Examining factors associated with individual differences in L2 proficiency development during study abroad

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Study abroad research has shown that, contrary to common expectations, the linguistic gains made by study abroad participants are often subtle and subject to substantial individual differences. This paper examines the role of a range of learner- and programme-related factors in differential L2 proficiency gain during study abroad with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The discussion will focus primarily on a number of hitherto unexplored factors, including L2 use anxiety with other non-native speakers, self-efficacy in using the L2 in social interactions, the perceived present-future self-discrepancy, as well as attitudes towards one’s own national group.

The findings derive from a mixed methods study of 96 German ERASMUS students on study abroad in the UK, whose English proficiency upon programme-entry was upper-intermediate to advanced. All students completed C-tests of overall English language proficiency and questionnaires that inquired into the students’ mobility history, their L2 learning background, L2 motivation, intergroup attitudes and aspects of the study abroad experience itself, including their social contact experiences. Both instruments were administered at the onset of the study abroad period, one term into the programme and prior to the students’ return. Repeated interviews with a sub-sample of 15 students abroad served to illuminate the observed developmental patterns from an emic perspective.

In discussing the above-mentioned factors, I will draw on multiple regression models of their relationship with overall L2 proficiency gain, as well as on the insights gained from the over 40 student interviews on how these factors play out in the process of L2 learning during study abroad. The discussion will also address the implications of the findings for programme development.

Keywords: self-concept, study abroad, EFL, individual differences, SLA.