67)
Cultural sensitivity	3.94 (.91)	4.2 (.73)	4.38 (.82)	4.20 (.79)	4.30 (.79)	4.44 (.59)

Note. Levene's tests were computed for the equality of error variances

As for the *functional knowledge outcome*, a main effect for *Time* appeared to be statistically significant ($F_{1,122}=21.75$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.30$). That is, participants' post-survey scores for functional knowledge ratings exceeded pre-survey scores. A main effect for *Proficiency Level* was also significant ($F_{2,122}=3.84$, $p=.004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$), in that ratings of advanced students were higher than those of beginners. However, no significant interaction effect was found between *Time* and *Proficiency Level*. The mixed factorial ANOVA analysis showed no significant effect (neither main effect nor interaction effect) on *knowledge of global interdependence* and *cultural sensitivity* variables.

For the *knowledge of cultural relativism*, a significant interaction effect for *Time x Proficiency* was found ($F_{1,122}=3.24$, $p=.043$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$). Accordingly, Tukey HSD procedure was conducted as a *post hoc* test. At the pre-survey, there were significant differences among levels of proficiency ($p < .05$); i.e., advanced learners were more culturally knowledgeable than beginners and intermediate learners before the SA experience. After studying abroad, however, beginners and intermediate participants showed a significant improvement in their knowledge gain about cultural differences ($p < .05$). Advanced learners did not demonstrate any substantial changes in this outcome rating before and after their SA experience. Changes in the cultural gain were found to be especially high in the intermediate level. A main effect of *Time* achieved statistical significance with a medium positive effect size for this cultural relativism rating ($F_{1,122}=12.83$, $p=.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$). This means that participants' rating of their *cultural knowledge* on the post-survey

exceeded those of the pre-survey with all the three levels of learners combined. A significant main effect for *Proficiency Level* with a medium positive effect size ($F_{2,122}=2.69, p=.019, \eta^2 = 0.06$) also emerged.

The analysis found no significant interaction effect for the *verbal acumen* outcome variable. Main effects were found both for *Time* with a high positive effect size ($F_{1,122}=20.34, p=.000, \eta^2 = 0.27$) and for *Proficiency Level* with a medium positive effect size ($F_{2,122}=5.08, p=.004, \eta^2 = 0.09$), however. In other words, regardless of the proficiency level, the mean scores of the verbal acumen ratings in the post-survey exceeded those in the pre-survey. In addition, the mean differences were statistically different between beginners and advanced level participants in this outcome measure. Similar patterns were found in the *knowledge of world geography* outcome variable. Two main effects achieved statistical significance with medium positive effect size: *Time* ($F_{1,122}=7.96, p=.006, \eta^2 = 0.06$) and *Proficiency Level* ($F_{2,122}=4.80, p=.005, \eta^2 = 0.08$).

Lastly, the *interpersonal accommodation* outcome variable did not receive any significant interaction effects, but a main effect for *Time* appeared significant with a high positive effect size ($F_{1,122}=5.73, p=.000, \eta^2 = 0.15$). Participants' ratings of this outcome variable were higher in post-surveys than in the pre-surveys.

Qualitative responses

Thirty-two out of 125 participants took part in online interviews. These interviews included 12 beginners, 16 intermediate, and 4 advanced learners. The qualitative responses (online interviews, focus group meetings, and faculty reports) helped understand participants' SA experience as well as their preference for language and culture immersion. Most intermediate learners responded that they went abroad at the right time and at the right level of proficiency. Advanced learners were generally content with their SA experience. In contrast, some beginners in the study shared some negative SA experiences and opinions due to their lack of language ability. The following comments were excerpted from some beginner-level students:

- (1) I had zero skills of the language beforehand, and by the end I definitely felt like I had a good basing in the basic language. I think if I had gone with an intermediate level of learning, the experience would have really propelled my learning. (Online interview, female student, studying Irish, beginner)

A female high-beginner who studied Spanish in Mexico provided the following comment. This implies that a lack of proficiency hindered the student from practicing her TL in the immersion context:

- (2) ...Professors often say that...like get a boyfriend, get a girlfriend and you will become fluent. ... because I feel that I had a boy and he only spoke English with me and I was like no and it's cuz my Spanish sucked and I was like, great, you know.... (Focus-group meeting, Female student, studying Spanish, high beginner).

Participants who went abroad at intermediate and advanced levels shared their experience as well as their perspectives on language learning. Students' responses at these levels were mostly positive, indicating that their experiences were fairly satisfactory, and they seemed to have found that their overseas experience took place at the right time of their proficiency level. Some comment examples are as follows:

- (3) I was at an intermediate level before the program and came back to America being at an advanced level. I improved because we had Mandarin classes from 8am-noon MTThF and I was in a home-stay that didn't speak any English.... (Online interview, female student, studying Mandarin Chinese, intermediate)

Faculty leaders, SA advisors, and SA program coordinators expressed their opinions on the best time point in SA immersion through reflection reports. In terms of the best time point in overseas immersion, opinions varied.

- (4) I would say as a high intermediate learner would be the most appropriate level for a student to take on an immersion experience. With a lower level and with such a relatively short stay in the foreign country, a student will be learning things they could learn in the classroom at a lesser cost, and they quite frankly aren't able to fully take advantage of the time abroad. (Reflection report, faculty member, Spanish program)

- (5) I truly believe there needs to be an emphasis on language and culture immersion EARLIER. About 80% of students quit after the intermediate low level or the 2000 college level/high school Spanish 2 level. They lose motivation and an incentive to learn the language. (Reflection report, SA faculty leader)

Comments from the 10 instructors and SA advisors in this study did not show any particular patterns. Nevertheless, a majority of them stated the importance of the practical and economical benefit in which students are interested in the SA contexts. Three out of 10 faculty advisors agreed that students who went abroad without any basic skills in the TL might not fully benefit from the time abroad.

V. DISCUSSION

The project sought to answer questions regarding the learner perception of their FL study in overseas immersion, focusing on students' own self-reports on their preferred language proficiency, and the proficiency effect on students' cultural gains. The study solely focused on learners' perceptions as a starting point to better understand the complexity of language learning abroad.

Self-report on the preferred time to be abroad

Overall findings about learners' self-perception of their SA immersion revealed that although participants' responses varied and each proficiency level held its own advantages, learners found that the intermediate level appeared somewhat more beneficiary to them than other levels; accordingly this level was favored by more participants in this study. In fact, the growing consensus among researchers is that there is a threshold which learners must reach to benefit fully from the

SA context of learning (Collentine, 2009; Lafford & Collentine, 2006). In this study, two thirds of the respondents (66.4%) selected the intermediate level as the ideal proficiency to be immersed in the target language and culture after their SA experience. In the pre-survey, about forty percent of the participants chose the beginner level as an ideal stage, including those (5.6%) who chose the time of “before studying the target language”. Conversely, in the post-survey, only one quarter of the participants (24%) preferred the beginner level, having less than 1% of the participants who chose the option of “before studying the target language”.

The TL levels of proficiency particularly preferred by students were low intermediate and intermediate (See Figure 1). Note that the current study included 51 beginning and 49 intermediate students (self-reported). This suggests that beginning-level students considered the intermediate proficiency a desirable level, even though their SA time did not begin with that level of proficiency. Although the general consensus among SA scholars seems to be in favor of the beginning language level (Collentine, 2009; Martinsen, 2008), students’ own preference seemed to be somewhat differently situated.

When participants self-rated their own improvement in language learning, beginners and intermediate learners perceived that their proficiency had improved significantly after their SA experience. Nevertheless, advanced learners did not notice changes in their TL proficiency studying abroad. Findings with advanced level learners concur with previous literature (e.g., Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993). Advanced level students might self-perceive their language gains somewhat differently from beginner/intermediate level students. That is, their focus might be on the refinement or sophistication of their TL rather than on individual language skill gains.

The positive influence of SA on students’ language abilities has been widely documented (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Milton & Meara, 1995; Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011; Du, 2013; Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom 2013). However, these studies have often accounted for particular language improvements through researchers’ proficiency measurements, and do not necessarily relate their scores to students’ actual perception of their own language improvements. As most SA language programs do not often provide institutionalized proficiency scores at the end of the program, students’ self-judgment of their own improvement may weigh heavily in their satisfaction of SA language learning experiences.

Self-reports on the optimal cultural and program gains

The intercultural learning outcomes (ILO) were measured through mixed factorial ANOVAs (*2 Time x 3 Proficiency Level*). Five out of 7 outcome variables received significant main effects in *Time*; i.e., participants’ post-survey scores exceeded pre-survey scores for the following measures: *functional knowledge*, *cultural relativism*, *verbal acumen*, *world geography*, and *interpersonal accommodation*. These score increases were evident regardless of participants’ proficiency levels. The main effect in *Proficiency Level* was also significant with some outcome variables notwithstanding the SA experience. These variables include *functional knowledge*, *verbal acumen*, and *knowledge of world geography*. That is, ratings of advanced students were higher than those of beginners in these measures. Therefore, the best time to develop functional knowledge, verbal acumen, and knowledge of world geography would be when the student has achieved high proficiency in the TL. The *knowledge of global interdependence* and the *cultural sensitivity* variables received no significant effect in this study.

Some cultural gains were achieved differently across the *Proficiency Level*. For example, *knowledge of cultural relativism* received a significant interaction effect for *Time (2) x Proficiency Level (3)*. Before the SA experience, advanced learners were more culturally knowledgeable and more willing to accept others’ cultural practices than beginning and intermediate learners. On the contrary, after the SA experience the beginning and intermediate participants achieved a significant improvement in their knowledge gain about cultural differences between their culture and the TL culture, while advanced learners did not. Gains in *cultural relativism* were found to be especially high in the intermediate level, possibly due to pre-program levels of cultural sensitivity (Martinsen, 2008). In Sutton and Rubin’s (2004) study, when SA students were compared with domestic students in terms of their learning attainments, this knowledge of cultural relativism showed the most powerful effect on their outcomes.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings of the current study can contribute to SA research and to the field of international education because they provide some insights on students’ SA learning outcomes as well as their perceptions toward SA language programs, even though findings are based on students’ own self-reports only. The generalization of the current findings should be carefully made as participants’ self-reports could have relied on their subjective self-judgment. Future research can incorporate direct measures of learners’ learning outcomes such as proficiency tests before and after their SA experience. While recognizing such limitations, however, this self-report method has been proved to be quite informative in SA contexts and has been used by many previous studies (Pellegrino, 1998; Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013). These findings can benefit students, parents, and teachers, as well as, governing boards, international studies specialists, higher education leaders, and SA directors and coordinators in suggesting ideas on the effective point-in-time for maximally effective SA immersion experiences.

In the field of second language acquisition, building a theory of acquisition and identifying all the factors that come into play is still in the early stages (Collentine & Freed, 2004; DeKeyser, 2007). Students may be able to take a full advantage of an SA setting only when they are linguistically prepared. Perhaps specific domains require a particular

developmental threshold for overall gains to occur, and therefore, preparedness in AH settings becomes crucial for the benefits of a SA environment to take full effect (Brown; 2009; Collentine, 2009, Dewey, Bown, & Eggett 2012). The current study attempted to investigate the learner-perceived best point in TL study for overseas immersion by collecting students' self-assessment reports for their language and intercultural acquisition, but did not investigate any direct, linguistic constructs in outcome assessment because it was not the main purpose of the current study. A future study, however, investigating threshold levels of development at which SA will be optimally beneficial through the analysis of speaking performance is recommended. Finally, the current study used a tool, called ILO to measure the intercultural learning outcome in particular. Although the validity of this ILO instrument has been tested (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), the interpretation of the ILO results should not be over-generalized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was entirely supported by the TOEFL Board Grants and Awards. The authors express special gratitude to all participants and coordinators of SA programs included in this study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Allen, H. W., & Herron, C. (2003). A mixed-methodology investigation of the linguistic and affective outcomes of summer study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 36, 370-385.
- [2] Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Barron, A. (2006). Learning to say 'you' in German: The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in a study abroad context. In M. DuFon & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language learners in study abroad contexts* (pp. 59 – 88). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- [4] Bialystok, E. (1978). Language skills and the learners: The classroom perspective. In C. Blatchford & J. Schachter (Eds.), *On TESOL '78* (pp. 224-231). Washington DC: TESOL.
- [5] Berg, M. V., Paige, R. M., & Lou, K. H. (2012). *Student Learning Abroad. Student Learning Abroad: What Our Students Are Learning, What They're Not, and What We Can Do About It*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- [6] Brecht, R. D., Davidson, D. E., & Ginsberg, R. B. (1993). Predictors of foreign language gain during study abroad. Washington, DC: Occasional Papers of the National Foreign Language Center.
- [7] Brecht, R. & Robinson, J. L. (1993). Qualitative analysis of second language acquisition in study abroad: The ACTR/NFLC Project. Washington D.C.: National Foreign Language Center.
- [8] Brown, N.A. (2009). Argument and debate in foreign language instruction: A case for the traditional classroom facilitating advanced-level uptake. *Foreign Language Annals*, 93(4), 534-549.
- [9] Cohen, A. D. (1987). Using verbal reports in research on language learning. In C. Faerch & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Introspection in second language research* (pp. 82-95). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- [10] Collentine, J.G. (2009). Study abroad research: Findings, implications and future directions. In M. H. Long & C. J. Catherine (Eds.), *The handbook of language teaching*, (pp. 218-233). New York: Wiley.
- [11] Collentine, J., & Freed, B. F. (2004). Learning context and its effects on second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26, 153-171.
- [12] Creswell, J., & Clark, V. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [13] Davidson, D. E. (2010). Study abroad: When, how long, and with what result? New data from the Russian front. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43, 6-26.
- [14] DeKeyser, R. (1991). Foreign language development during a semester abroad. In B. F. Freed (Ed.), *Foreign language acquisition research and the classroom education* (pp. 104-119). Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath & Co.
- [15] DeKeyser, R.M. (2007). Study abroad as foreign language practice. In R.M. DeKeyser (Ed.), *Practice in a second language: Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology* (pp. 208-226). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [16] Dewey, D. P. (2004). A comparison of reading development by learners of Japanese in intensive domestic immersion and study abroad contexts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26, 303-327.
- [17] Dewey, D. P., Belnap, R. K., & Hilstrom, R. (2013). Social network development, language use, and language acquisition during study abroad: Arabic language learners' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 21, 84-110.
- [18] Dewey, D. P., Bown, J., & Eggett, D. (2012). Japanese language proficiency, social networking, and language use during study abroad: Learners' perspectives. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 68(2), 111-137.
- [19] Du, H. (2013). The development of Chinese fluency during study abroad in China. *The Modern Language Journal*, 97(1), 131-143.
- [20] D'Urso, T. (1997). Direct and mediating effects of individualism-collectivism orientation and social support on international students' adjustment. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.
- [21] Fraser, C. C. (2002). Study abroad: An attempt to measure the gains. *German as a Foreign Language Journal*, 1, 45-65.
- [22] Freed, B. F. (1995). Language learning and study abroad. In B. F. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 3-33). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [23] Freed, B. F., Dewey, D. P., Segalowitz, N., & Halter, R. (2004). The language contact profile. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26, 349-356.
- [24] Freed, B. F., Segalowitz, N., & Dewey, D. (2004). Contexts of learning and second language fluency in French: Comparing regular classrooms, study abroad, and intensive domestic programs. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26, 275 – 301.
- [25] Hansel, B., & Grove, N. (1986). International student exchange program--Are the educational benefits real? *NASSP Bulletin*, 70, 487, 82-90.

- [26] Isabelli-Garcia, C. L. (2006). Study abroad social networks, motivation, and attitudes: Implications for SLA. In M. DuFon & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language learners in study abroad contexts* (pp. 231 – 258). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- [27] Isabelli-García, C. (2010). Acquisition of Spanish gender agreement in two learning contexts: Study abroad and at home. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(2), 289-303.
- [28] Kohro, Y. (2001). A pilot study of the linguistic impact of study abroad experiences on the writing of Japanese college ESL learners in America. *JACET [The Japan Association of College English Teachers] Bulletin*, 33, 57–72.
- [29] Kinginger, C., & Farrell, K. (2004). Assessing Development of Meta-Pragmatic Awareness in Study Abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 19-42.
- [30] Knight, S. M., & Schmidt-Rinehart, B. C. (2002). Enhancing the homestay: Study abroad from the host family's perspective. *Foreign Language Annals*, 35, 190-201.
- [31] Lafford, B., & Collentine, J. (2006). The effects of study abroad and classroom contexts on the acquisition of Spanish as a second language: From research to application. In B. Lafford and R. Salaberry (Eds.) *Spanish second language acquisition: From research findings to teaching applications*, 103-126. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- [32] Liskin-Gasparro-Gasparro, J. E. (1998). Linguistic development in an immersion context: How advanced learners of Spanish perceive SLA. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(2), 159-175.
- [33] Martinsen, R.A. (2008). Short-term study abroad: Predicting changes in oral skills. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43, 504-530.
- [34] Milton, J., & Meara, P. (1995). How periods abroad affect vocabulary growth in a foreign language. *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics*, 107–108, 17–34.
- [35] Möhle, D., & Raupach, M. (1983). Planen in der Fremdsprach [Planning in the foreign language]. Bern: Peter Lang.
- [36] Pellegrino, V. A. (1998). Student Perspectives on Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 4(2), 91-120.
- [37] Rifkin, B. (2005). A ceiling effect in traditional classroom foreign language instruction: Data from Russian. *Modern Language Journal*, 89, 3-18.
- [38] Rivers, W. P. (1998). Is being there enough? The effects of homestay placements on language gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31, 492 – 500.
- [39] Segalowitz, N., & Freed, B. F. (2004). Context, contact and cognition in oral fluency acquisition: Learning Spanish in at home and study abroad contexts. *Studies in Second Language*, 26, 173-199.
- [40] Seliger, H. W. (1977). Does practice make perfect?: A study of interaction patterns and L2 competence. *Language Learning*, 27, 263–278.
- [41] Serrano, R., Llanes, Á., Tragant, E. (2011). Analyzing the effect of context of second language learning: Domestic intensive and semi-intensive courses vs. study abroad in Europe. *System*, 39, 133-143.
- [42] Sutton, R. C., & Rubin, D. L. (2004). The GLOSSARI project: Initial findings from a system-wide research initiative on study abroad learning outcomes. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 65-8.
- [43] Whitworth, K. F. (2006). Access to language learning during study abroad: The roles of identity and subject positioning. Retrieved from: The Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Theses and Dissertations for Graduate School, 6917.
- [44] Wilkinson, S. (2002). The omnipresent classroom during summer study abroad: American students in conversation with their French hosts. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 157 – 173.
- [45] Yager, K. (1998). Learning Spanish in Mexico: The effect of informal contact and student attitudes on language gain. *Hispania*, 81, 898-914.

Okim Kang (PhD, University of Georgia, 2008) is Associate Professor in the Applied Linguistics Program at Northern Arizona University. Her research concerns aspects of L2 pronunciation, speech perception and production, automated speech scoring, oral language proficiency assessment, language attitudes, and World Englishes. This scholastic effort made a significant contribution to the field, which led the PI to recipient of the 2013 TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award by the TOEFL Grants and Awards at Educational Testing Service. Her articles have appeared and are scheduled to appear in top-tier journals and received numerous external grants (e.g., Educational Testing Service, Cambridge ESOL Examination for 2 separate projects, and TOEFL Board Grants for three separate projects)

Romy Ghanem was born in Lebanon and is currently a 4th year PhD student in the applied linguistics program at Northern Arizona University. She received her MA in linguistics and teaching English as a second language from Ohio University in 2010.

Her research includes speech perception and production as well as speech convergence and alignment. She has been working as a coder and trainer on a Speech Automated Recognition project for the past two years under the supervision of Okim Kang and David Johnson.