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Language learning and interactional experiences in Study Abroad settings

An introduction to the special issue

M. Rafael Salaberry¹, Kate White² and Alfred Rue Burch¹

¹ Rice University | ² Western Michigan University

This special issue presents a critical analysis of various types of language use and language interaction instantiated in study abroad (SA) settings (e.g., homestays, language tutors, social media) and describes how these socially-contextualized experiences may lead to improvements in language competence. In this introduction to the special issue, we present a critical summary of previous research findings and an analysis of the potential for new conceptualizations of study abroad settings. We consider how research has approached issues of learning setting and access to second language (L2) input and interaction. This includes the traditional homestay experience, interactions with local communities of L2 speakers, and engagement with social networks. We also review research on the use of the learner's first language (L1) in L2 study abroad settings and discuss the role of SA pedagogical structuring of students' L2 engagement opportunities. Finally, we describe how the selective sample of studies presented in this issue provides us with a glimpse of new strands of research that will help us understand the SA experience in more detail than has been possible thus far.

1. Language and language learning in study abroad settings

The most salient characteristic distinguishing SA programs from traditional at-home (AH) programs is the increased access to language input, which is also shaped by the prevalent sociolinguistic and sociocultural features of language interactions among both native and non-native users of the language across a wide range of settings. For instance, in his state-of-the-art review, Collentine (2009, p.219) points out that learners who study in SA contexts “must determine the relationship between the L1, the L2, and their identities as social individuals and language learners.” Several overviews of this field of studies have looked at sociocultural and sociolinguistic identity as two of the constructs that

are most relevant for the analysis of language development in a SA context (e.g., Block, 2009; Jin, 2015; Kinginger, 2013; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). Not only are there qualitative differences between AH and SA settings with regards to language input, but there are also quantitative differences in academic coverage. Collentine notes that the concept of L2 learning in a SA context is expanded even further as “sociopragmatic variables and the inherent linguistic variation existing outside this laboratory will essentially increase the ‘content’ that learners must acquire” (p. 229). In other words, the curricular objectives of L2 students abroad increase in complexity several times relative to the tasks facing AH classroom learners (who often face little linguistic variation, few if any functional social non-classroom interactions, few demands and/or reflection on identity, and so on).

Each learning environment (i.e., AH or SA) requires a different understanding not only of the ‘language construct’ but the ‘learning construct’ as well. In effect, the dual goals of communication and learning (Klein, 1986) inherent to all L2 curricula are highlighted in a SA context. Lafford and Collentine (2006) describe salient components of language input in a SA environment, emphasizing the potential for language learning provided by:

[...] the copious amount of target language input and the opportunities for interaction with L2 native speakers of various ages, socioeconomic conditions, professions, and so on. It is through these interactions that SA learners become aware of appropriate ways to communicate with various members of the target culture.
(p. 120)

This characterization of SA by Lafford and Collentine helps identify two distinct questions: (1) Is it the case that SA programs provide students with a “copious amount” of interaction with local native speakers? and (2) How do students “become aware” of aspects of the L2 that they have not yet learned while they communicate with native speakers (cf. Klein’s communication-learning paradox)? The first question focuses on the nature of the input and the second on the nature of the acquisition process.

2. Access to input and interaction in a SA setting: Quantity and quality

While popular beliefs (along with findings from a few early studies such as Carroll, 1967) have claimed that the SA sojourn is superior to AH classroom instruction in terms of L2 development, it is only in the last two decades that studies have qualified that notion. A number of empirical studies converge on the idea that the SA experience does not automatically lead to much enhanced

L2 skills for SA students in comparison with AH students (e.g., Collentine, 2004; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Martinsen, 2011; Mora & Vals-Ferrer, 2012; Rivers, 1998; Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011). The challenge inherent in the development of language competence in SA settings is to ascertain that learners will be able to engage with the input and interactional opportunities available and thus maximize the potential benefits of the SA context. Among the most prevalent sources of language input and interaction in a SA setting that have been reviewed in previous studies (apart from classroom interactions abroad) are host families, language partners / exchanges, and service encounters. Many studies have revealed, however, that L2 learners may not have as much access to social interaction in the L2 in SA programs as previously believed (e.g., Freed et al., 2004; Kinginger, 2015; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Martinsen, 2008, 2011; Rivers, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998).

Despite the apparent convergence of results from several studies on the benefits of having access to sufficient input and relevant contexts of use while sojourning abroad, there are methodological issues that hamper our ability to determine the benefits of SA contexts. First, the measurement of language gains tends to be restricted to certain areas of competence, thus limiting the generalizability of conclusions. A significant number of studies have shown gains in fluency, but not necessarily in accuracy (e.g., Collentine, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). For instance, Collentine (2004) shows gains in written narrative fluency, but not in the accurate use of morphosyntactic endings (e.g., past tense marking). This is made more complex by the fact that past studies have not consistently approached questions of L2 gains during SA with the same or even easily comparable methods (Ecke, 2014).

Second, a growing area of focus in study abroad research is individual variation. Studies indicate that the benefits of the SA experience may be significant for some students but not for others, raising the difficult challenge of identifying and describing the components of individual variation (e.g., Isabelli-García, 2006; Kinginger, 2015). Martinsen (2008) states that even though large-scale studies show that students as a group improve their language skills after participating in SA programs, the impressive gains in the aggregate may hide sizeable degrees of variation between individuals.

Beyond limitations within the research design, the instrumental definition of the SA setting is another challenge that constrains our ability to accurately compare AH and SA learning settings. The complex construct of learning context (i.e., AH and SA) is properly defined as a compound factor made up by two main variables: the time one spends learning the language (time spent 'on task') and the quality of the language input available in these settings (primarily represented by language use in the context of interactions with speakers of the language outside

of the classroom environment). Given the likelihood of confounding these two variables, it is important to attempt to isolate the specific effects associated with these two variables to identify the source of change in language abilities (cf. gains) in a SA context. For instance, it is possible that L2 learners have access to large amounts of input in a SA context (e.g., classroom time, some passive sources of information such as TV, movies, and some types of social media), while having limited access to ‘high quality’ input (i.e., with high levels of social contextualization and interaction). On the other hand, it is possible that learners have access to interactive, naturally occurring input, but not in high enough quantities that such language input and linguistic exchanges could have a discernible impact on the developing L2 system.

To the best of our knowledge, the earliest study to empirically address the significant effect of confounding variables in the analysis of SA data (i.e., quantity and quality of L2 input data) was Freed et al. (2004). In their study, they isolated the variable of quantity of language input through the collection of empirical data from three learning settings: SA, AH, and AH intensive immersion programs (IM). Using a pre- and post-test comparison of oral proficiency interviews, Freed et al. concluded that the AH group made no significant progress in any area, while the SA group made significant gains only in spoken fluency. However, the gains of the AH intensive immersion group were greater, attributed in part to the fact that IM students both spoke and wrote significantly more than the other two groups. The findings also indicate that the IM group reported more hours of use of French than the SA group, and, more importantly, the SA group reported “significantly more English language out-of-class contact activities than the IM group on all measures except listening” (p. 291). Freed et al. proposed that it is not the learning setting *per se* which determines language gain, but rather the nature and intensity of contact within that setting.

Serrano et al. (2011) extended the main findings from Freed et al. for English as the target language with Romance language speakers (the opposite contrast from Freed et al.). In their study, there were no statistically significant differences between the intensive programs (at home and abroad) on the post-test measures of all combined dependent variables. However, unlike the students in the immersion program from Freed et al., the learners in the intensive program “lacked opportunities for L2 practice outside class.”¹ Consequently, Serrano et al. concluded that “this could be the reason why the AH intensive context did not lead to more significant gains than the SA context” (p. 141).

1. Serrano et al. acknowledge that the degree of language contact and use among the SA participants in their study was limited: “most of the SA participants stayed in houses with other students (60%), while 20% stayed in halls of residence and another 20% with families” (p. 136).

Whereas the two studies reviewed above provide empirical evidence about the effects of quantity of input (and only indirectly about quality of input), some studies have specifically addressed the possible effects of the type of input in SA and AH contexts. For example, Collentine (2004) analyzed Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) data from 46 L1 English-speaking learners of Spanish to determine the effects of learning context on morphosyntactic and lexical development.² The analysis of data showed that, overall, neither group (AH or SA) improved significantly in terms of grammatical development from pre- to post-test. After close scrutiny of the data, however, Collentine noted that, in general, the learners from the SA group demonstrated a predisposition to expand their repertoire of language forms, adding marked forms to their language production. These learners also made more errors as a consequence of the expansion of their linguistic productivity. For instance, with regards to the copula verbs *ser* / *estar*, Collentine noted that “the SA group effectively elevated the proportion of *estar* forms [...], and so the latter was more prone to error.” Similarly, whereas the students in the AH group increased their accuracy in the use of verbal forms in the indicative mood, “the SA group experienced a decrease,” most likely because the students in the SA group increased their use of the subjunctive (the marked form of the indicative-subjunctive contrast) (p. 239).

The studies reviewed in this section have sought to understand the extent to which SA outcomes can be affected by the amount and quality of input accessible to learners through social interactions in the L2. These studies have relied on data across a number of languages, types of SA programs (among several other important variables), and different levels of proficiency. The studies reviewed above, however, do not provide enough information about the actual experiences of learners in SA settings. For instance, recent research on students’ experiences with host families (e.g., Kinginger, 2015) has shown that it is crucial to attend to levels of individual variation to properly understand the range of possible outcomes affected by such a prominent component of a SA experience. In the next section, we address the effects of specific experiences of learners in SA contexts.

3. The host family experience abroad

The role played by the host family in a typical SA program is very important given that a large number of SA providers consider a homestay a necessary component

2. Collentine points out that the test that he used “produces surveylike answers from the learner, and it is not filled with negotiations of meaning, such that students’ production is more monologuelike and unlikely to be highly influenced by input of the OPI interviewer” (p. 233).

of the experience abroad. Collentine (2009, p. 218), in fact, defines the study abroad context as one in which “the L2 enjoys an important sociological and functional status, entailing a combination of planned curriculum and a host family.” Despite the fact that a stay with a host family during a SA sojourn is viewed by both learners and teachers as a crucial component of a SA experience (i.e., positively contributing to the development of both language and cultural knowledge), several studies have reported less positive aspects of the homestay (e.g., Kinginger, 2015; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Martinsen, 2008; Rivers, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998).³ Also, positive effects of homestays are not absolute and cannot be expected for all students even within a single program (Kinger, 2015).

Among the earliest studies to point out the limitations of a homestay, Wilkinson (1998) offered a detailed analysis to showcase the mismatch between promotional materials touting the benefits of improvement in conversational abilities in academic programs abroad and the limitations within the actual implementation of such programs. Her analysis (primarily of turn taking, sequencing, repair and preference) led her to conclude that learners transferred their classroom-based experience (i.e., the IRF pattern of initiation, response and feedback) to the SA environment, thereby substantially limiting opportunities to benefit from interactions in a non-academic setting. Wilkinson stated that “it is only in moving beyond the classroom that we begin to see the negative repercussions of modeling discourse appropriate uniquely to the instructional setting” (p. 34).

Wilkinson’s analysis of a small database was supported by other large-scale studies. Rivers (1998, p. 496), for instance, analyzed a large database of questionnaires on the homestay experience, reaching the conclusion that “homestay is a negative predictor for Speaking gain, has no apparent effect on Listening, and is a positive predictor for Reading gain.” Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2004) also used questionnaires and demonstrated that in some cases students spoke as little at home as they did in school. Not only is it possible that the homestay environment does not provide learners with enough input, but the types of interactions that occur in these settings may not provide learners with the quality of input expected to be found in the SA context. Martinsen (2008, p. 517) claims that the insignificant role of communicatively relevant, albeit simple linguistic tasks may be the reason why high ratings of students’ use of the L2 with their host families “failed to predict language learning.” Martinsen states that this may be the

3. Some studies that have demonstrated a positive effect of the homestay have done so indirectly through measures of students’ satisfaction and not actual linguistic gains (e.g., Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014), whereas others have included confounding effects such as self-selection biases (e.g., in Shiri, 2015, expert learners were part of the homestay group whereas non-expert learners were part of the control group).

case in the most unexpected environment (i.e., experienced families that have hosted other SA students in the past): “Family members may be accustomed to students who do not possess high levels of proficiency and consequently lower their expectations for what kinds of conversations they ask students to participate in.” Along the same lines, focusing on measures of fluency, Segalowitz and Freed (2004, p.193) described an inherent constraint of the homestay environment noting (speculatively) that interactions “[...] may have consisted largely of short exchanges – greetings, simple requests, and short formulaic exchanges (chitchat) – that resulted, if anything, in greater ability to communicate without necessarily holding the floor for a long time.”

Considering the attested shortcomings of homestay environments, DuFon and Churchill (2006, p.24) concluded in their state-of-the-art analysis that “the success of the homestay experience appears to have a lot to do with how hosts and students perceive their respective roles.” In effect, several factors associated with the perceived roles of host family members and guest students are likely to be important predictors of the potential success or failure of the homestay experience: the host family’s perception of the learner as a competent or incompetent user of the L2 (e.g., Martinsen, 2008); the possible lack of clarity regarding the roles of host families as determined by the administrative organization of the program (e.g., Wilkinson, 1998); the time dedicated to do homework at home as required by the program of studies (e.g., Rivers, 1998); and so on.

4. Interactions with the local community of speakers abroad

Apart from the homestay setting, SA programs highlight the benefits of a second major environment for interaction in the L2: the local community. Unlike the homestay environment, however, the local community can be represented in many different ways (e.g., conversational exchanges with local host and international students learning the SA participants’ L1, service encounters, community activities, etc.). As is the case with the homestay environment, Martinsen (2008, pp.516–517) claimed that the interactions students have with the local community can be repetitive or simple enough (e.g., “purchasing a bus ticket or engaging in other brief and superficial exchanges”) such that they do not push students to improve.

Concrete empirical evidence regarding the actual nature of interactions in traditional service encounters (i.e., an exchange of goods or services between students and service providers) is offered by Shively (2013). Her study focused on an analysis of audio-recorded service encounters (113 recordings) with L2 Spanish learners during a semester-long program in Spain. Students were asked to record

at least five encounters each week on three separate occasions at various locations around the city (e.g., bars, cafés, reception desks, etc.). The quantitative analysis of the findings shows that close to half of the service encounters were very brief (fewer than 50 words in total), and that routine expressions dominated these brief interactions, which therefore provided “limited opportunities for extensive L2 use or social interaction” (p. 84). Not surprisingly, service providers’ turns tended to be longer than students’ turns. In general, transactional talk made up two thirds of the interactions. The author found that, in general, students did not seem to find the exchanges useful or interesting.

Despite the apparent limited benefit of service encounters, some studies have shown promising opportunities provided by structured learning environments that offer pedagogical guidance beyond the traditional classroom-based interactions (e.g., Bataller, 2010; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbeláiz, 2014; Shively, 2011). Fernández-García and Martínez-Arbeláiz, for instance, analyzed data from semi-informal conversations during a language exchange program between eight native English- and Spanish-speaking students in Spain. Among a number of important findings, the authors conclude that both the native and non-native speakers initiated moves to improve their interlocutor’s use of their respective L2s. One important aspect of these interactions was the fluid role of ‘language expert’ that shifted between speakers. Fernández-García and Martínez-Arbeláiz note that this opportunity is part of a range of interactional settings provided to sojourners abroad: “unlike classroom interactions or service encounters where the study abroad student is permanently positioned as a second language learner or user, in these exchanges the role of learner is particularly fluid since it is alternatively played by the dyad members” (p. 101).

Equally important are interactions with language partners who are either chosen by instructors, the program, or the learners themselves. These interactions provide opportunities for language use that are distinct from the classroom setting. They give learners a chance to initiate talk that is less constrained than teacher-fronted interaction, while also allowing learners to speak with native or near-native peers who may be closer in age and interests in comparison with the host family (e.g., Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbeláiz, 2014). However, similar questions about the role these interactions play in the learners’ linguistic development are relevant. In particular, how do the relationships that the learners develop with language partners influence the type of interactions? And to what degree do they lead to language development?

5. Social networks abroad

Whereas some studies have gathered explicit empirical evidence about the extent to which SA students interact with local speakers or with other international students (e.g., Hoffman-Hicks, 2000; Mendelson, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998), for obvious logistical reasons, most SA research projects cannot gather direct information about each student's level of engagement with the local community. Recently, however, some studies have started to collect data about students' social networks (e.g., Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013; Isabelli-García, 2006; McManus, Mitchell, & Tracy-Ventura, 2014; Shiri, 2015). Despite this new source of information, the precise relationship between the development of students' social networks (including their motivation / attitude) and their eventual language gains is not very clear (e.g., Isabelli-García, 2006).

Isabelli-García (2006) assessed the expected positive effect of social networks on L2 development among four L2 Spanish learners studying in Argentina. To measure improvement, she relied mostly on pre- and post-sojourn oral data (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews [SOPIs]). The findings, however, were inconclusive. On the one hand, students who were able to expand their social network to the second-order zone (i.e., the deep network that includes first acquaintances and 'friends of friends') were able to improve their language abilities as expected. On the other hand, one of the two students who remained in the first-order zone of their social networks (i.e., the less developed one of direct acquaintances) also improved by one proficiency level. A detailed analysis of the experience of this student (Sam) revealed that he preferred to use English, had a negative attitude toward the local culture and thus did not develop his social network. Isabelli-García notes, however, that he was an assiduous reader of Argentine newspapers and other media (non-interactive). Results from Sam are reminiscent of the outcome of Rivers' study (1998): he spent a lot of time reading newspapers, thereby increasing his proficiency despite his few interactions with other Spanish speakers, or conversations in Spanish in general.⁴

Another important aspect in the nature of social networks among SA participants is the role of social media in developing and maintaining their networks. McManus et al. (2014) gathered data from L1 British students learning L2 French in France to analyze the social networks they developed and the interactions that ensued. Their findings show a significant use of L1 English across all social

4. It is possible that the assessment instrument biased the results. That is, if the SOPI as a testing instrument is not focused on measuring interactive speaking abilities, it would have allowed Sam to perform relatively well (in terms of general language ability) despite not having developed interactional skills with an extended social network.

contexts (approximately 50%). Once the results were broken down by social setting, however, it turned out that most of the use of English occurred in the context of virtual communication (social media), with a concomitant increase in the use of French in most face-to-face interactions that occurred on site. Unsurprisingly, new communication technologies have become an integral part of the study abroad experience. The expanded use of social media has changed the nature of the traditional SA setting in which learners were expected to be completely immersed in the L2 with few opportunities to connect with L1-speaking friends and family. Nowadays, participants in SA programs stay in daily or even hourly contact with friends, family, fellow students, local native speakers and the administrators of academic programs with the use of mobile applications such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Given the very recent appearance of social media, however, there has been relatively little discussion of their possible uses in SA research (e.g., Back, 2013; Hofer, Thebodo, Meredith, Kaslow, & Saunders, 2016).

6. Using the L1 and interacting with fellow L2 learners

Despite the possible benefits of establishing connections with local native speakers through various avenues (e.g., host families, language partners, service encounters), it is not easy to interact with native speakers. For instance, Wilkinson (1998) described the tendency of her informants to get together in the face of difficulties in their social interactions with local French speakers. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) pointed out that, in order to protect their self-image, students were reluctant to take risks during speaking tasks and thus reduced their interactions with native speakers. However, the use of the L1 and regular contact with fellow learners during activities abroad are not necessarily as negative as both students and teachers seem to believe. There are some conditions under which the use of the L1 with fellow students during a SA sojourn (as opposed to native speakers) may be regarded as beneficial to language learning.

In some cases, there are strategic benefits from the use of the L1 to provide learners with access to an expanded network of native speakers. Dewey et al. (2013) used questionnaires to study 30 L1 English learners of L2 Arabic focusing primarily on the assessment of the range, size, and durability of their social network of native Arabic speakers. In line with expectations about the expansion of social networks, Dewey et al. (2013) concluded that the more the students interacted with people other than friends and acquaintances, the more likely they were to show gains in proficiency. A surprising finding, however, was that their improvement in L2 Arabic was explained in part by the English language proficiency of the students' social

network. The greater the English proficiency of the learners' Arab friends, the more gains they were likely to make in Arabic. As one of the learners explained, "English served as a ticket to Arabic in a way. I got in with Arabs by speaking English with them. Then once they got around each other, they'd speak Arabic" (p. 97).

Apart from the advantages of using their L1 abroad, learners may also benefit from interacting in the L2 within their own social network of fellow learners. Even though both teachers and learners tend to discount the assumption that interactions with the network of fellow learners (and L1 speakers in general) may be conducive to learning (e.g., Allen, 2010), there are cogent reasons to challenge this belief. Some empirical evidence upholds this claim. Martinsen (2011) reports that the highest gains in language improvement were found among students who, relatively speaking, spent more time using the L2 with fellow L1 speakers than they spent speaking it with native speakers. In principle, the exchanges with fellow learners allowed them to have equally active roles in the interactional management of a conversation while avoiding difficult interactions that were sometimes beyond their linguistic competence, and therefore less immediately useful in the development of their L2.⁵

Apart from the management of conversational routines and interactional abilities in general, another factor that weighs in favor of interacting with fellow learners is the complexity of specific target language concepts (e.g., pragmatics or cultural norms). Hassall's (2015) study on the acquisition of some target pragmatic features of Indonesian (cf., address terms, leave taking, complaints / refusals) among twelve L1 English speakers focused on raising awareness among the learners through a variety of activities requiring systematic interaction between the learners. This included noticing pragmatic features in the speech of fellow learners and jointly planning and performing pragmatic actions, among others. Hassall demonstrates the beneficial effect of students' interactions among themselves based on data from a pre-test / post-test measure of linguistic gains, diary reflections and interviews.

7. Pedagogical structuring and intervention

In previous sections, we pointed out that popular beliefs about the unqualified benefits of academic programs abroad are misguided. A negative consequence of this erroneous belief is that inflated expectations about the advantages of the

5. It is also possible that limited language resources that constrained the choice of interlocutors (i.e., prompted them to interact with fellow learners) provided learners with the opportunity to make the most progress given that they were at the early stages of acquisition.

learning setting lead to limited programmatic structuring of a learning experience with great potential. In a perceptive statement, Brecht and Ingold (2000, p. 37) noted that the study abroad experience is “inherently so powerful [...] that often there is too little effort invested to make it as rich in outcomes as it could be.” Broadly speaking, there has been minimal pedagogical structuring of SA programs, with even less attention given to establishing pedagogical norms across programs.⁶ Accordingly, there have been specific calls for the implementation of a purposeful approach to pedagogical structuring of the academic experience abroad beyond the traditional academic course and the placement with a host family (e.g., Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, & Hoff, 2005; DeKeyser, 2007).

Regarding the ever-present homestay placement, Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2010) argue that it may be beneficial for this central component of the SA experience to become a planned part of the overall curriculum abroad. That is, there should be an integration of experiences obtained in both formal and informal settings of learning. A coherent SA curricular approach will also require selection of topics for formal instruction in the classroom abroad that are aligned with salient aspects of learners’ interactions with native speakers in the L2 community. For instance, Collentine (2009, p. 245) notes that “day-to-day interactions with the target culture permit SA learners to practice retelling their daily or weekend adventures to friends and host-family members.” Others have suggested instructional targets such as listener responses (Shively, 2015) and markers of politeness (Taguchi, 2015). By the same token, experiences outside of the classroom (e.g., homestay, service encounters) will have to be managed and structured in a way that such information becomes pedagogically useful input for learners.

Interestingly, the quest to enhance academic arrangements of SA programs is also leading researchers to review the academic structure of AH programs. For instance, the explicit teaching, practice, and testing of pragmatics in the L2 curriculum is becoming a more typical component, incorporated as the definition of language addressed by the classroom syllabus changes. On the other hand, there still seems to be a significant gap in the way language is defined in AH and SA contexts, to the extent that the AH environment often focuses on decontextualized, written standards of language, whereas the SA context is more aligned with a contextualized, interactive definition of language. Awareness about this discrepancy in the academic approaches associated with these two contexts of learning is useful when attempting to design the pedagogical structure of both learning environments. To this end, it is important to recognize that the potential differential

6. We consider it important to distinguish the apparent high level of logistical support of SA programs (e.g., faculty leaders accompanying learners, emergency support, etc.) from the structuring of pedagogical activities described in previous sections.

effect in learning outcomes attributed to the context of learning may actually be a result of alternative variables such as a given setting's focus on the development of oral or written language abilities (e.g., Mora & Vals-Ferrer, 2012).

8. The contributions in this special issue

The articles in this special issue present explorations of settings of L2 use that include post-sojourn settings, homestays, conversations with language partners, interactions with the local community, non-traditional lingua franca settings, and socialization via new media.

The first article by Celeste Kinginger and Sheng-Hsun Lee provides a timely analysis of the types of interactions that are possible in homestay settings. Whereas previous theoretical models conceptualized the dynamics of interactions with host families as reliant on the notions of power and solidarity in conflict as polar opposites, Kinginger and Lee propose we view the homestay as the locus for the seamless integration of control and connection. Their detailed analysis of three cases of L2 Chinese learning highlights a different aspect of the connection between a host family and guest student. In all cases, Kinginger and Lee demonstrate the need for fine-grained analyses to understand the interactional dynamics depicting various layers of a symbiotic level of control and connection that may have been missed in previous research.

The next article by Victoria Surtees utilizes Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), a microanalytic approach to analyzing interaction that shares common roots and methodologies with Conversation Analysis, in order to analyze interviews with language partners who have worked with study abroad students from Japan. Surtees finds that the relationships involve a tension between the degree that the learners and language partners are 'friends' versus the degree that they are 'language experts' and 'language learners' who interact for the sake of language practice. These relationships, and how the language partners view their responsibilities towards the learners vis-à-vis these roles, have consequences for the interactions, particularly in how the language partners view their rights and obligations to provide corrective feedback.

Daisuke Kimura uses a variation of the concept of social networks (Individual Networks of Practice) to analyze data from a longitudinal semester-long study of a 20-year-old Japanese student (Shota) learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Thailand. Even though English was used as a lingua franca in the learning setting in which Shota was immersed at the time, his opportunities for sustained communicative engagement in English were very limited. As Kimura notes, this outcome was not necessarily because opportunities for inter-

action were non-existent, but mostly because Shota's investment in his learning experience was curtailed by his ideological stance with respect to the relevance of perceived types of English language use.

Amanda Huensch, Nicole Tracy-Ventura, Judith Bridges, and Jhon A. Cuesta Medina provide a different perspective on the measurement of amount and quality of L2 exposure after participating in a SA program through the analysis of data collected among L2 French and L2 Spanish learners four years after the conclusion of their sojourn abroad. The database for their study consisted of L2 Spanish and L2 French students who had originally participated in the LANGSNAP program (see Mitchell et al., 2017), which collected data from UK students majoring in their respective languages. The analysis presented specifically reviews the relative effect of proficiency acquired by the time learners finish their sojourn abroad and the effect of their relative lack of exposure to the L2 after they conclude their formal L2 studies. Interestingly, despite the important potential effect of more or less language exposure long after their SA experience, the majority of the learners did not show significant levels of attrition.

Finally, Roswita Dressler and Anja Dressler perform a meta-analysis of the findings of a previous study that focused on the experience of one adolescent's use of Facebook over the course of two SA sojourns in Germany to identify the affordances and challenges associated with research methodologies using Facebook. One important finding of their analysis is that the technological platform the authors selected to collect data evolved quickly over the two-year period of their study. In fact, not only did the technology change over time, but the main participant also changed her social media behavior in significant ways in response to the changing affordances of the communication tool. Accordingly, the authors provide three important recommendations that they believe could help researchers better manage the use of new technologies in general and social media in particular: define common terminology, document the changing nature of Facebook (or the chosen tool) at the time of the study, and consider conditions for the use of visual media.

The articles selected for this special issue are good representatives of the recent shift in focus in the field of study abroad research from overall L2 gains to what students can do with the language outside of class, and how that experience impacts their L2 development. Furthering our understanding of these interactional settings as well as the interactions individual students have within them could impact the field of study abroad research in many ways. One potential positive outcome of this new research agenda will be the opportunity to expand the minimal pedagogical structuring of most SA programs and incorporate the various types of students' interactions across different study abroad settings. Such programmatic and curricular development may, in turn, form part of a virtuous cycle

that would allow researchers to investigate the potential of study abroad contexts under conditions that are likely to maximize the type of learning that has been lavishly praised on study abroad programs in the past, but which has been insufficiently described in previous research.

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Authors' addresses

M. Rafael Salaberry
Rice University
335 Rayzor Hall, 6100 Main St.
Houston, TX 77005-1827
United States of America
salaberry@rice.edu

Alfred Rue Burch
Rice University
221 Rayzor Hall, 6100 Main St.
Houston, TX 77005-1827
United States of America
arb18@rice.edu

Kate White
Western Michigan University
MS 5288 – Kalamazoo, MI 49008
United States of America
kate.white@wmich.edu