

# Research Forum

## Accessibility of the Sojourn Experience and its Impact on Second Language Study, Education, and Research

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Although opting to study abroad individually or collectively is one of the decisions potential study abroad (SA) students have to make, the choice faced by students is not adequately researched in the extant SLA literature. I report a small-scale statistical comparison between participants of custom-designed programs and those who study abroad on their own. The comparison is conducted in terms of students' perceived English, sociability, willingness to use English, and sense of fulfillment with the SA experience. The study revealed that students participating in collective programs rate their English lower and are less willing to communicate in English. There were no group differences in sociability or level of satisfaction. The findings are discussed in relation to the current SA phenomenon characterized by convenient and diverse modes of access to the SA experience and by the sometimes nonlinguistic motivation for seeking such experiences.

語学留学を考えている学生は、個人での留学か大学などの語学研修への参加、いずれかの選択肢から選ぶこととなる。しかし両タイプの語学留学の比較についてはこれまでの知見には含まれていない。本稿では、英語圏での個人留学生と語学研修参加生の2集団を対象とし、英語でコミュニケーションしようとする気持ちや語学留学への満足度などにおいて、統計的に差が見られるかどうか分析した。本研究の結果、集団で語学研修に参加している学生たちのほうが、個人留学生よりも英語でコミュニケーションしようとする気持ちが弱く、また自らの英語力観を低く評価していることがわかった。しかし、語学留学への満足度にはグループ間に差は見られなかった。こうした結果を語学留学の大衆化と動機の多様化という面から考察した。

Gateway 21 Company, a major Japanese private agency mediating between individuals planning to study abroad and overseas language schools and host families, filed for bankruptcy on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, with 1.29 billion yen in total debts. The agency, registered as a travel agency by the Tokyo metropolitan government, was not affiliated with The Council of International Education and Language Travel, “the only organization registered by the Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure and Construction” that aims to “improve the quality of international educational, language travel and youth travel programmes” (CIEL, 2008). The live telecast of creditors rushing to the failed travel agency for its emergency meeting is testimony that studying abroad is an established enterprise but one that is not always appropriately regulated.

The role the agencies play in the study abroad (SA) experience is rarely highlighted in the second language education literature, presumably because study-abroad research in general, either quantitative or qualitative, entails a group of high school or college students collectively participating in “a study-abroad program” organized by their school or some organization (e.g., Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Lafford, 2004; Magnan & Back, 2007) with, in some cases, the researchers themselves being the student supervisors. Agencies, on the other hand, generally tend to cater to the individual student, and researchers are rarely attached to sojourns undertaken through this model.

The research trend understating the role of agencies is also understandable because collectively packaged programs undertaken by collaborating institutions are nowadays one of the most common types of study abroad experiences, and L2 teachers and/or researchers are concerned with the effect of those programs on their students’ L2 development. Indeed, as Lafford (2004) argues, “many foreign language educators, SLA researchers, and university administrators...are more interested in finding out the concrete effects of SA programs on the linguistic abilities of their students” (p. 202). These educators, researchers, and administrators likely keep in mind collectively organized “educational language travel” and L2 progress rather than individually planned “travel” and anecdotal sojourn experiences. Another possible rationale for more representation in the research literature of students studying abroad in groups is the matter of accessibility. Individuals oftentimes study abroad through mediating agencies and do not present ready-made research groups.

Nonetheless, the long line of clients waiting outside for seats at an emergency meeting held by the failed agency, Gateway 21 Company, reminds L2

educators and researchers that such agencies cater to a large proportion of sojourning students. Are individually and collectively sojourning students equally satisfied with their study-abroad experience? Do they differ in the study-abroad experience? To the best knowledge of the author, this comparative research question has been overlooked, apart from Coleman (1997), a review article that refers to the substantial differences between the European model endorsing lone sojourning for a long period and the American one in favor of "the short-term transfer of cohesive groups of American students to a different geographical base . . . without necessarily abandoning an American educational framework" (p. 1).

The individual/collective sojourn comparison seems to be worthy of scrutiny given that, first of all, the SA experience has become more accessible to the general public in the industrialized parts of the world and opting to study abroad individually or collectively is one of the major decisions for potential SA students. My own anecdotal experience is that secondary and postsecondary foreign language teachers are asked for advice about the effects and benefits of the two types of SA. That students would have this concern, I argue, is common sense and not in need of empirical demonstration.

Furthermore, L2 research has identified the issue of solidarity among collectively sojourning students and "the paucity of L2 use by students in an SA setting" (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004, p. 295) as a problem. Most recently, Magnan and Back (2007), identifying American students in France who spent too much time with their compatriots (e.g., "I spent nearly all of my time with English speakers/American students," p. 52), hypothesize that orientation sessions held at college prior to departure "may, in reality, indoctrinate students into an Americanized community of practice that will impede their language acquisition" (p. 57). Coleman (1997) argues that students who socialize largely within the L1 group or with another out-group of nonnative L2 speakers "may fail almost wholly to acculturate, and make relatively little linguistic progress" (p. 13).

The present study reports a small-scale statistical comparison between a sample of collectively sojourning students and a sample studying abroad on their own. These two groups are considered in terms of their perceived English skills, willingness to communicate in L2, and sense of satisfaction with the SA experience. The study does not posit that studying abroad individually is substantially superior to studying abroad collectively or the other way around. Rather, it is directed by the belief that this between-group comparison can produce useful research-based knowledge which will assist with counseling students who are deciding what kind of program to choose.

Focusing on Japanese students enrolled in the same host institutions at the same time of the year, the present study operationally defines students studying collectively as those who arrive at the institutions in a group and who are enrolled in special programs designed for them, and students studying individually as those who arrive at the institutions on their own and are enrolled in regular classes with other international students. As described in the ensuing section, the study controlled some key variables such as duration of sojourn.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

As part of a larger scale research project conducted with Canadian ESL schools involving 216 short- to long-term students from Japan (Kobayashi, 2006; 2007), this study focuses only on those who had never studied abroad before, had been in SA sites from 3 to 8 weeks, and who were staying with host families. These criteria resulted in a total sample of 74 students comprising 26 students studying on their own (average age 21.77 years) and 48 students in short-term programs chaperoned by teachers from Japan (average age 19.96 years).

These institutions are well reputed and thrive on a relatively balanced student body in terms of nationality. At the time of on-site research, no regular classes were identified as dominated by students from a single country, which was confirmed by interviewing the staff and being informed of the school policy on class placement, observing different levels of classes (including participant observation), and joining, more than once, a one-day new student orientation and assessment held every week.

### ***Instrument***

The survey was conducted at five institutes (100% response rate) and at another two schools via the take-home method (75% and 74% response rate). The first part of the survey, which concerned biographic data, was designed to differentiate SA students on individual and collective sojourns while controlling for key variables such as SA period and current residence. The latter part comprised items (with open-ended questions) designed to elicit data on students' SA experience. The variables subject to statistical analysis in the present study are as follows:

*Personality* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ): Four items on extroversion and introversion were adapted from the Japanese version of the Maudsley Personality Inventory (Eysenck, 1964). The items (e.g., "Are you the kind of person who socializes only with a limited number of people who you like?") **were presented** in this study on a 4-point Likert scale.

*Perceived English skills* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ): Five items were designed to take into account Japanese students' communication in and outside classrooms. Students rated their English skills on four items (e.g., "Can you express in English what you want to say?") using a 3-point scale and their level of understanding of their teachers' English ("To what extent do you understand your teachers' English at your current school?") on a 4-point scale. An overall scale from the two variables was created by converting the different metrics to z-scores.

*Willingness to communicate in English* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ): Although the operational bandwidth of measurement of the scale is quite narrow with only two items included, this alpha value is respectable given that alpha is positively biased for the number of items on a scale. Asked, "To what extent did you initiate the following while enrolled in the current school?" students responded to the two items, "Speaking to other students or teachers in English between classes at school" and "Looking for persons to speak English to and then coming up to them (with host families included)" on a 4-point scale.

*Satisfaction with overseas study* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ): On the basis of a pilot study conducted at two overseas schools, five items (e.g., "I think my personality has changed" and "I think my future possibilities have widened") on a 4-point scale were designed to reflect three commonly mentioned motivations for studying overseas: English improvement, self-growth, and experience in overseas contexts.

## Findings

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine differences between individually participating SA students and chaperoned students on the four variables: personality (sociability), perceived English skills, willingness to communicate in English, and SA satisfaction. The results of the MANOVA showed that the Wilk's Lambda was significant,  $F(1, 72) = 7.55, p < .001$ , indicating that the population means on the four variables are not the same between individual and chaperoned par-

ticipants. Regarding ANOVAs, which are produced as part of the MANOVA, the Bonferroni method was employed and each ANOVA was tested at the .01 level (.05/4) in order to control for Type I error. The ANOVAs revealed significant group differences in the two variables, perceived English level and willingness to communicate in English, at the .001 level, indicating individual students are more willing to communicate in English and rate their English skills more highly than individual students within the chaperoned group: respectively,  $F(1, 72) = 14.21$ ;  $F(1, 72) = 22.58$ . No significant group differences were found in terms of personality and SA satisfaction: respectively,  $F(1, 72) = .28$ ,  $p = .60$ ;  $F(1, 72) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .12$ .

## Discussion

This study suggests that relative to individually participating SA students, chaperoned students rate their English skills lower and are less willing to communicate in English. This finding is likely due to the nature of collective programs in which students are situated in more controlled settings for a longer period of time. Some chaperoned students' written responses indicated that opportunities for intercultural communication with other L2 students tended to be limited while time with friends from the school of origin was more available, creating environments where students spoke the L1. For students who happened to be housed with another friend in the same host family, the temptation to use the L1 was inevitably irresistible.

The present findings are arguably evidence for the superiority of studying abroad individually in terms of exposure to L2, and its use, and sense of confidence in L2 use. Indeed, the choice of studying abroad individually likely secures more L2-use opportunities in unsupervised private spheres. However, it is also true that studying abroad does not guarantee this outcome. Those who opt to study abroad individually should, therefore, be counseled that their freer status needs to be actively mobilized in order for them to derive the benefits facilitated by such freer status. On the other hand, those who consider joining a customized SA program should be forewarned that a sense of security and solidarity with their teachers and other L1 speaking compatriots could also be a fertile ground for L1-bound networking.

The present study found that SA students' decisions to study individually or collectively bear no relationship to their orientation to sociability, and there are no group differences in terms of the level of satisfaction with the SA experience. These findings might result from the convenient accessibility of, and sometimes nonlinguistic motivation for, SA. First, many of those

who decide to study individually are likely to do so through the help of a study-abroad agency, which is functionally similar to those who participate in school-led SA programs and have their chaperon teachers make the arrangements. In other words, those who embark on their sojourn individually do not necessarily have a different sense of agency in how they are pursuing their L2 goals via SA.

Furthermore, according to the intercultural communication literature, a growing number of students, whether individually or collectively “studying” abroad, no longer necessarily strive to immerse themselves in local communities as much as possible in order to achieve their L2 goals. For instance, Shaules (2007) describes an American sojourner living in Japan for years who exhibited a low level of perceived cultural distance and a high level of satisfaction, partly due to his limited Japanese, limited acquaintance with monolingual Japanese nationals, and thus few incidents of culture shock or cultural conflicts. This seems to be part of “a long-term tourist” phenomenon (p. 169) in that “globalization has increased our ability to avoid deeper intercultural experiences when we are abroad” (p. 16), and SA students without specific goals, now akin to tourists, come to engage in superficial contact with locals and spend most of their time with other compatriots. Naturally, these sojourners, including the ones traveling individually, tend to seek the comfort zone afforded by their fellows and are content with such an experience.

A limited amount of deep contact with the host community predisposes a growing number of tourist-like sojourners to perceive a lower level of cultural distance and cultural conflict in a distant foreign context, which increases their sense of security and satisfaction. Such in-group networking based on limited contact with the local community diverts from the traditional notion of in-group solidarity in foreign contexts that is supposed to function as a facilitator for sojourners’ intercultural adjustment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Furthermore, these SA students’ motivation for “studying” abroad can be incompatible with the expectations of those in charge of them (teachers, local staff, local host families, SA researchers, etc.).

## Conclusion

The present study shows that the individual sojourn is less predisposed to the tourist-like outcome in practice than the group sojourn whatever the motivation for going overseas at the outset. On the other hand, the finding of there being no group differences in satisfaction with the SA experience sug-

gests that time spent with other L1 compatriots or L2 nonnative speakers and tourist-like experiences can contribute to a sense of satisfaction (Kobayashi, 2006; 2007; Shaules, 2007; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). This finding, seemingly part of the intercultural research domain, poses a challenge to the design and implementation of second language research and study abroad programs that conventionally place top priority on studying a second language through contact with host nationals (i.e., native speakers of the language).

This study reminds us that SLA researchers and secondary/postsecondary language educators, who often take the role of chaperon teachers, need to be more responsive to the changes taking place within today's "educational study", "travel"- abroad enterprises. Although the televised scene of young clients rushing to a failed travel agency will soon cease to be in the collective memory of laypersons and professionals alike, what the scene embodied—the diversification of would-be sojourning students (and their dreams) and groups that cater to those young people's wants and needs—will increasingly impact on the outcomes of L2-focused SLA research and SA programs. Hence, a better understanding of this changing SA terrain is more critical than ever when counseling sojourning students and/or conducting SLA research with those students.

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