

# Student Performance in The School of International Liberal Studies' Spanish Study Abroad Program

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## Abstract

This study investigates the effects of the School of International Liberal Studies' Spanish Study Abroad Program (*kaigaikadaikenkyu*) on participants' Spanish skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading) and grammar performance. Nowadays, the number of study abroad programs has continued to increase and has become an important part of universities' curriculum all over the world. The idea of combining the formal classroom learning of a second language with the immersion in that language's speaking country seems to be incredibly ingrained. However, what is the scientific evidence of the study abroad benefits? In order to understand such effects, a formal study was carried out with a control and an experimental group and the data of a pre-test and a post-test was statistically treated. The findings show a positive effect of studying abroad on students' self-awareness of their Spanish skills (subjective perception) and grammar performance (objective evidence). As a result, this study is a valuable tool in order to know both the potential benefits and deficiencies of the Spanish *kaigaikadaikenkyu* program for our students.

**Keywords:** Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, *Kaigaikadaikenkyu*, Second Language Acquisition, Spanish, Study Abroad

## List of Abbreviations:

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
FL	Foreign Language
L2	Second Language
SA	Study Abroad
SAH	Study at Home
SILS	School of International Liberal Studies

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, the number of study abroad (from here “SA”) programs has continued to increase and has become an important part of universities’ curriculum all over the world. The idea of combining the formal classroom learning of a second language<sup>1</sup> (from now on “L2”) with the immersion in that L2 speaking country, as Freed (1998) pointed, seems to be an ideal situation for L2 acquisition.

The merits of studying an L2 away from home are diverse, and it is generally assumed students will:

- attain independence
- learn self-reliance
- obtain self-confidence
- learn more about themselves
- gain life experience
- become an adult
- acquire cross-cultural skills
- change their perspective on the world and their own culture
- increase opportunities in their careers
- be able to decorate their CV, as it looks good
- meet real learners of that L2 and create a social network
- make lifelong friends
- meet a diverse range of people
- discover new foods and sensations
- experience a new way of learning and studying
- increase their L2 proficiency, fluency, accuracy, etc.

Although SA seems to be the *panacea* for L2 acquisition, there are also critics, as shown in Twombly *et al.* (2012: 95), who denounce:

- 1) The instrumentalization of SA as a political tool, a new form of cultural and economic imperialism.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper “second language” (L2) and “foreign language” (FL) are used with the same meaning.

- 2) The exclusivity, as it is reserved for a reduced number of students, depending on their economic situation.
- 3) The experience itself, as many variables are involved in it: age, personality, motivation, L2 proficiency, length of stay, etc.

However, what is the scientific evidence of the aforementioned benefits? And, what kind of SA program is settled for Spanish in the School of International Liberal Studies (hereinafter "SILS") at Chukyo University?

### *Research in Study Abroad*

There is recent data comparing SA to study at home (from now on SAH) L2 programs in different areas, such as language learning strategies, motivation, pragmatic competence, social networks, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, etc. (for a brief and recent description see Pinar, 2016). In this introduction the focus will be on evidence of language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) and grammar acquisition.

**Speaking** ability has received the main attention in SA research and authors such as Lennon (1990), Freed (1995), Lapkin *et al.* (1995), Freed *et al.* (2004), Segalowitz and Freed (2004), and Llanes and Muñoz (2009, 2012) have demonstrated significant gains in oral fluency after a SA program.

Studies in **listening** reported significant gains for SA students compared to SAH students. Dyson (1988) arrived at this result independent of the target language, which were Spanish, French and German. However, Cubillos *et al.* (2008) found similar gains for SA and SAH students, but "good listeners" obtained better results in the SA context.

Regarding **writing** skills, Freed *et al.* (2003) showed no significant gains compared to oral fluency in French as L2. However, Sasaki (2004, 2007, 2009) found differences between SA and SAH students, where SA students demonstrated the ability to use more writing strategies. Finally, Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) confirmed the positive effect of SA on written performance.

In respect to **reading**, Dewey (2004) compared an intensive and domestic immersion program to a SA program for Japanese learners. The results showed a higher level of confidence for SA students.

In regards to **grammar acquisition** in a SA context, Collentine (2004) found no significant increase in grammatical skills. Freed, So, and Lazar (2003) found the SAH students gained a better mastery of grammar. In contrast, Isabelli (2004), Isabelli and Nishida (2005) concluded that SA

students showed more improvement in this task.

### *The School of International Liberal Studies' Spanish Study Abroad Program*

The SILS at Chukyo University offers students the possibility of a mid-length<sup>2</sup> SA program in the country where their major language is spoken (France, Spain, Germany, Russia and China), with a duration of approximately one semester. This program is called *kaigaikadaikenkyu*<sup>3</sup> and it is settled for the fall semester of the second year, although there is the possibility of registering for it in the third year. In the last ten years (from 2009 to 2018) 707 students have participated in this program, whose details can be seen in the SILS' Study Abroad Handbook<sup>4</sup>.

The main requirements in order to join the program are:

- 1) To have gained all the credits of Spanish subjects (eight subjects in the first year in case a student enrolls in the program in their sophomore year) and not to have more than three "C" grades (= "pass") in Spanish subjects.
- 2) To have registered for a preparatory course in the spring semester called *Kaigaikadaikenkyu Jizenshido*<sup>5</sup>.

When a student participates in the second year, a total of 17 credits are transferred, not only by receiving the Certificate of Completion from the corresponding SA university, but students must also carry out a research project, and submit a planning report (*keikakusho*<sup>6</sup>) before going abroad and a findings report (*hokokusho*<sup>7</sup>) after returning.

Focusing strictly in the SA program for Spanish and leaving aside the research activity, the classes take place at the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (Seville, Spain) from the second week of September until the third week of December. The Spanish Language and Culture Program consists of 225 teaching hours with five courses that are strictly given in Spanish:

- 1) Spanish Language (6 hours per week)

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<sup>2</sup> Following Twombly *et al.* (2012: 27): 1) Short-term programs: eight weeks or less; 2) Mid-length programs: a semester or less; 3) Long-term programs: an academic year or longer.

<sup>3</sup> 海外課題研究

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ils.chukyo-u.ac.jp/gakubu\\_intro/files/ryugaku\\_handbook\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ils.chukyo-u.ac.jp/gakubu_intro/files/ryugaku_handbook_2018.pdf) (Accessed 15 July 2018)

<sup>5</sup> 海外課題研究事前指導

<sup>6</sup> 計画書

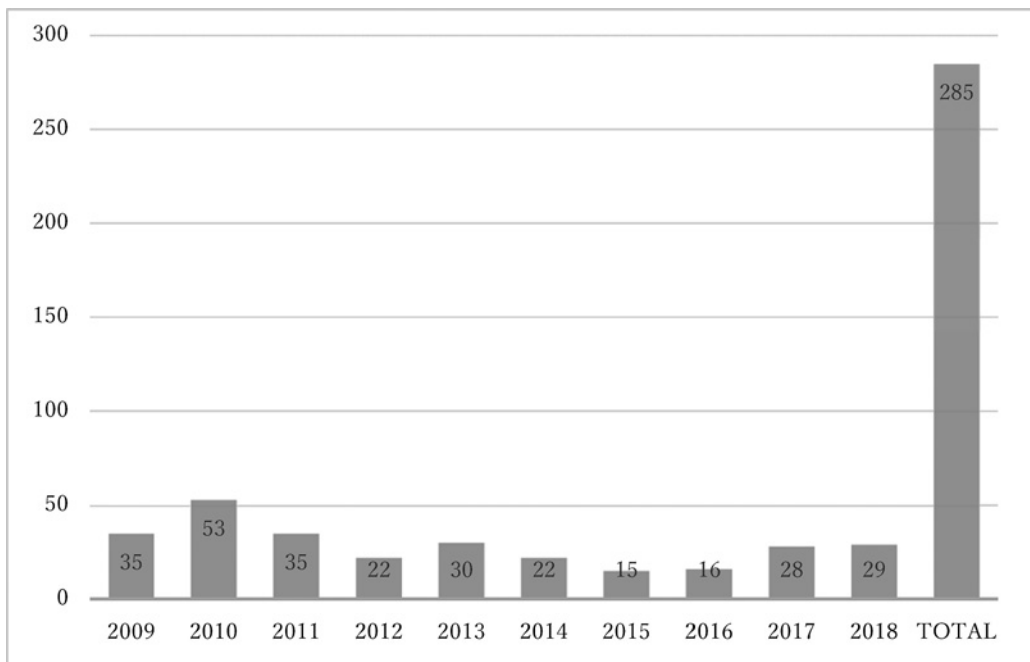
<sup>7</sup> 報告書

- 2) Spanish Conversation (3 hours per week)
- 3) Spanish Reading and Composition (3 hours per week)
- 4) Spanish Culture (3 hours per week)
- 5) Spanish Pronunciation (2 hours per week)

Apart from teaching classes, students can complement their immersion in Spanish life by participating in a homestay system, thereby learning about Spanish culture and traditions at the same time that they improve their language skills.

As can be seen in **Table 1**, a total of 285 students majoring in Spanish have enrolled the SA program of the SILS in the last 10 years, being the most popular destination among the five languages that make up the SILS.

**Table 1.** Participants in SILS Spanish Study Abroad Program in the Last 10 years



Finally, the *kaigwikaikai* program is optional; therefore, students who cannot enrol in it, or who are not interested in it, can attend Spanish classes normally during the fall semester at Chukyo University.

## 2. Objectives

The literature suggests that SA has a direct effect on oral skills, but it is not so evident for the rest of competencies and, even less, for grammar acquisition. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the effects of the *kaigaikadaikenkyu* SA program:

- 1) On students' self-awareness of their Spanish level, following the levels of the Council of Europe (2001), as seen in **Table 2**, for every competence (→**Table 3**).
- 2) On Spanish grammar acquisition.

**Table 2.** Common Reference Levels: global scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

**Table 3.** Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
<b>Listening</b>	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
<b>Reading</b>	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
<b>Spoken Interaction</b>	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
<b>Spoken Production</b>	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or film and describe my reactions.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
<b>Writing</b>	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

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### 3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions formulated in **2**, an experimental and a control group (→**3.1 informants**) were established, each of which were asked to respond to a survey (→**3.2 material**) before the *kaigaikadaikenkyu* SA program started and after it finished (→**3.3 proceedings**).

#### 3.1 Informants

The informants were divided into two groups, the control group was made up of students who remained in Japan (21 students in total), while the experimental group consisted of 28 students who participated in the 2017's *kaigaikadaikenkyu* SA program<sup>8</sup>. Age and academic grade (i.e., proficiency level) were the same for both groups and the percentage of males/females was similar, as can be seen in **Table 4**.

The variable “nationality” was identical for both groups, and also the mother language: Japanese. In addition, all students in the experimental group resided with homestay families.

**Table 4.** Informants

	<b>Control Group</b>	<b>Experimental Group</b>
Number of participants	n=21	n=28
Age	20	20
Male/Female	m=8 (38.1%) / f=13 (61.9%)	m=9 (32.1%) / f=19 (67.9%)
Year	second	second

#### 3.2 Material

A survey using *Google Forms* was specifically created, including the following three parts:

- 1) Biodata. The students were requested to fill in variables such as age, gender, grade or nationality.
- 2) Self-assessment. The students had to evaluate their Spanish competence in listening, reading,

<sup>8</sup> The stay in Spain for 2017's *kaigaikadaikenkyu* was from September 9 until December 23.



speaking and writing following the descriptors given by the CEFR (see **Table 2**).

- 3) Level evaluation exam. In order to measure their grammar proficiency, students were asked to complete a 40-question grammar exam, where they had to choose the correct answer from four options.

### 3.3 Proceedings

Both experimental group students and control group students completed the survey described in **3.2** in a computer room. The time given for completing the survey for both groups was the same (one hour), and data was collected online via *Google Forms* two times: before the 2017's *kaigaikadaikenkyu* program started (mid-July) and after it finished (mid-January).

Pre-test and post-test scores were randomly presented and data was statistically treated using the IBM SPSS Statistics software, specifically the 25<sup>th</sup> version, through paired samples T-Tests.

## 4. Results

Below are the results for both self-assessment tests for the four competencies (→**4.1**) and the scores for the level evaluation exam (→**4.2**).

### 4.1 Self-assessment Results

As shown in **Table 5**, there is little difference in the means between the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test, as was the case with the results of the pre-test and the post-test for control group. Paired sample T-tests showed no significant differences for these comparisons.

In contrast, the experimental group's means for post-test seem to be higher than pre-test ones in the descriptive statistics. The results of the paired sample T-test that was carried out can be seen in **Table 6**.

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics for self-assessments

	Control group (N=21)		Experimental group (N=28)	
PRE-TEST	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Speaking	1,48	,602	1,71	,763
Listening	1,62	,498	1,79	,738
Writing	1,76	,700	1,57	,690
Reading	1,81	,602	1,54	,576
POST-TEST	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Speaking	1,67	,856	2,54	,576
Listening	1,86	,727	2,54	,576
Writing	1,95	,921	2,75	,752
Reading	2,00	,775	2,46	,576

**Table 6.** Paired Sample T-test for experimental group's self-assessments

		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% CI of the dif.		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
P. 1	Speaking_Pre-Post	-,821	,723	,137	-1,102	-,541	-6,013	27	,000
P. 2	Writing_Pre-Post	-1,179	,863	,163	-1,513	-,844	-7,227	27	,000
P. 3	Listening_Pre-Post	-,750	,752	,142	-1,041	-,459	-5,281	27	,000
P. 4	Reading_Pre-Post	-,929	,539	,102	-1,138	-,719	-9,108	27	,000

The results from the T-test demonstrate statistically significant differences for the experimental group before and after the *kaigaikadaikenkyu* SA program for the self-assessment of the four skills analysed, with the p-value (denoted by “Sig. (2-tailed)”) equal to .000.

Regarding **speaking**, there was a significant difference in the scores for pre-test (M=1.71, SD=.763) and post-test (M=2.54, SD=.576):  $t(27)=-6.013$ ,  $p=.000$ . Participants also showed lower results for **writing** before their SA experience (M=1.57, SD=.690) than after it (M=2.75, SD=.752):  $t(27)=-7.227$ ,  $p=.000$ . Concerning **listening**, the numbers for the post-test (M=2.54, SD=.576) were higher than for the pre-test (M=1.79, SD=.738):  $t(27)=-5.281$ ,  $p=.000$ . Finally, **reading** scores were also lower before the SA (M=1.54, SD=.576) than after (M=2.46, SD=.576):  $t(27)=-9.108$ ,  $p=.000$ .

#### 4.2 The level evaluation exam's results

The scores from the level evaluation exam, based on Spanish grammar knowledge, offered differences between control group and experimental group in the pre-test and the post-test, as can be seen in **Table 7**. These results are explained because one of the reasons the students do not

participate in the SA program, apart from economic, is academic. Namely, they have in general lower Spanish level skills (see requirements for the participation in the *kaigaikadaikenkyu* program in the introduction). However, there are hardly any differences between pre-test and post-test for the control group.

In contrast, the experimental group's mean scores for the post-test were noticeably higher than pre-test. Therefore, it was necessary to carry out a paired sample T-test whose results are shown in Table 8.

**Table 7.** Descriptive statistics for level evaluation exam

	<b>Control group (N=21)</b>		<b>Experimental group (N=28)</b>	
<b>PRE-TEST</b>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grammar	17,81	6,121	22,46	4,749
<b>POST-TEST</b>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grammar	19,05	6,477	25,75	5,816

**Table 8.** Paired Sample T-test for experimental group's level evaluation exam

	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% CI of the dif.		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Grammar Pre-Post	-3,286	3,710	,701	-4,724	-1,847	-4,686	27	,000

As can be inferred from the paired sample T-test, participants demonstrated lower results for **grammar accuracy** before their SA experience in Spain ( $M=22.46$ ,  $SD=4.749$ ) than after it ( $M=25.75$ ,  $SD=5.816$ ). The p-value indicates that there was statistically significant difference before and after the *kaigaikadaikenkyu* program:  $t(27)=-4.686$ ,  $p=.000$ .

## 5. Discussion

As seen in the literature review in the **introduction**, the SA study effects in L2 acquisition are diverse, and depend on several factors. Although our findings show a positive effect regarding students' self-awareness of their L2 skills (subjective perception) and grammar performance (objective evidence), they must be contextualized and cannot be extrapolated to other SA programs. Therefore, further research will be necessary in order to get more empirical evidence. However, despite the limitations described above, this research offers us a valuable tool in order to know both the potential benefits and deficiencies of the Spanish *kaigaikadaikenkyu* program for our students.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the effectiveness of a SA program, specifically the SILS's *kaigaikadaikenkyu* for Spanish at Chukyo University, for Japanese students regarding their Spanish skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading) and grammar accuracy. Our statistical analysis indicated that students who participated in the SA experience noticed an improvement in their Spanish skills, and their grammar performance was better than the students who remained in Japan.

Although previous findings indicated divergent results for writing, listening and reading, they seem to be consequences of the research methodology and variables such as length of stay, the SA program itself, etc. Future researchers should consider other variables included in this study (for example, motivation) in order to better ascertain the benefits of studying abroad for L2 acquisition.

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