

Treball/projecte de fi de màster de recerca

# **The development of intercultural awareness and changes of beliefs: the effects of studying abroad on learners of English as a second language.**

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**Màster:** Lingüística i Aplicacions Tecnològiques

**Edició:** 2006-2007

**Director/ora:** Carmen Pérez

**Any de defensa:** 2007

**Col·lecció:** Treballs i projectes de fi de màster de recerca

**Programa oficial de postgrau**

**"Comunicació lingüística i mediació multilingüe"**

**Departament de Traducció i Filologia**

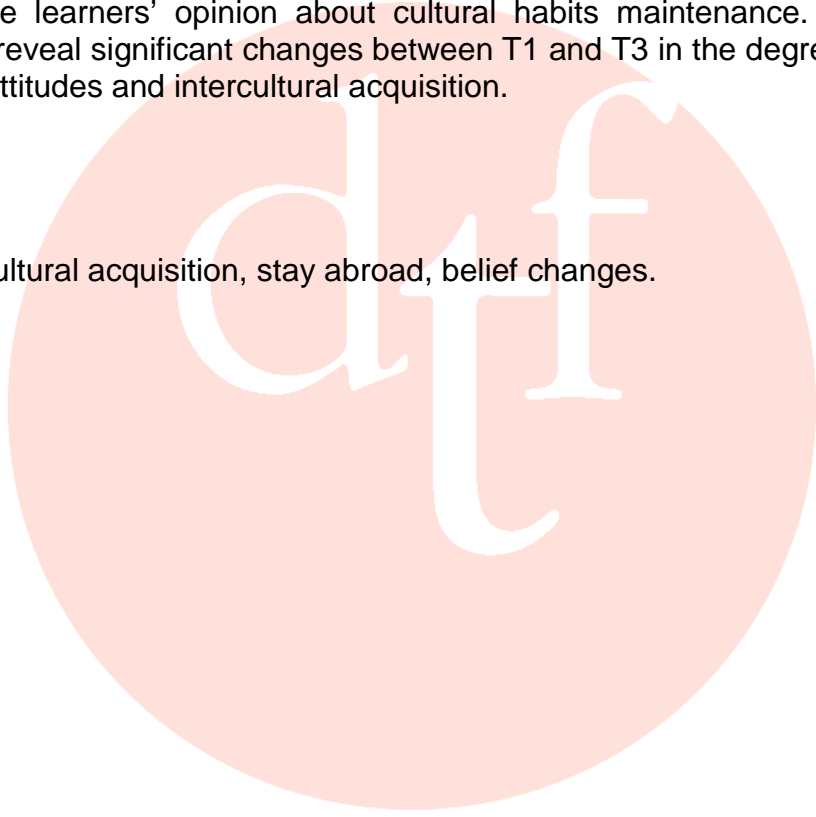
**Universitat Pompeu Fabra**

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**Keywords:**

intercultural acquisition, stay abroad, belief changes.



# **The development of intercultural awareness and changes of beliefs: the effects of studying abroad on learners of English as a second language.**

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## **Abstract**

The present study examines the development of interculturality and changes of beliefs, by analyzing 106 compositions produced by 53 advanced level university students of translation studies at a university in Spain before and shortly after a stay-abroad (SA) period. The study draws on data collected at two different times: before (T1) and after the SA (T3). In addition, we compared the results with the writings produced by a control group of 10 native English speakers on SA too. Data were collected by means of a composition which tried to elicit the learners' opinion about cultural habits maintenance. The results reveal significant changes between T1 and T3 in the degree of better attitudes and intercultural acquisition.

## **1. Introduction**

Due to the growth of international trade and communication, globalization and, consequently, the migration of cultures, the world has become a crucible of a great number of distinct ethnicities. Nowadays we live in a hybrid world where a lot of different cultural practices have blended. The most visible examples can be found in music, food, or fashion. That is why the interest in understanding other cultures is increasing in Europe and all over world. As a result, in the past decade a lot of disciplines like linguistics, anthropology, sociology and psychology have focused their attention in this new area.

Living abroad is a tremendous opportunity to be in contact with different ethnic groups of the world. Yet, when we interact with people from other places, we must be very aware of the cultural differences that underlie each society. If we do not want to fall into misunderstandings or racist ideas, we cannot take for granted that we all share the same conception of the world. That is why when we learn another language we cannot just remain at the linguistic level. Learning a language also implies understanding the culture the speakers are subscribed to. If we are learning a second language (L2), this attitude becomes crucial. Moreover, it is equally important to appreciate the similarities and differences between the L2 culture and our own culture. In order to interpret other ways of being, we need to understand the cultural elements that compose part of our identity first (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Miquel and Sans, 2004). The North American anthropologist Weaver (2006) considered that our own culture is inherent, and not until

we go to another country and get in contact with other ways of behaving, we become aware of our own cultural values and habits. Then we are ready to understand other attitudes. This exchange of cultural ideas is what has been called “intercultural or cross-cultural communication”. Byram and Fleming (1998) defined it as “the acquisition of abilities to understand different modes of thinking and living, as they are embodied in the language to be learned”. Other researchers, like Alonso-Marks and Oroz-Bretón, (2005), agree that the achievement of this type of skill facilitates the mediation and the better understanding of cross-cultural communication, which is carried out by means of language interactions. And a language, being the main means of communication, is also a symbol of the speech communities. If we are learning an L2 language in the target country, we must take advantage of this opportunity to create and improve not only linguistically, but also learn new communicative and cultural skills. Thus being immersed in another country is one of the greatest opportunities to get an insight of other cultural behaviors. Fortunately, in Europe we can benefit from a continent where a great number of different countries, languages and cultural practices are mingled.

Most research shows that whenever a person gets in contact with another culture, they start learning something that goes beyond cultural knowledge (Cassany et al., 1993; Byram and Feliming, 1998; Couper, 2001; Miquel and Sans, 2004, Alonso-Marks and Oroz-Bretón, 2005). Moreover, the Common European Framework of Reference considers that when intercultural competence is achieved, learners are more likely to improve interpersonal understanding and respect diversity. Back in 1980, Canale and Swain (1996) considered this “sociolinguistic/sociocultural competence” an important part that constitutes the whole communicative competence. They thought that if L2 learners wanted to communicate properly, they also needed to be knowledgeable about the target country’s culture.

As previously mentioned, communication and tolerance are better acquired when the different societies of the world get involved in intercultural interaction. Additionally, this helps in the emergence of more critical individuals capable of changing any negative attitudes or prejudices about other cultures (Cassany et al., 1993, Couper, 2001, Miquel and Sans, 2004; Weaver, 2006). This “intercultural speaker” (Kramsch, 1998) is said to

be able to reflect upon those different cultural practices and construct a more tolerant view of the world, where all cultures are equally respectful.

Thus, this study, using data from the SALA-ALLECAM<sup>1</sup> project by Pompeu Fabra University, tries to describe how a three-month SA term affects the learners' conception of the L2 country and the degree in which these intercultural interactions promote the respect towards both the L1 and L2 cultures. Hence the goal of the study presented here is to examine the degree to which SA is beneficial for the acquisition of intercultural and tolerant attitudes. To that effect we examine which cultural items are more recurrent in the students' writings before and after the SA, as well as how their perspective of the L2 culture develops. In addition, we also analyze the writings of a group of native speakers of English studying in Spain with the objective of comparing results.

## **2. Overview of related literature**

Throughout the history of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), learning a language has been treated differently with very diverse perspectives, from the ancient Greco-Latin teaching methods to the current communicative approaches (Celce-Murcia, 2001). One of the most influential approaches in SLA was Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in the 1980s, which argued that in order for L2 learners to acquire a better language competence they needed to be exposed to comprehensible input (Nunan, 1994). If we would like to apply this theory to cultural competence acquisition, we could agree this is also how learners get better cultural knowledge, by being in contact with the target culture. Therefore, it is equally important for language and cultural learning to find the most opportunities to receive this type of input.

Nowadays over one million students in the world go abroad for the purposes of studying and/or working. In fact, some European Modern Languages degrees, mostly in the United Kingdom, require the students to spend some time abroad as part of their education (Coleman, 1998a, 1998b). In Great Britain alone, about twelve thousand students take a year abroad as a requirement of their studies. However, in the

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<sup>1</sup> SALA-ALLECAM is a consolidated research group which studies the acquisition of languages in the target language country (Stay Abroad Language Acquisition).

rest of the European countries, less than ten per cent of university students are enrolled in these programs (Coleman, 1998b), and only five per cent in the United States (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004). Despite the low figures, this is an increasing trend and interest in this field is bringing up more research every year, especially in SLA and pedagogy. In general, over the last decades the goal of these programs has been to enhance the students' linguistic skills. This is why research has mainly concentrated on analyzing linguistic improvement, especially the development of oral and writing skills, as well as vocabulary or grammatical growth (for instance, the research done by the SALA project). However, while there is a good quantity of research done in the United States (Alonso-Marks and Oroz-Bretón, 2005), far fewer studies account for European SA programs (Coleman, 1998b). Still, in Europe thousands of students are sent abroad in the Socrates-Erasmus programs (originally the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, created in 1987). Two institutions, the European Union and the Council of Europe, are in charge of launching this exchange of students all over the continent. According to the EU policies, these programs are aimed at reducing cross-border differences and encouraging multilingualism and multiculturalism. Likewise, the European Council considers "plurilingualism, mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity" are central for international communication.

### **2.1. Culture**

There has been little research on the intercultural competence acquired during short periods of time of residence abroad so, firstly, we need to describe what 'culture' means, although it is a very difficult concept to define.

When we refer to culture, we often think of history, art or literature (Ganie et al. 2006)—"culture with C", as described by Miquel and Sans (2004). But culture also refers to the ways of living of the different communities in the world (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Weaver, 2006, Sutton, 2007). The problem is that the term "culture" has always been a very subjective concept. Miquel and Sans (2004) cite several relevant definitions that give us a general idea of the complexity of the concept. For instance, Louis Porcher (1986) stated that "toda cultura es un modo de clasificación, es la ficha de identidad de una sociedad, son los conocimientos de los que se dispone, son las opiniones (filosóficas, morales, estéticas...) fundadas más en convicciones que en un saber."

Later in 1990, the American anthropologist Marvin Harris characterized culture as a set of traditions, lifestyles, ways of thinking, feelings and acts that one acquires within a community. Likewise, the sociologist Guy Rocher (cited in Cassany et al., 1993) understood culture as a “conjunto de maneras de pensar, de sentir, de actuar más o menos formalizadas, que aprendidas y compartidas por una pluralidad de personas, sirven, de una manera a la vez que objetiva y simbólica, para constituir a estas personas en una colectividad particular y distinta”. All these researchers share the idea that every culture’s beliefs are connected to our ways of behaving because we internalize those beliefs. According to Cassany et al. (1993), getting to know other cultures rather than staying in their own helps learners to acquire a more positive view of the world and its different cultures, including all communities, not just the most powerful. Learners need a more international attitude, respecting the cultural and linguistic differences, rather than holding to a single imperialistic perspective. Sticking to stereotypes or generalized ideas of stereotypes does not help to promote understanding of the different ways of living and thinking. Unfortunately, stereotypes exist and for this reason, Coleman (1998a) did a study on a group of students’ beliefs of the target language. He applied a test called the European Language Proficiency Survey<sup>2</sup> which proved the existence of misconceptions and prejudices. For instance, it was found that the British beliefs about Spanish people were positive (friendly, confident, helpful, good-humored and generous) but also negative (loud, emotional, unserious, illogical, inefficient, incompetent, and sometimes impatient). Therefore, successful communication between cultures was not achieved here. Normally, communication is broken if the speakers do not make an effort to accept other perspectives of reality. Thus, what happens sometimes is that inadequate uses of language and, intrinsic culturally marked messages, might be offensive to the L2 speakers (Cassany et al., 1993; Juan-Garau et al., 2007; Coleman, 1998a; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Miquel and Sans, 2003). Everyday encounters increase social relations. These interactions can occur at different social events, with a great variety of NS and other interlocutors coming from different L1 backgrounds, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic communities. Therefore, we need to be very open-minded and aware of

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<sup>2</sup> Its methodology and goals will be explained later in this study.

cultural similarities and differences because speakers from different L1 backgrounds do not always share the same referential meanings.

## **2.2. Stay Abroad and intercultural acquisition**

As mentioned above, one of the best ways of acquiring cultural knowledge of other countries, in all its senses, is living abroad for a period of time. Nowadays the interest not only lies in linguistic achievement but also in a more intercultural aspect. Consequently, some organizations, such as the Modern Languages Project Group of the Council for cultural Co-operation, have been created for this purpose. Other researchers, like Byram and Fleming (1998), mention the importance of intercultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning: “language learning should lead to insight and increased understanding of the society and culture of speakers of other languages, but also of learners’ own society and culture and the relationship between the two, a cognitive learning process (...) Language learning should lead to positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages, an affective change.” We may compare this process of intercultural acquisition to the process of SLA, in which the students are believed to go through a U-curve progress. That means L2 learners start with a positive attitude which slowly decreases, getting to the lowest point and then going up again resulting in a refined positive attitude (Couper, 2001). This change is not always an easy process and there are students who go through a period of culture shock. It is interesting how this change may also lead to what is known as “re-entry shock”, which, as described by Ball State University, it is a period of “strangeness” students feel upon returning from their residence abroad (also characterized in the movie “L’auberge espagnole”, 2002). Then it is the reverse culture shock learners experience in their own country when they visit places that should be familiar to them, but are not; try to interact with people they should feel comfortable with, but do not; or face situations they should be able to handle, but cannot. Weaver (1994, cited in Couper, 2001) described it as a process in which there is 1) a loss of familiar cues, 2) a breakdown of interpersonal communications, and 3) an identity crisis. In brief, the returning students feel like foreigners in their own country because they have integrated into their personal outlook something that was not there before the SA, that is, they have become intercultural individuals. That means that after this period abroad the naturalness of the L1 social contexts is enriched with the



naturalness of L2 contexts as well. The previous set of values and cultural habits taken for granted before SA are not limited to L1 conception of reality but combined with the new target country's cultural practices.

Most research on SA agrees that when this happens, the learners undergo a "psychological change" needed to adjust all these variations of the acculturation process (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Couper, 2001). Our beliefs go through a slow process of changes influenced by all the experiences we have in life (family, friends, relatives, peers, media, and immediate environment), and traveling abroad is one of them (Couper, 2001; Weaver, 2006). The change is said to be due to all the interactions and experiences the students undergo when they are surrounded by different perspectives and ways of being that normally make them question their previous conceptions. Thus, cross-cultural communication is about identity and interaction in which different social groups with their beliefs and values identified.

Stay Abroad programs, like Erasmus, help to develop this new concept of interculturality. When students enroll in these types of programs, they are exposed to several kinds of changes: linguistic, cultural and personal (Couper, 2001) and, what is more, they acquire "literacy", a term defined by Johnstone (2006) as the "proficiency needed to improve at a linguistic, cognitive and intercultural level." Then, if learners end up examining their beliefs, stereotypes and generalizations are easier to be erased and their attitude changes into a more international position (Johnstone, 2006). As part of the process, it is important the students prepare themselves for the attainment of these goals. For instance, the SALA-ALLECAM project gives the students a module that tries to anticipate what they are going to encounter. This document provides the students with the necessary tools to make the students think about what kind of experience they will have. The module fact sheet consists of the description of the objectives and a set of activities and questions to raise the students' awareness of what they need to bear in mind before their SA. Finally the module tries to conduct them to be reflective of the most important points concerning linguistic, cultural, social and personal issues.

### **3. Framework**

#### **3.1. SA programs**

SA programs consist of sending students abroad so that they learn not only the language, but also how to live in another culture (Pérez-Vidal, 2007). The objective is that they learn to accept other identities and little by little, create a new identity composed of all other ways of living and thinking they might encounter in the target country, for there is not an absolute identity. All identities are valid and compatible. One of the main objectives of SA programs is to foster intercultural exchanges between students. If we try to know the ways of living in the target culture, and we show them ours, we will be able to understand each other a little bit more. Thus we need a change in our perception of others' behaviors and values—this is called “transformative learning” in psychology (Couper, 2001). Yet, research on SA programs is a very recent area, so there is not much data which can prove the direct relation between SA and interculturality. There is even less research on short-term SA programs and results obtained from these types of studies are very difficult to generalize (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004).

Most of the researchers agree that the permanent contact with the L2 culture and its benefits to the learners' personal growth is undeniable (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Couper, 2001; Pérez-Vidal et al., 2006). Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) compared the “global awareness” and interculturality acquired by students enrolled in SA programs versus the achievement of students staying at the L1 country and only receiving classroom instruction. The results showed that intercultural development in an L2 classroom lacked the array of opportunities provided by SA. FI lacks this plurality of views because it is limited to a very general reality of the L2. In addition, in FI settings it is necessary to make a bigger effort if we want the students to turn into “multicultural beings”, because we need to find the most efficient ways of transmitting intercultural perspectives and less archetypical views of the different cultures (Cassany et al., 1993). This does not mean FI cannot be helpful at all. It just needs to be planned from a multidisciplinary outlook, from a more “transcultural” approach. But, as we said before, FI can only make use of a limited number of hours of teaching, which are mostly applied to the teaching of grammar and a specific type of culture that, at times, is old-fashioned

Culture (with capital C). Fortunately, nowadays research shows there are a lot of different ways of approaching L2 culture in the classroom: comics, sports, cinema, drama, literature, etc. (Cassany et al. 1993; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Johnstone, 2006).

In general, SA programs encourage students to immerse themselves with the locals, so that they can experience the language and the national culture more closely. The more they assimilate, the more rewarding their time abroad will be. After that L1-L2 mixture, the resulting individual will be a tapestry of bits and pieces of the different ways of being they experience throughout their life.

### **3.2 Interculturality.**

Research shows that intercultural knowledge is gained through experience and interaction with native speakers (NS) of the L2. Communication with others is essential since, in this exchange, people transmit not only linguistic structures but also cultural messages (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Couper, 2001; Miquel and Sans, 2004; Johnstone, 2006). If L2 learners achieve this competence, it is easier for them to adapt to the L2 setting by accepting other ways of looking at the world. Thanks to the acquisition of intercultural awareness, more tolerant and less ethnocentric points of view emerge and a new identity, enriched by both the L1 and the L2 cultures, grows (Cassany et al., 1993, Byram and Fleming, 1998; Miquel and Sans, 2004).

Residence abroad helps in the acquisition of these values. The students learn how to be critical and respectful to the hosting culture. When a student lives in the target country, they are frequently involved in all types of communicative situations of the specific social activities and practices of the L2 country, where a lot of cultures may be interpenetrating. Pérez-Vidal et al. (2006) stated that social integration and participation in the L2 enhances linguistic, communicative and cultural competence. Besides cultural frontiers, although necessary to form identities within communities, need to be diminished for the sake of a multicultural communication, in which all cultural practices are tolerated (Coleman, 1998; Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004). If there is tolerance, it is easier to reach a better understanding of the culture and, indirectly, also improve in linguistic competency. Language will always be richer if it is backed up with a cultural basis, as well as the reverse effect (Weaver, 2006; Regan, 1998, cited in Pérez-Vidal, 2007). The opposite, i.e., lack of understanding, results in experiences like the ones

reflected by Coleman's (1998a) study. He used the aforementioned quantitative test, the European Language Proficiency Survey (Coleman, 1998a), in order to measure the students' acquisition of tolerance after being in contact with the target country. The main goal was to observe what kind of attitude (on a scale of one to five, from positive to negative) British native speakers had about the target language country they were going to as well as how these beliefs had progressed after the SA time. This test considered all kinds of variables that usually affect learning such as proficiency, progress, background, attitudes, motivations and skills. Surprisingly, the results were not very positive. It was found the learners had not changed their stereotyped views after the SA. Similarly, Miquel and Sans (2004) exemplified some circumstances in which, due to a lack of cultural awareness of the host country, many learners (and not only learners) may feel out of place in everyday interactions. As an illustration, they mention the difference in which British and Spanish people offer something. According to these researchers, British people do not normally insist when they offer food or drinks because they assume their guests will accept the offer the first time. However, Spanish people are used to be insisted at least twice before accepting anything. When these two cultural habits meet in the same context, there is a feeling of surprise, strangeness or, even worse, of culture shock. The reason for this, as it is explained in their study, is that L1 and L2 differences exist, because each culture has different customs. Neither is better but both are valid.

Then that is why it is so important to be aware of the similarities and differences of the L1 and the target country. Once that is achieved, the learner is prepared to accept and tolerate the differences, avoiding prejudices and stereotypes because generalizations are never fair or accurate. It is common for people from whatever country feeling offended thinking that is what other cultures perceive of their country, for no one can make rules out of issues like cultures and personality. When you live abroad you have to get rid of prejudices that could cause rejection from the L2 culture. When students enroll in a SA program they learn about the falseness that usually lies in generalizations, although it has been found that sometimes students who have lived abroad stereotype even more under the excuse of having experienced the target culture personally (Coleman, 1998a, Tusting et al., 2002 ). But when the result of SA is positive, learners get to understand that the most important way to accept other ideas is to experience them

through interaction and integration in the other culture. It is said that as the time abroad progresses, the learner approaches language and culture in a more native-like fashion. For instance, Shedivy's (mentioned in Johnstone, 2006) findings about cross-cultural acquisition showed the students had a "desire to immerse" and they described the SA experience as "very fruitful". Other researchers like Cortazzi (cited in Byram and Fleming, 1998) claimed that for intercultural acquisition to happen the learner needs to be able to understand the preconceptions of members of other cultures and of their own culture, in other words, to be able to reflect upon others' attitudes and ways of being, i.e., "reflexivity is essential to success in intercultural communication."

This study attempts to emphasize the enriching experience of a Stay Abroad in terms of the development of beliefs, and intercultural awareness of L2 learners of English by analyzing 53 writings the subjects wrote as part of the program at two different times, that is, a total of 106 compositions. Then we compared them to 10 more writings on the same topic written by native speakers of English. Thus this study tries to take an objective view of communication across frontiers out of a subjective experience, where opinions, assumptions and taken-for-granted preconceptions are analyzed. However, these facts are very difficult to measure empirically for it is hard to establish a set of categories that can be applied to everybody. We must point out that the results of such qualitative topics cannot be generalized or applied to all inhabitants of a country. Moreover, it is necessary to point out that some students had already been abroad for other purposes like holidays or very limited school exchanges. These and other features, like personality or affective, cognitive, biographical and circumstantial variables, may have influenced the degree of adaptation and intercultural acquisition. But this does not mean they students were automatically prepared for intercultural appreciation and acquisition (Coleman, 1998a, 1998b). However, it is obvious that it is easier to adjust to the target country if the learner has already had any kind of contact with the L2 country (Couper, 2001). We agree that interpersonal relations and the degree of acceptance of the L2 are closely related to personality, motivation and even gender (Pérez-Vidal, 2007). That is why we think that where more openness previously exists to the L2, the more intercultural acquisition. Yet, those factors could not be considered for this analysis because we did not have access to that data.

#### **4. Hypothesis and Objectives**

The above review supports the idea that, in general terms, after the SA the students will perceive a positive change in their attitude towards the L2 culture and they will learn how to integrate L1 and L2 cultures despite the expected common difficulties that any process of adaptation carries (Curtis, 2001; Alonso-Marks and Oroz-Bretón, 2005; Pérez-Vidal and Beattie, 2006). The students are expected to acquire skills that will help them see the similarities as well as the differences of the L1 and L2 cultures, creating a new intercultural identity and a more critical and autonomous approach to the L2 culture (Cassany et al., 1993; Pérez-Vidal, 2007). In spite of other negative findings like Coleman's (1998a, 1998b) or Tusting et al.'s (2002), we foresee the following results and hypotheses:

- 1) The students will get awareness of L1 and L2 similarities and differences due to an improvement cultural competence (an insight of the way others think, live, act and speak), after the SA.
- 2) There is likely to be a process of cultural shock in the process of attitude and belief adjustment.
- 3) There will be more "global awareness" of other cultures, so tolerance will increase and stereotypes will be diminished.
- 4) The students will acquire a positive attitude and reflect on the benefits of personal interactions.
- 5) The students will mature and achieve a growing independence (despite the short-duration of the program).

#### **5. Methodology**

The data were collected from a broader developmental project (SALA-ALLEMCAM) which studies second language acquisition in Stay Abroad programs conducted by Pompeu Fabra University. Every year, around 90 students are sent abroad in their second year of university (although SA programs usually take place during the third year of college). These SA programs are a requirement for all students majoring in Translation and Interpreting. It consists of an 18 credit program of three-month residence abroad in an English speaking country.

### **5.1. Participants**

The participants in the present study were 53 Catalan/Castilian native speakers in their second year of Translation and Interpreting in Pompeu Fabra University, in Barcelona. Data from the 90 students going abroad could not be used because not all of them completed the writings used for the analysis. The students in the experiment group (N=53) spent three months abroad in an English speaking country during the school year 2006-2007, while the students in the control group (N=10) were native speakers of English studying Spanish at the University of the Balearic Islands, UIB, in Palma de Mallorca, during the same period of time. This last group was used to see what the L2 native speakers' perspective was regarding cross-cultural interaction. Getting opinions from these two distinct groups was beneficial to compare the answers from different cultural groups and get more reliable and less biased results.

### **5.2. Design**

This study was based on a pretest-posttest design. It analyzed two compositions written by the experiment group one year before going to the L2 country, Time 1 (T1), and right after the three-month stay, Time 3 (T3). The pre-test (T1) was given after 40 hours of formal instruction in the L1 setting during the first trimester of their first year of college. The FI's (Llegua B I and Llegua B II) objectives were based on the acquisition of linguistic structures, and not on cultural matters. The post-test (T3) was given right after the stay abroad, i.e., fifteen months after T1.

It must be mentioned that there was another test (T2) given six months after T1. Yet, it was not taken into account here for the following reasons: a) the difference in cultural awareness is not significant between T1 and T2, b) not all the students completed all tests, c) the number of students completing both T1 and T3 is higher, and, consequently, better for statistical analysis.

### **5.3. Instruments**

The students (N=53) completed two tests (53x2=106) to determine whether or not they were willing to accept L2 cultural norms, or, on the contrary, maintain L1 cultural habits. Both tests consisted of a 15-minute composition in which the participants had to write an essay about the following topic: 'Someone who moves to a foreign country should always adopt the customs and way of life of his/her new country, rather than

holding on to his/her own customs'. The same test was given to the control group (N=10).

It is acknowledged that the way the question was presented was rather conflictive and it limited the topics the students could use in their writings. However, they were a good source to illustrate what their opinion was and what things concerned them in relation to that topic. In general, the pretest composition contained fewer words than the post-test, but the difference is not statistically significant. We can assume this might have been due to a) the students' writing skills had improved and/or b) after their SA experience they had more to say about interculturality, habits, beliefs, etc.

Another important fact is that some of the students also wrote weekly diaries, which were voluntary and only people who wanted a better grade wrote them. However, albeit the importance of this data, this type of writing was not analyzed for it would have reduced the number of our participants. The number of diaries written was quite lower than the number of compositions. That means that not every student who wrote the compositions also wrote the diary, and not every student that wrote the diary may have written the compositions either.

#### **5.4. Analysis Procedure**

After double reading all compositions, the following categories were analyzed:

- a) The most popular topics mentioned by both the experiment group (at T1 and T3) and the control group.
- b) The percentage of specific topics mentioned at T1 but not at T3, and the other way round.
- c) The changes of perspective about the same topic at the different times (positive, negative, or unchanged).
- d) The comparison of attitudes on the same topics by the experiment group and the control group.

#### **6. Categories and results**

Bearing in mind that it is likely that most of the students were not experiencing contact with the L2 country for the first time, it is more difficult to assess previous beliefs and how these beliefs evolved after the SA. Thus, for further research, it would be of great help to know the percentage of students who had already been abroad. As we



previously mentioned, this earlier contact may not significantly influence in the results, but it is a variable that needs to be considered in order to get more reliable outcomes. It is also interesting to mention that other curious findings were obtained but were not specifically analyzed (for they were not directly part of the objectives):

a) The Arabic culture was mentioned at least 10 times as an example of immigration and culture distance in relation to the L1.

b) The compositions contained several inner contradictions in the students' personal opinions. This might have been the result of trying to avoid stereotyping (Tusting et al., 2002). Teun Van Dijk called it “disclaimer”, a strategy used when we want to make a “racist” or “stereotyped” comment by concealing it behind our words. These statements are usually a combination of a positive comment followed by a negative concessive particle like “but”, “however”, etc. and a negative comment, which is said to be the strongest of the two. Thus, in the compositions we found sentences<sup>3</sup> of the following type (here there is more than one disclaimer):

“There are two kind of tourism; people who travel for a few period of time to have a holiday, take relax with family or visit new places. This people comes back to their country after these days. But a high scale of immigrants, majority from Latin America, West-European countries and morrocos, get to arrive to Spain or some better economy country to improve their way of life, find a job, have a pay and then help their family, too. In spite of this fact, most of the immigrants come here and they continue their daily routine like if they were in their native country without taking care of the new costume that there are here”

c) Another strategy of avoidance was the use of general pronouns like “they”, “people”, “the institutions”, etc., which places the blame on other people instead of them; therefore, they were avoiding the authority of negative statements. For instance, we found comments like “sometimes, the native population of a country relate immigration with danger or vandalism”. These types of comments also show another recurrent practice of using negative adjectives linked to words like immigration, Morocco, Latinamerican, etc.

### **6.1. Topics**

The following recurrent topics were found in the 106 compositions analyzed, in both pretests and post-tests, in the experiment group and the control group. There were a

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<sup>3</sup> The grammar of the sentences extracted from the compositions were not corrected or analyzed because that does not concern us for this study.

total of 15 topics. Each topic was divided in three different values (positive, negative, neutral), according to the students' opinions. Some of the topics could not be assigned these values, but contained other similar polarizations. This is how the topics were divided into positive or negative reactions based on the previous framework. However, it was not possible to do that with all of the topics, for there were some ideas which could not be valued as positive or negative (like topics (3), (5), (8) or (12)).

**Composition topic:** 'Someone who moves to a foreign country should always adopt the customs and way of life of his/her new country, rather than holding on to his/her own customs'.

**Recurrent topics inside the compositions:**

Topics/values	YES	NO	Neutral/somehow
<b>1.Adoption of L2 cultural habits(should)</b>	Positive reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>2. Hold on L1 habits</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>3.Adoption of L2 habits depends on SA length*</b>			
<b>4. Culture shock</b>	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>5.Unconscious L2culture adoption with time*</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>6. Awareness culture differences; respect</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Negative Reaction
Topics/values	Adoption	No-adoption	Neutral/somehow
<b>7. Specific different habits (ex. timetables)</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>8. L2 religion*</b>			
Topics/values	Positive	Negative	Neutral/somehow
<b>9.Intercultural exchanges</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Negative Reaction
<b>10.Interpersonal exchanges</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Negative Reaction
<b>11. Personal growth; new identity</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>12.Learning L2 language for better adaptation*</b>			
<b>13. Personal experiences</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction
<b>14. Immigrants maintain their culture in the L1 country.</b>	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction

Topics/values	Yes	No	Some
15. Stereotypes	Negative Reaction	Positive Reaction	Negative Reaction

\* (3) The reaction to this topic is neither positive nor negative.

\* (8) Religion is a very personal and sensitive topic.

\* (12) We agree with Pérez-Vidal (2007) about the importance of linguistic competence in order to acquire a better sociolinguistic acquisition. However, we did not consider this a topic we could judge as positive or negative because some other times, there are other ways of communicating. Besides, we are primarily concerned with intercultural acquisition, not with SLA.

## 6.2. Results

As aforementioned, in this study we tried to obtain and describe the following results from the compositions:

### a) The most and least popular topics in both the experiment group (T1 and T3) and control group:

Obviously, the most popular topics in both groups and at T1 and T3 were number (1) and (2) because those introduce the topic of the composition. In general, all the subjects agreed the best thing to do was to try to find a balance between L1 and L2 customs. The next chart shows the following most popular and least popular topics:

Group / Topic number, (percentage of people)	Experiment G. T1	Experiment G. T3	Control Group
	Most popular	6 (83%) 7 (54%)	6 (87%) 9 (68%)
Least popular	13 (9%) 12 (26%)	8 (20%) 15 (32%)	13 (10%) 8 (20%) 14 (20%)

These results reveal that most of the students in all groups and at different times talked about showing respect towards other cultures, even if they found differences between the L1 and the L2 (or other cultures). All the answers were positive, except for one subject in T3 who suffered a cultural shock and defined the result of the SA experience generally positively but with some comments that showed he/she had felt out of place. The other most popular topics had also positive reactions:

-‘Adopting L2 specific habits’ (T1), which most subjects thought anyone should do. It is interesting to see that, in general, there were a high number of subjects who

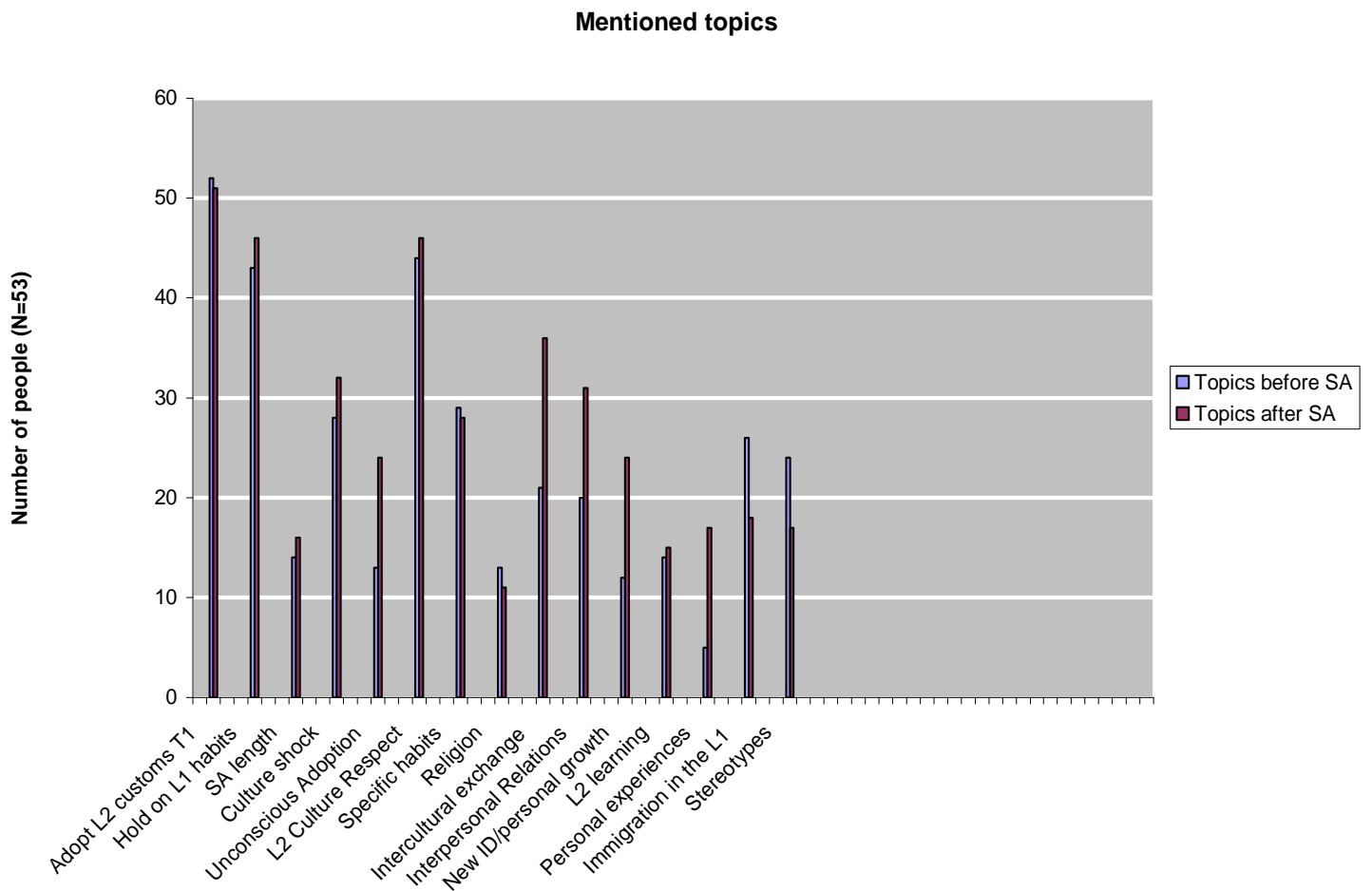
thought adopting specific habits was necessary because they did not want to feel rejected or “considered outsiders”. However, when the control group talked about this, they said something similar but from a more positive perspective: if you adopt L2 culture habits, it will be more “appreciated by the local inhabitants”.

- ‘Intercultural exchanges’ (T3), which most of the participants found a positive thing; something from which they considered they always learned. Only 4 subjects thought it was somehow a positive thing. They thought they did not need to like, accept or understand some of the things the other country was teaching them.

- “Interpersonal Relations” (control group). All the subjects considered they had to take advantage of the “great relationships that could be formed from branching out”; however, there was a generalized bad reaction about the process of adaptation to the L2. They found it a hard thing to do (“culture shock”).

Regarding the least popular topics, the experiment group (T1) and the control group coincided in not talking much about personal experiences. However, the number of subjects writing personal anecdotes doubled in T3. As mentioned in Tusting et al. (2002), this may be due to because students often make certain comments under the legitimate idea of “I know because I have been there”. For the experiment group (T3), the least popular topic was ‘religion’, with most of the subjects considering L1 religious beliefs needed to be maintained in the L2 country and only one subject said that habit needed to be changed abroad, although it could be kept for home-practice. This was not a very popular topic in the control group (20%) or in the experiment group (25%) either. We may assume this is a very delicate topic which subjects were wary of discussing.

**b) The percentages of topics mentioned in T1 or T3 (fig.1):**



**Figure 1. Topics**

Figure 1 shows there was a significant difference of topic discussion at T1 and T3 in the ‘intercultural exchanges’ issue, which 21 out of 53 subjects mentioned at T1 whereas 36 out 53 did it at T3, that is, 15 more students. After this, we can state this was an important subject for the students after the SA. Other topics such as telling ‘personal experiences’ or ‘acquiring a new identity/personal growth’ had an increase of 12 more subjects. This also proved SA influenced the type of things the students were concerned about before and after their residence abroad, i.e., the kind of experiences SA made them be aware of.

The inverse phenomenon also happened, that is, the participants mentioning something at T1 but decreased in doing it at T3. The most significant differences could be seen in talking about ‘immigration in the L1 country’ and the use of ‘stereotypes’. Then the same

effect after SA took place: some of the things the students thought as important at T1 were not as such after the SA.

**c) Belief changes from T1 and T3:**

In the annex we can find the percentages of how each topic considered in 6.1. evolved from one period (T1) to the other (T3), either positively or negatively. The most significant positive belief changes were on ‘intercultural exchanges’ (26.42% increase) and ‘new identity/personal growth’ (24.53% increase). This shows a positive result to the previous hypotheses, which predicted the acquisition of intercultural awareness and personal growth after the SA program. In the compositions analyzed, there were very optimistic comments on learning from other cultures and teaching others their own L1 cultural habits, and, therefore, resulting in a new person with a new identity who could benefit from both cultures. Both topics are interrelated. For instance, some of the students wrote sentences like “(...) when more than one culture live together, a brand new one is born as a result” or “I think that having customs from both countries and making the most of them can be really productive, and gives a greater view of the world.” These comments reveal that students gained intercultural knowledge and moved towards achieving its ultimate goal: to erase cultural borders.

In terms of negative reactions, it is interesting to mention that the percentage of changes of beliefs was either 0% or 1.89%. This shows that SA had very little negative effect on the acquisition of negative values. The topics where we found this slight negative increase were ‘holding to L1 habits’, ‘intercultural exchanges’, and ‘interpersonal relationships’. The last two results may seem contradictory to the previous statements. The reason for the increase of this negativity is because any ‘neutral/somehow response’ was considered a negative reaction. Therefore, it is not that after SA the students thought that getting involved in the culture and its people was negative. It is just that some of them adopted a neutral position (that is, not completely positive or negative). For the first topic, we may assume the negativity comes from a general feeling the students had about this issue previously. Some of them expressed a negative attitude about keeping one’s habits because 1) they did not accept that from immigrating cultures in the L1 or 2) they thought keeping their habits would give them trouble in the L2 culture.

Additionally, there was also a small decrease (1.89%) of positivism in ‘adopting the L2 culture’ and ‘immigration maintaining their culture’. The reason for this is related to the previous negativity increasing. Those not prepared to accept the adoption of L2 culture were afraid of losing their identity as L1 cultural beings. Most of them considered it an advisable attitude if they wanted to feel accepted by the L2 society but they did not think it was strictly necessary. Similarly, when talking about immigration in the students’ own country, they usually thought positively about keeping the immigrants’ own habits. However, that was not always the case, because they said when this happened there were normally many conflicts in society. In relation to immigrant issues, there were many stereotypes, although there were also many related to the Anglosaxon culture too. Words like “vandalism”, “danger”, “problems”, “guns”, etc. were often linked to the word “immigrant” in the L1 culture. However, when defining the Anglosaxon culture, the general beliefs and stereotypes were on drinking and eating habits, as well as timetables for lunch or shopping. Yet, this topic, ‘stereotypes’, decreased in the number of times the students mentioned them (18.87%). Generalized remarks about the L2 were broken or avoided. We must not forget, though, that sometimes general comments are positive for culture comparison because that shows plurality and diversity (Tusting et al., 2002).

There were no changes in, for instance, ‘adopting L2 specific cultural habits’. An equal number of people thought it was a good idea to adapt to very specific customs like lunch times, food, drinks, etc., at T1 and T3. Though, nobody who mentioned this topic considered the opposite option, that is, the idea of not doing it. No negative changes were found either in ‘adopting L2 culture’, ‘L2 cultural differences respect’ or ‘negative personal experiences’, which 0% thought of as negative. Some students suffered a culture shock and described their terrible experience. Nonetheless, they considered the SA a worthy experience, which, in spite of the difficulties, brings more advantages than disadvantages.

#### **d) Comparison between the experiment and the control group:**

In general the control group’s comments were more positive than the experiment group’s, especially if we compare the group at T1 with the control group (see annex). For some topics, the experiment group at T1 and, above all, at T3 overcame the control group’s positive arguments, for instance: ‘culture shock’, ‘adopting L2 specific habits’,

‘intercultural exchanges’, ‘new identity/personal growth’, ‘accepting immigration cultural maintenance’. However, we cannot make these results generalizable because the number of compositions analyzed for the experiment group and the number for the control group was significantly different.

As regards this part of the analysis, it is interesting to say that after double reading all compositions, a general impression was formed that the control group was more aware of them being foreigners or visitors who needed to adapt to the L2 culture rather than the L2 adapting to theirs. Interestingly, the experiment group preferred to think of mixing cultures and the L2 culture adapting to the L1 too.

## **6. Conclusion**

These results confirm our previous hypotheses concerning the positive effects SA programs have on intercultural acquisition and attitude changes. We have seen that cultural awareness is crucial if one wants to understand a language properly. The opportunities provided by SA to communicate in the L2 culture are undoubtedly beneficial for the creation of a more tolerant identity that integrates several identities. SA program goals are usually achieved for what they normally seek is “personal maturity and independence, cultural insight, and improved foreign language proficiency” (Coleman, 1998a). Therefore, thanks to the chances offered by natural immersion projects to interact and learn the L2 in situ, learners of another language gain knowledge and maturity in all aspects of language, culture and social relations. Therefore, SA programs are a means of encouraging positive attitudes towards other cultures and their way of life. It also helps in the reflection of the students’ own culture, and the understanding of their own behavior and habits. Thus interculturality advocates for the acceptance of not only the similarities but also the differences between cultures with the objective of understanding that we all belong to a common humanity, no matter the cultural practices differences.

Notwithstanding, this study has some drawbacks that may be solved in further analyses. The main problem with this type of analysis is its subjective nature for there was only one person reading all the compositions and making conclusions. Additionally, the topic, as most of the participants said, is a very difficult issue which may create a bit of confusion in their writings (as we can appreciate from the inner contradictions).



Another important factor to be taken into account is that 15 minutes may not be enough time to let the students think and organize their ideas; however, general psychology says it is the spontaneous approach that is most effective at getting somebody's real opinion.

Due to the subjective nature of this type of analysis we propose the use of other instruments before and after the SA to measure these qualitative facts: questionnaires, surveys, diaries, portfolios, etc. In addition, the results could be more complete if it were possible to analyze the control group's (i.e., the native speakers of English) writings before their SA. Unfortunately, for the present study, no access was gained to those compositions, but this should be considered for further research too.

As a final remark, it is recognized that in terms of intercultural gains, some of the participants only considered one-direction learning, from the L2 to the L1. These subjects were not aware of what interculturality really means. So although the results are very positive and encouraging, there is still a need for leading and teaching our students to acquire intercultural knowledge in order to foster communication among the cultures of the world.

In summary, our results indicate that SA programs are a great method for creating intercultural beings rich in the "awareness of the nature of intercultural interaction, and the skills and competences which allow them to relate cultural difference" (Byram and Fleming, 1998). Providing L2 learners with the most natural opportunities to approach the L2 culture, will help to increase respect for cultural identity and diversity so that the people in the world achieve a better understanding through personal interaction, as proposed by UNESCO and the UE (Coleman, 1998b).

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**ANNEX --- BELIEF CHANGES**

	<b>Adopt L2 customs</b>		<b>Hold on L1 habits</b>		<b>Culture shock</b>		<b>L2 Culture Respect</b>		<b>Specific habits adoption</b>		<b>Intercultural exchanges</b>	
	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>		<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Experiment Before SA</b>	94.34	3.77	67.92	13.21	11.32	41.52	83.02	0	50.94	3.77	33.96	5.66
<b>Experiment After SA</b>	92.45	3.77	71.70	15.09	22.64	37.74	86.79	0	50.94	1.89	60.38	7.65
<b>Control group</b>	20	0	90	10	20	50	100	0	40	0	50	0

	<b>Interpersonal Relations</b>		<b>New ID/Personal Growth</b>		<b>Personal experiences</b>		<b>Immigration in the L1</b>		<b>Stereotypes</b>	
	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>Experiment Before SA</b>	35.85	1.89	18.87	3.77	9.43	0.00	26.42	22.64	35.85	9.43
<b>Experiment After SA</b>	54.72	3.77	43.40	1.89	34.08	0.00	24.53	9.43	16.98	15.09
<b>Control</b>	70	0	30	0	10	0	10	10	30	0

