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# Scrutinizing the Impacts of Study Abroad Programs

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***Abstract:*** ***Educators and Study Abroad (SA) program designers have set high goals for these experiences. The main objective of sending students to sojourn in Morocco is to have inter-culturally competent graduates who can efficiently function in a global economy. A review of the literature on the impacts of SA programs on American students shows that these programs are frequently described as life-changing experiences since they improve participants' second language skills, enhance their Intercultural Communicative Competence, and make them more in-demand employees. The present qualitative study examines the impacts of Study abroad programs on American students regarding the target language proficiency, Intercultural Communicative Competence, and employability. To this end, ten interviews were conducted to collect data. The findings indicate that the top three personal characteristics that are crucial to intercultural success are adaptability, open-mindedness, and patience. In addition, the top three program components that affect participants' overall learning during their sojourn in Morocco are homestay, group travel, and academic leader. Moreover, results show that gender has no impact on respondents' ability to communicate using the host language; however, females are better than males in terms of developing their Intercultural Communicative Competence due to their participation in Study Abroad programs in Morocco. More than that, the findings indicate that the programs' component significantly impacts students' ability to communicate in the target language and understand the host culture. Concerning the impact of the duration of SA programs on participants' intercultural skills, the findings suggest that the longer these programs are the more linguistic and cultural gains students get. The core finding of this study is that the duration of Study Abroad programs and students' previous international experiences make the strongest contribution to students' employability; however, gender does not contribute to helping participants find a job.***

***Keywords:*** ***Study Abroad Programs, Second Language Proficiency, Arabic, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Awareness, Employability Internationalization.***

## 1. INTRODUCTION

SA programs are believed to be a strategic element in higher education whose outcomes need

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to be explored, identified, and measured. In recent years, higher education institutions have been attempting to provide students with opportunities to improve their fluency in one or more foreign languages and to efficiently understand and interact with people of different origins, races, and religions. These abilities are a necessity in today's world to deepen students' knowledge and to get well prepared for a global market.

Over the last two decades, student mobility increased by 263% in the United States moving from 129,770 participants in 1998 to 341,751 by 2018 (IIE, 1999; IIE, 2019). This trend is believed to continue since educational stakeholders have been giving importance to this international experience as a significant aspect of enhancing students' global competencies during their sojourn abroad.

Despite the constant growth of SA programs that are organized by almost all American universities, their effectiveness to boost students' intercultural learning needs concrete evidence. Previous studies indicate that students who participate in SA programs improve intercultural skills, such as adaptability, flexibility, and openness to cultural differences (Williams, 2005). Moreover, findings from large-scale programs, such as the SA Articulation Project (SAAP), SA and Exchange Programs (SAEP), American Institute for Foreign Studies (AIFS), and Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), indicate that this overseas experience had significant effects on students' academic success, careers, and personal/social development (IES, 2014).

## Literature Review

According to Hoffa (2007), SA programs began in the 1870s. At that time, Indiana University encouraged students, faculty, and administrators to enroll in summer courses given in Europe to learn a foreign language. In the beginning, the number of participants was small as only the most advantaged students participated in those courses. However, a precedent was set presenting a new approach to education abroad that allowed students to combine academic classes with out-of-classroom cultural engagement. To maintain the educational continuum, faculty members joined and supervised both students and studies.

In 1946, Senator J. William Fulbright launched the Fulbright Program to improve cultural diplomacy and intercultural relations between Americans and other people from other countries. Its mission was to "bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs and thereby increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship" (Woods, 1987). This objective was reached through the exchange of individuals, knowledge, and abilities. The Fulbright program provided scholarships to students, scientists, and artists from the U.S. to help them to study, do research, or improve their skills in other countries. It also helps citizens from other nations to do the same in the U.S. Fulbright is now considered one of the most prominent and valued scholarships as it operates in more than 150 countries worldwide providing scholarships to more than 4000 international students (Fulbright Scholarship Program, 2020)

In 1948, the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA) was established thanks to colleges, universities, government agencies, and private organizations. The rationale behind creating this association was the belief that international education was the foundation stone for building a more tolerant and nonviolent world. Its objective was to spread policies and practices to help develop global citizens who possess the necessary knowledge and abilities required in today's interrelated world.

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Since the 1960s, bilateral and multilateral exchange agreements between American colleges and universities and other institutions worldwide have facilitated SA programs. They were faculty-directed, and they lasted longer, a semester or one year. Nonetheless, these programs were not believed to be worthy of academic credit, and there were no methods to measure out-of-classroom learning. It was until the mid-80s that SA programs started getting influenced by the experiential learning theory due to the development of different approaches to assess out-of-classroom knowledge (Carlson et al., 1990).

The Helsinki Declaration of 1975 (also known as the Helsinki Accords) compelled the 35 signatory nations to motivate students to learn foreign languages and civilization as they are essential means of increasing communication among people. To reach this goal, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies investigated the state of foreign language and intercultural studies and their effects on the internal and external strengths of the United States of America. In 1979, the Commission's report, Strength through Wisdom, stated that American national security and welfare did not depend only on defense, diplomacy, and economics; but also on the psychological and intellectual strengths that Americans would gain if they changed their views of the world beyond their frontiers. The commission, therefore, provided a set of realistic, modest, and practical recommendations (Perkins, 1979).

Regarding international educational exchanges, the Commission thought it was advisable to increase funding for several cultural exchange programs immediately. The main objective was to boost intercultural relations between Americans and people from other countries. For example, it was advisable to increase the funding for the United States International Communication Agency (USICA) to $60 million and $100 million by 1985 (Perkins, 1979). As an additional example, the Fulbright program was urged to include junior and senior undergraduates and make available incentive funding to different higher institutions to promote reciprocal undergraduate exchange. As a result, the program provides 8000 grants annually – roughly 1600 to U.S. students, 1200 to U.S. scholars, 4000 to international students, 900 to foreign visiting scholars, and several hundred to teachers and professionals (Fulbright Scholar Program, 2017).

**Conceptual Framework**

- **Second Language Socialization Theory (SLS):**

In the application of the second language socialization framework to second language studies, Duff (2007) states that it is necessary to involve an additional level of complexity. Second language learners already possess a set of linguistic and cultural traditions that they got from their native language (L1) and local culture (C1), while L2 and C2 provide them with various choices when interacting with members of the host community, which results in heterogeneous second-language socialization situations.

Following the steps of thematic analysis and the SLS theory, a summary of participants' responses in light of explicit and implicit inquiries is presented. In this part, data is discussed according to the researcher's interpretation and understanding of different themes extracted from students‟ answers and zoomed in through the lens of SLS theory. This way, the researcher guaranteed meticulous and methodical handling of information, reporting findings, and concluding.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

The present study relies on a qualitative method to collect data. It offers a clear idea about the elements responsible for the data through interviewing the study population (Creswell & Clark 2010).
After pilot testing the four questions, it was concluded that the telephone interview questions were to the point and can reach meaningful data. The responses to the feedback questions signaled that no serious revisions were to be made and that, apart from question 5, almost all the questions needed no reformulation as they were unmistakable, appropriate, and acceptable. This indicated that the questions would provide high-quality data for the present study. However, following the recommendations of Peat et al. (2002), the data provided by this pilot study were not included in the full-scale study.

### Research Questions

Although the four questions guiding the interviews were premeditated, other issues and topics were raised by the participants. They were explored and discussed as standard in qualitative interviewing (Glogowska et al., 2010). These four open-ended questions allowed the researcher to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the issue under study since respondents were allowed to provide more details and options that would add more diversity to quantitative data. These questions were as follows:
Question 1: Did your participation in the SA program in Morocco help you to improve your SCA?
Question 2: What qualities and abilities helped you to get accepted in the Moroccan culture?
Question 3: What effect(s) did your host family have on your experience?

Question 4: Did your sojourn in Morocco have any effects on your life and work choices after returning to your country?

### Participants

Telephone interviews were conducted with ten alumni from five different universities in the U.S.A. These interviews enabled the researcher to understand respondents' perceptions and experiences deeply. At the very beginning of each interview, the participants were reminded of the research project's objectives. They were also asked to give their permission to be recorded. The interviews did not take more than thirty minutes, as suggested by De Vaus (1991).

### Qualitative Data Collection

Quantitative data paved the way for factual findings statistically, but it was not the only way to get solid results. To get ideal qualitative data that can lead to a deeper understanding of the outcomes and impacts of SA programs in Morocco, the researcher interviewed ten alumni who expressed their readiness to participate in this study. These interviews were a unique method as the researcher decided to probe further and ask more questions to get more insights.
The conduct of interviews over the telephone has been increasingly used to collect qualitative data in different fields. Robson (2002) provided three advantages of using telephone interviewing compared to mailed surveys. First, thanks to the expansion of ownership of mobile

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telephones around the globe, it is now easy for researchers to contact respondents and get instant responses. In addition, through telephone interviews, respondents' lack of understanding can be dealt with on the spot, and questions can be explained immediately. Finally, telephone interviews allow researchers to build rapport with participants, keep the conversation on course, and help respondents stay engaged.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is the process of bringing order and meaning to the collected data. While quantitative analysis dealt with numerical size and statistical patterns, qualitative analysis was concerned with open-ended data from telephone interviews. The rationale behind qualitative analysis was to understand the statistical results gained by quantitative data. The questions posed to participants aimed to explore how they reflected on their experience in Morocco. To be more specific, respondents could provide answers using their own words.

*Microsoft Word, NVivo* 11 Plus, and Microsoft Excel 2010 were used to process and analyze the qualitative data taken from the telephone interviews conducted with ten participants after expressing their willingness to participate in these interviews. These tools were used to do the recording, storing, matching, and linking of data. They also allowed the researcher to focus on identifying "categorical patterns" (Lune et al., 2017, p. 197) in a down-to-earth way as it facilitated a user-friendly identification, organization, and classification of information (ibid.). There are several approaches to conducting thematic analysis, but the researcher decided it was more convenient to use the most common form that is developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Taking into account the research questions, the method for analyzing the data, and the approach that is going to be taken, the researcher followed six steps to determine relevant themes:

Step 1: Organizing and getting familiar with the collected data:
Step 2: Highlighting sections of the transcripts and coding them:
Step 3: Generating themes:
Step 4: Reviewing themes:
Step 5: Defining and naming themes:
Step 6: Writing up thematic analysis:

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, four themes were identified and are restated below. The framework that underlies the qualitative part of this study is one of Second Language Socialization. As mentioned earlier, SLS is defined as “the process by which novices or newcomers in a community gain communicative competence” (Duff, 2007, p. 310). This process is facilitated by the use of L2 in interactions within the host community. Previous studies have indicated that language socialization experiences and L2 proficiency are interconnected (Kinginger, 2008).

Wang (2010) claimed that second language socialization is a suitable theoretical framework to decipher the learning process during the international experience as understanding the acquisition of a second language needs data from different languages. Wang advised researchers to study every nuance of related information since language learning in SA programs is a complex process. For this researcher, students’ self-positioning can affect their access to social networks and influence their linguistic and cultural gains in-country. Similarly,

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Kinginger (2013) urged researchers to use the second language socialization framework to better comprehend the individual variability in participants' experiences during SA programs in addition to the benefits of these programs in terms of students' language learning.

**Theme 1: SA programs helped alumni improve their linguistic skills.**

In light of the findings, the most pertinent competency that appeared in the qualitative data as a center of socialization is linguistic competency. Participants indicated that they made significant improvements in linguistic skills during their international experience in Morocco. Duff (2007) stated that the most important element of language socialization is the mastery of the target language (p. 310). The socialization of participants into their new environment during their experience in Morocco enabled them to acquire and improve a great deal of their L2 through countless contacts and exchanges with members of the local community.

Similar to L1 socialization, L2 socialization is facilitated by individuals who are more proficient and more familiar with the target language than those that are less knowledgeable (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). More experienced people usually include faculty members, tutors, peers, and local people who are willing to give a helping hand to novices to learn the target language and acquire the values and practices that relate to the language and its users within the communities of practice.

According to the common conviction in the field of international education, the most successful way to learn a language is in the country where this language is spoken. During their sojourn abroad, students are exposed to a large amount of the target language. They are also able to put into practice the knowledge they have learned in the classroom. As a result, students improve their oral skills thanks to their interactions with local people. A series of studies (Freed, 1998; Ellis, 3003) have compared the linguistic skills students acquired in the classroom and during their participation in SA programs. The results indicated that the gains in fluency and accuracy were higher for SA participants.

The type of relationships students may have with local people, their characteristics, and the amount of exposure and immersion in the host culture may determine the level of L2 proficiency they may reach. According to Krashen (1988), low-anxiety contexts that language socialization offers increase learners' self-confidence and provide them with positive attitudes toward the target language and culture. Students' attitudes toward the target language and the host community affect their language contact and the linguistic gains from this contact. Therefore, since students may have different second-language socialization experiences, they may have various perceptions of these influential involvements. The SLS framework, then, is believed to be the most suitable tool to investigate and interpret the incongruous results of research on the linguistic outcomes of SA programs.

Several researchers have indicated that SA programs increase students' L2 proficiency. Isabelli (2000) pointed out that participants with a solid social network during their international experience were able to improve their proficiency. In another study, the same researcher (2004) also indicated that students with a high degree of socialization and exposure to the input made significant language gains. The findings of the present study support these investigations. Participants who interacted more with local people benefited from large amounts of input through the L2 socialization process and, consequently, increased their linguistic competence.

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**Theme 2: Qualities that made participants feel they were accepted as members of the local community.**

Another primary theme that was attached to various segments of the participants' responses is the skills that helped respondents to get accepted into the local community. Students' ability to speak Arabic and the way they dressed up were the most frequent in students' responses. Being able to speak SCA and dressing up in a way that is like local people (particularly for women) may initially open many doors for students to increase their everyday language practices (Kofman, 2012).

**L2 proficiency and social integration**

Speaking the target language is an indispensable element of social integration, particularly in the context of studying abroad. Social integration refers to the process of building relationships with members of the local community and gaining access to different areas of social life (Bosswick and Heckmann, 2006). Social integration allows students to interact with people of the host community through daily communication on the street, in the market, or educational institutions. In other words, to get accepted in the local community and to communicate with local people, students are expected to be able to speak the local language. The ability to speak the host language is the core element to get socialized in the host country.

The findings of the present study are consistent with previous research on the importance of L2 proficiency as a skill that enables students to get accepted into the host community. According to Oshrat and Davidov (2014), proficiency in the target language is believed to be a form of human capital. Speaking a language of a community enhances students' prospects for social success. The two researchers argued that L2 proficiency is considered a topmost cultural indicator that newcomers should show to obtain group membership. L2 proficiency is a tool that students use to integrate into every aspect of the new society (ibid, p. 347).

**Clothing and social integration**

Another element that plays an important role in enabling students, especially females, to get accepted in Moroccan society is how they display themselves, and what they wear. It is true that in Morocco people dress in different ways. Some females wear shorts or skirts and some women have everything but their eyes covered (Michalove, 2014). Respecting the Moroccan culture and going for more conservative clothes is highly appreciated by local people.

Heath (1983) stated that "all language learning is culture learning" (p. 5). Sharing the same point of view, Agar (1994) made up the term *languaculture* to point out that language and culture are so significantly interconnected that they should always be studied together. For Schieffelin & Ochs (1986), learning an L2 and acquiring sociocultural aspects happen simultaneously and form the basic principle of second language socialization. Baquedano-Lopez & Garrett noted that language and culture are so strongly interwoven. So, while learning the language, participants in SA programs learn about the dress code in Morocco.

Though Morocco is an Islamic country, there are no official or legislative rules on women's dress. Moroccans dress in a wide variety of ways when in public settings and they do not expect foreign students to dress the way they do (Bachleda & Hamelin 2014). However, it is always a good idea to dress more modestly than American students do at home. They are expected to respect the local norms and dress more conservatively. Though there are no rules, students are advised to be somewhat covered. It is never appropriate to see a shirtless man or a woman with

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the stomach and the chest area uncovered.
Clothing has great implications in all cultures, and outfits have a special symbolic significance. Clothing carries and communicates concrete cultural meanings to other people (McCracken, 1988). Dress is part of the culture (Kuchler and Miller 2005). In Morocco, young men and women prefer to wear ready-made clothing such as skirts, jeans, shirts, and blouses (Boulanouar, 2011). College students typically wear these garments. They may also wear jellaba with or without a headscarf. Ready-made outfits are less expensive, but they may fit less well. They also may allow less choice since the material can be of poor quality (ibid)

**Theme 3: Homestay was a great experience.**
One of the most important characteristics of SA programs that may affect participants' development in terms of linguistic and cultural gains is housing. During their sojourn in Morocco, students may encounter three types of accommodation.

- Dormitory: a residence that often consists of corridors with identical rooms where several students live with each other.
- Shared apartments: several students live in furnished apartments with many bedrooms. A student can have his/her room or share the room with another student. The bathroom and the kitchen are shared with the other students.
- Homestay: the student may have his / her room while living with a host family. Students may share the bathroom and other spaces with family members. Two or three meals are often included, so students can save time and money and get more opportunities to try local food and interact with local people.

There is scant literature on the impacts of housing type on the student's linguistic and cultural gains during the SA experience. Wilkinson (1998) indicated that students' cultural sensitivity may have an impact on the quality of their interactions with their host families. She raised the question of the importance of staying with a host family during SA programs. She compared students who benefited from the homestay to those who stayed in dorms. She concluded that "contrary to popular belief, the host family situation does not always constitute the most beneficial living arrangement for all study-abroad participants" (p. 38). She noted that participants who stayed with host families scored lower in listening and speaking proficiency. Conversely, several studies have examined the power of the homestay experience and its impacts on students' L2 proficiency and ICC. A great number of these studies have proved the efficacy of the homestay experience and its vital role in socializing students through and into the target language as they participate in everyday interactions with individuals from the target language community. Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) highlighted the importance of the homestay experience and advised SA program administrators to include this experience as a planned part of the curriculum. Di Silvio, Donovan, and Malone (2014) pointed out that there is a correlation between participants in the homestay experience and their L2 learning process. Nine out of ten interviewees displayed a crushingly positive reaction to the importance of staying with a host family during their sojourn in Morocco. The interviewees stated that their homestay experience helped them to enjoy an immensely valuable trip and to be exposed to the local language and culture 24/7. Thanks to the high flow of L2 input that these learner-host family interactions offer to students, homestay is considered a great opportunity to develop deep linguistic gains and cultural awareness.

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Many studies have used the language socialization framework to investigate and interpret different aspects of students' interactions and L2 development due to the homestay experience. This experience is believed to provide participants with the opportunity to use the target language to complete daily activities while engaging members of the host family. DuFon (2006) used this model to examine how students were socialized into food and taste during their homestay experience in Indonesia. He found out that participants learned the local standards and culinary aesthetics from members of the host families. Shiri (2015) indicated that the homestay experience played a great role in connecting students to the local community, its language, and its culture. This researcher pointed out that the homestay experience promoted linguistic and social confidence in students and offered them a much more appreciated understanding of the local language and culture.

The homestay experience provides participants with opportunities for experiential learning and socialization into the routines of the host family. The everyday interactions that take place between students and their host families allow participants to have an insider perspective and to socialize with the daily life of the host family, the society, and the culture. Shiri (2015) found that participants in a SA program in Tunisia were able to get a unique and inside investigation of the local culture which they might never get from books or in the classroom. For this researcher, the homestay is not only a site for linguistic and cultural immersion but also an opportunity to benefit from an existing social network, which permits participants to enjoy more unique interactions.

**Theme 4: SA in Morocco means better job prospects.**

The fourth theme, which was identified in interviewees' responses to question four, focuses on the role of SA programs in enabling participants to find a job when they graduate. It seems that students are aware that the degree they get at the end of their university studies is not sufficient; they need to develop a set of employability skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving, and communication. Pham & Thompson, (2019) stated that employers do not consider graduates' academic results only, but they also give more importance to generic and practical skills to recruit relevant candidates. By the same token, Duronsoy et al. (2014) indicated that 51% of employers had problems finding qualified candidates. He stated that the main issues are graduates lacking adequate skills, relevant qualifications, and work experience.

The findings of the present study are supported by a growing body of research that focused on the interaction between SA programs and employability. As an example, the Institute of International Education (IIE) examined the connection between the skills that students develop in SA experience and their career outcomes. 4.564 participants who took part in learning abroad between 1999 and 2017 were surveyed. The results of this study indicated that most alumni stated that the SA experience helped them to develop and improve significant transferable skills, such as self-confidence, curiosity, and intercultural skills. In the same way, Waibel et al. (2017) reported a positive connection between SA programs and employability and stated that learning abroad helps facilitate the education-to-work transition.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study has also contributed to the much-needed qualitative research on SA sojourns in

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Morocco. In total agreement with its quantitative counterpart, the qualitative part has touched upon the impacts the experience of studying in Morocco has on students. It has helped the researcher to get a fuller picture of the SA programs. The identified themes in the qualitative part have been discussed and interpreted drawing on the second language socialization theory pioneered by Duff and Talmy (2011). Qualitative results have confirmed the quantitative findings and created a vigorous foundation for making comparisons and drawing conclusions. Hence, the profound impacts that participants have described strongly support the benefits of SA opportunities, particularly in relation to L2 proficiency, ICC, and employability. Qualitative results have also indicated that language socialization enables students to improve their linguistic skills and boost their intercultural gains. L2 socialization allows participants to take part in interactional routines and speech acts within the new discourse community. These social interactions and routine activities are crucial aspects of nurturing communicative competence and other cultural knowledge, such as values, practices, identities, ideologies, and affective states associated with the new community of practice. However, students participating in SA programs are expected to be active members in the construction of socialization. They should be active contributors to the meanings and outcomes of different interactions with the other members of the local community

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