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Women students from Saudi Arabia in a study abroad programme

Sociocultural experiences and English proficiency development

Hassna M. Alfayez and Julia Hüttner
King Saud University, Riyadh | University of Vienna

Most students taking part in Study Abroad (SA) programmes aim to immerse themselves as fully as possible in the target language (TL) country and so improve their TL proficiency, as well as their own personal development towards independent adulthood. From a research perspective, the quality of social networks involving TL speakers, and hence the social interactions the SA students engage in, are seen as of paramount importance in determining the ultimate success in TL attainment. This paper addresses a cohort of learners who have not received a lot of attention in the SA literature, namely Saudi Arabian female students, whose individual immersion into the TL context is limited by cultural restrictions, importantly the need to be accompanied by a male guardian (*mahram*). Based on a data set of a cohort of nine students gathered over the period of one year, this study aims to establish the extent to which these students engage in social interactions in the TL setting and how these affect their overall language proficiency development. Data was gathered pre-, during, and post-SA, using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative instruments. These tested language proficiencies and surveyed the social interactions and engagement with the TL of the students, using both questionnaires (Language Engagement Questionnaire, Social Networking Questionnaire) and semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest, firstly, that despite the limitations on social interactions, these students clearly benefit from SA. Findings show a complex set of relationships between language development and interactions, with diverse strategies employed to access social networks and thus engage in interactions. Overall, these results point to SA settings as highly conducive learning environments, even for students who face cultural restrictions in their interactions.

Keywords: cultural and social interaction, second language proficiency, fluency

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1. Introduction

Higher education in the 21st century is increasingly characterized by student mobility. While this can take the form of students pursuing entire degrees outside their home country (as around 2% do, see UNESCO, 2014), spending a limited time abroad for educational purposes, i.e. study abroad (SA), as part of a degree is by now well-established. Indeed, Kinginger (2009, p. 7) states that "more students are going abroad for a wider range of purposes [...] than ever before." Thus, 1.5% of all US students and 13.8% of all EU students are involved in organized study abroad (European Commission, 2014; NAFSA, 2016).

Even though there is a range of perceived benefits of SA, two aspects seem to feature more prominently, i.e. an improvement in intercultural awareness and in the foreign language capacities of the students involved. The common argument is that since SA programmes immerse learners in social and cultural settings where their target language is dominant, they are more likely to become proficient in that language than if they studied it only in their native countries (see, e.g., Kinginger, 2009; Llanes, 2011; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017 for overviews of claims for SA and related research).

While a considerable body of research confirms that SA is overall a conducive language learning environment, Llanes' (2011) overview of SA research outlines differences in the effect on diverse elements of language proficiency with the clearest impact on fluency, lexis and pragmatics and with much less conclusive results for morphosyntax and writing. Additionally, we find considerable variability in the success achieved by individual learners and the reasons for this are not yet fully understood. Explanatory attempts have addressed individual cognitive differences, such as working memory, or metalinguistic awareness (DeKeyser, 2010; Schauer, 2009) without achieving much more clarity. Some links have been established between individual variability and the differences in the nature of the SA experience, notably length of time abroad and level of prior foreign language attainment (Magnan & Back, 2007; Rees & Klapper, 2007). Linked to this is the growing body of research that investigates the details of the SA context, acknowledging that full, rich and highly interactive immersion into the TL is not a certain or uniform experience. Thus, "extensive availability of 'input', far less its conversion into 'intake'" (Mitchell et al., 2017, p. 8) cannot be taken for granted.

Gaining a detailed understanding of the nature of the SA experience involves a heightened appreciation that for most participants, SA is much more than a language learning endeavor (see, e.g., Murphy-Lejeune, 2003), and includes importantly a 'coming of age', i.e. a transition towards independent adulthood and related identity change. Personal characteristics such as learner agency are seen as candidates in determining access to L2 interactions and hence to language learning

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opportunities. A research cluster relating linguistic development with language socialization, social interactions, identity, intercultural awareness and the processes surrounding the development of these has developed, problematizing simplistic notions of 'immersion' still current in popular images of SA. However, the existing bias of SA research towards European and North American students arguably limits the types of experiences contributing to our understanding of wider SA processes, leading Kinginger (2009, p. 112) to the "major recommendation [...] that researchers take an interest in students from a broader spectrum of backgrounds and origins."

In answering this call to action, this paper addresses learners from Saudi Arabia, a country that has been making considerable efforts in recent history to develop English communication skills among its people, while safeguarding its own culture and traditions. Thus, Saudi Arabian higher education institutions introduced SA first for male students in 2009 and in 2010 for female students. The female students in this study are atypical candidates for SA, compared with those generally studied in the field, as legal and cultural factors limit their independent agency, and especially social encounters with men who are not their relatives or their husband (Moores-Abdool, Yahya, & Unzueta, 2011). The requirement for these students to travel with a male relative as guardian (*mahram*), in addition to the arguably greater cultural diversity of their host country (in this case the USA), provides an ideal opportunity to investigate the effects of SA when the traditional concept of 'full individual immersion' in the TL context is replaced by an experience explicitly involving the co-participation in the SA experience of family members.

More specifically, this study seeks to examine the social and cultural interactions experienced by a cohort of nine female Saudi Arabian SA students who studied English as a second language in the United States and to establish how these impacted on their language development. It will thus contribute to broadening our overall understanding of relationships among these different factors, through increasing the diversity of SA research.

2. Social interactions and social networks in study abroad

The research presented here aims to contribute to the sociocultural research tradition in SA, linking findings on L2 development and on the amount and type of interactions that SA students engage in during their sojourn, using all of their languages, including social interactions with local and international target language speakers as well as with representatives of home networks. Specifically, we are addressing female Arab learners, which is a group under-represented in

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language learning research. Their SA experience involves not only contacting family members and friends at home through the internet, which is now a very well documented part of the SA experience, but the physical presence in the SA setting of a *mahram* and possibly more family and friends from the L1 context. In addition, these learners experience a noticeably cultural distinctness, visible in their dress conforming to religious norms (e.g. *hijab, niqab*) and in the rejection of specific L2 cultural practices (e.g. cross-gender friendships, romantic attachments with locals, drinking alcohol).

The notion that interaction is central to language learning is expounded in Michael Long's 'interaction hypothesis', which specifies that linguistic input, modified to be made comprehensible to the learner through face-to-face interaction, is essential in promoting language proficiency (Long, 1991). Support for this hypothesis is found in a number of empirical studies based in language classrooms and on a range of skills, e.g. Ewert (2009), Jiang and Ramsay (2005) and Lin and Yang (2011).

Based on the interaction hypothesis, it might be suggested that any positive effect on language learning during SA might be due to increased interactions with TL speakers, which take place within the social networks established by the speakers (Milroy & Milroy, 1992). Empirical studies into the effect of social interaction and social networks on language learning within SA have so far given a mixed picture of the relationship between social interaction and language gain. While Dewey (2008) found a link between social interaction and lexical knowledge, Archangeli (1999) found that syntax and vocabulary were rather unaffected. Briggs (2015) in her study of 241 SA students established that, apart from a duration effect, there was little effect of her participants' social (or cultural) interactions in terms of lexical acquisition. She explains these findings with the limited amount of TL-medium interactions the SA students engaged in outside of class, largely limited to obtaining information from strangers (e.g. asking the way) and hence of limited challenge in terms of vocabulary. Archangeli's (1999) study showed that fluency and pragmatics improved with the number of social interactions. This positive effect on pragmatics is supported in other studies, e.g., by Bacon (2002) and Ishida (2010). Bacon (2002) additionally found that the social interactions of SA participants entered into a very positive dynamic interplay with the formal lessons, supporting a language gain, and notably an improvement in writing. A number of studies found that oral fluency correlated positively with frequency of TL social interactions (e.g. Dewey, Belnap, & Hillstrom, 2013; Hernández, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Tentatively, we might argue that part of the reason for such variability in findings lies in the nature of the research tools used to document social interactions and networks of participants. Most research studies examining relations between

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social interaction and L2 development have relied on some form of self-report to document the former, and the reliability of the most commonly used questionnaire, the Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004), has been questioned (Fernández & Gates Tapia, 2016). In addition to the challenges of self-reporting language use, a major limitation of the Language Contact Profile relates to the difficulty of accurately capturing all of the changes in the students' behavior outside the educational setting and so to provide internally consistent reports of L2 use.

A means of addressing these methodological reasons for variation in findings has been to complement the use of questionnaires with journals, logs and ethnographic methods, as has become prevalent in research addressing social network development. Investigating the experiences of US students of Arabic in Jordan and Egypt, Dewey et al. (2013) focused on identifying factors that influenced the development of rich L2 social networks. Among the enabling factors was the availability of like-minded individuals, ideally of similar age. Thus, the location in Jordan, where students were accommodated close to a university, fostered network development. This was aided by the fact that in offering language tandems, the American students could gain access to TL speakers. Overall, the most durable networks evolved through 'friends of friends'. We also find some studies on SA that highlight gender as a factor in accessing social networks and in negotiating the positioning made in the TL country. Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1995), Polanyi (1995) and Isabelli-García (2006) found negative effects of some gendered experiences for female SA students, who found themselves either positioned as sexual objects, and so harassed, or excluded from many interactions, leading to a withdrawal from social interactions and, at times, a disengagement from the entire SA experience. Trentman (2015) presents a more complex picture of female SA participants in Egypt negotiating a range of gendered identities, some of which facilitated local social networking, including the roles of 'traditional good girl', 'guest of the family', 'romantic partner'.

In their recent, large-scale study aiming to track both language gain and social networking, Mitchell et al. (2017) provided a detailed qualitative analysis of the characteristics of high gainers during a sojourn abroad. A key feature identified lies in the participants' own "active agency and initiative in accessing and sustaining L2 networks, whether diverse and/or intensive" (p. 245). This included a strategic use of participants' 'assets', such as specific skills in sports, music, and also in English, as entry points into local social and professional networks, as was also found in Dewey et al.'s (2013) participants' use of their English skills to make local friends. This strategic ability was supported by specific personal characteristics of these high gainers, such as resilience, flexibility, openness, self-reflection and a clear vision of themselves as multilingual. Additionally, the engagement

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in close relationships, whether romantic or friendship-based, challenged the SA students' language abilities and so furthered their development (Mitchell et al., 2017, p. 247–248).

There is a definite cultural dimension to social interactions, which shows in two major forms. First, students engage with the TL without necessarily engaging with an individual, for instance, when they access local media, go to the movies or to other events seen as specific to the TL context. These events might, but do not have to, become starting points for social interactions with TL speakers. Culture also affects social interaction through culture-based stereotypes that might be present in both the SA and the TL speakers. Thus, such 'othering' processes experienced by some SA participants, are based on cultural stereotypes, which affect access to, and the nature of the social networks available to them. Giroir (2014) in her account of the experiences of two Saudi men in the USA addresses the ways in which her participants engage with mainstream post-9/11 discourses in their negotiation of access to and positioning in social networks. For the younger of these two men, Musa, the 'coming of age' aspect of SA became associated with a greater independence from some familial and cultural norms. An aspect of his agency to enter social networks was his disassociation from the effects of Islamophobic discourses and practices, treating them as a 'joke'. The second participant, Alim, also displayed openness and a multicultural view of himself, which, supported by having an English-speaking girlfriend, aided his access to social networks. In terms of cultural positioning, he felt the need to actively take a stance in the post-9/11 anti-Islamic discourse encountered and so negotiate the differences in the narratives 'of' himself by mainstream US society and the ones 'by' himself. To the best of our knowledge, the only study addressing female Saudi Arabian students abroad is Kampman (2011), who conducted case studies of five female Saudi Arabian students who enrolled in a short summer business program in the United States. The findings show that participants felt discomfort at some TL cultural practices, such as being in co-educational classrooms and interacting with males and females from different cultures but thought it important for their professional development to become accustomed to these practices. In their own estimation, they were, however, less confident in handling the socio-cultural interactions that the setting seemed to expect from them and generally withdrew from these.

The picture emerging from this body of research suggests that more work will be needed before the various factors can be disentangled and a clear picture drawn of the relationship between social interactions / networks and language gain. It will be of special interest to find out to what extent Saudi female learners present similar characteristics to other learner groups. Kampman (2011) raises many pertinent questions to this study; i.e. while it is clear that there are challenges for the Saudi female students in SA, the question is whether these are strong enough to

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outweigh any potential benefits, or whether female Saudis can develop strategies to overcome these obstacles.

3. Study

The project described here aims to enable a deeper understanding of the social / cultural interactions and language development of a cohort of nine female Saudi students.[1] More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the cultural and social interactions experienced by female Saudi Arabian students while studying abroad?
2. To what extent were female Saudi Arabian SA participants able to develop proficiency and confidence in the use of the English language?
3. Can any variations in the gains in English language proficiency among female Saudi Arabian SA participants be explained with reference to different social and cultural interaction experiences?

In order to capture the richness of this experience, the methodology employed combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, following an overall mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2010). Quantitative methods were considered necessary in order to establish the language learning gains of the participants as well as to describe the extent of their English language interaction in the SA setting. However, the focus of this study is on the qualitative aspect where evidence from participants' experiential accounts was used in order to establish the impact of social and cultural interactions on the participants' second language learning gains.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study are nine Saudi Arabian female students at the English section of a Translation Studies department at a Saudi university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years and their Grade Point Averages (GPA) from 3.3 to 4.9/5. All of them started learning English in seventh grade at public schools in Saudi Arabia, and they had studied English language skills at college for one year before joining the SA program. Like all Saudi females, they need to live by specific socio-cultural restrictions, many of them concerning their positioning in relation to males, both in their own country and abroad. Importantly, there is a

1. See Alfayez (2016) for the full study.

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prohibition, both cultural and legal, against women travelling without their husband or a male relative acting as guardian (*mahram*). Increasingly, Saudi women embrace higher education, and are recognizing, and partly questioning, some of these restrictions. Education is thus perceived as a means for achieving independence and self-sustainability within what is still a patriarchal Saudi Arabian society (Al-Yousef, 2009; Lindsey, 2012). Al-Yousef (2009) notes the tension within female Saudi students, many of whom hold considerably liberal ideals, but, at the same time, embrace conservative values with regard to engaging in social relationships, especially with the opposite gender.

Especially with regard to SA, there are anxieties in general opinion, mirrored partly by educational institutions, surrounding the involvement of female students. One reason for this is that females are considered the weaker gender and may be unable to protect themselves abroad. Another reason is the belief that exposing women to Western ideologies is considered potentially harmful if they were to come back and influence others, such as their children, in these ideologies. In addition to this, most Saudi men typically shy away from marrying women who are known to have travelled alone. Finally, there is still the social mind-set in some parts of Saudi Arabia that the rightful place of a woman is in her parents', and eventually, her husband's house, and so there is no need for her to have advanced formal education outside the Kingdom. However, regulations enacted by the participants and their families were interpreted a little more liberally in that the *mahram* was required to live in the same apartment as the student they were chaperoning at least until the student was settled in the new environment. A clear preference in the guidance was given towards the *mahram* staying for the duration of the student's SA sojourn, but the fact that this was not always strictly followed is evidence of cultural norms being relaxed in some families. Table 1 shows the living arrangements of participants.

The students were not escorted by their *mahram* while they were inside the university, showing further evidence of greater independence accorded to the participants in the study. However, the female students were still required to comply with traditional Muslim attire, and so most students wore the *hijab* (headscarf) both within and outside campus and one student additionally wore the *niqab* (face veil).

Thus, these participants' SA experience is atypical in not being intended to embrace a full, individual immersion into the TL context. This is the case as restrictions apply in terms of social engagement with TL speakers, especially males, and in family members being co-opted into the SA experience as guardians, companions or facilitators.

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Table 1. Living arrangements of participants

Student name*	**Living arrangement during SA**	**Official *mahram***
Basma	With father for the first week, then shared flat with Fahda and Shatha	Father
Fahda	With father for the first week, then shared flat with Basma and Shatha	Father
Ferdos	With father for the first four months then living alone	Father
Majd	With both parents for the duration of the stay	Father
Ranem	With parents and three sisters and one brother	Father
Reem	With father for the first three months then living alone	Father
Sara	With both parents for the duration of the stay	Father
Shahd	With younger brother for the duration of the stay	Brother
Shatha	With father for the first week, then shared flat with Basma and Fahda	Father

* All names are pseudonyms

3.2 Setting and SA programme

In relation to the goal of Saudi universities to develop higher education in the Kingdom through partnerships with universities of distinction worldwide, the Twinning Program was launched in 2008 in order to foster international experiences of both staff and students. This also facilitates SA sojourns for one year as part of an undergraduate degree. In the context of this study, the uptake of this initiative by students of Departments of Foreign Languages and of Translation, who were encouraged to spend an academic year in the country of their chosen language, is the prime concern.

The site of this study is one such department at a prestigious Saudi university in the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, which has been part of the Twinning Program since its inception. Male participants have since then travelled to the USA, Canada, Spain, Italy, and France for their SA sojourn. Female students were initially excluded as the university was conscious of the need to provide adequate and culturally acceptable safeguarding for the female students abroad, including the provision of a guardian / chaperone, in order to reassure parents and calm public opinion. In 2011, the Twinning Program started sending second year female participants to partner universities in France, Canada and the United States, one of which is the focus of this study.

The participants in this study are thus the first group of female participants from the English Translation department to join the SA program, which is voluntary. The SA sojourn takes place in the second year, when students are sent to a

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university in a small town in the United States to enroll in an English for Academic Purposes program at an International English Center. The programme ran for eight months from January until August 2012.

Students interested in joining the SA programme had to undergo a selection process developed and administered by the college to decide on which female participants to send abroad. The criteria for inclusion in the SA programme encompass the following points: First, their GPAs were required to be at least 4.0 out of 5.0. Second, interviews were held by a committee from the college. The focus was not only on evaluating the candidate's L2 fluency and ability in vocabulary, grammar and structure, but also covered personal, academic and social aspects. Thus, students were good candidates if they were confident, resilient and showed an ability to handle criticism well.

The GPA requirement was changed subsequently and lowered to 3.75 out of 5 and sometimes to 3 out of 5 due to culturally-based problems in recruiting participants. These centred on two features: firstly, family objection to the idea of their daughter travelling outside Saudi Arabia, and secondly, the availability of a *mahram* as per the requirements posted by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education (e.g., 2013). This resulted in the need for family members to uproot and join their female relative in her SA program. Many female participants had to withdraw from the program even though they were qualified for it, because their father, brother or husband were not granted a leave of absence from work and were unable to accompany the young women. As preparation for their SA, students attended a seminar at the American Embassy, covering the importance of orientation days, information on visa regulations and cultural and safety tips. Students were also shown a video about various American universities and interviews with Saudi participants, males and females, studying in different USA campuses.

The participants of the study were enrolled at an International Language Center that implemented a 'buddy' system; as part of this the SA student is assigned a native speaker student as a conversation partner. The conversation partner is an undergraduate native speaker who spends one hour per week with the international student in conversation sessions inside the campus. In line with cultural requirements, participants of the study were assigned to female conversation partners only. The center found conversation partners for only four out of the nine participants in the study, as a limited number of American students volunteered. Some of the participants restricted their interaction with their conversation partners within the university-allotted time only while others continued to interact with their partners outside campus. Some participants exchanged emails, social network accounts, and other personal communication details with their language partners.

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4. Data collection

Data collection took place at three points in time:

Time 1: before the sojourn, in the month prior to leaving for the US;
Time 2: during the sojourn, i.e. in month 6 of their stay in the US;
Time 3: after participation in the SA program, four months after returning to Saudi Arabia.

The data collection instruments focused on assessing language proficiency gains and on establishing social networking and cultural engagement practices and perceptions on SA by the students. Table 2 shows the research instruments that were used to collect the language development data.

Table 2. Research instruments

Focus	Instruments	Time
Language development	Elicited imitation	1, 3
	Paragraph writing test	1, 2, 3
	Picture description test	1, 3
	Oral interview	1, 3
Social /cultural interaction	Social networking questionnaire	1, 2
	Language engagement questionnaire	1, 2
	Semi-structured interview	1, 2, 3

4.1 Language development tests

Overall, four different research instruments were used to measure language proficiency development. Firstly, the elicited imitation test (EI), which was completed at Time 1 and Time 3 during the data collection period, served as a general measure of L2 proficiency by asking learners to listen to test items and repeat these orally as accurately as possible. The underlying assumption is that in order to do this, learners need to have parsed and understood the test items, and recent studies have confirmed its validity and reliability as a general proficiency measure (Bley-Vroman & Chaudron, 1994; Iwashita & Ortega, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2017; Tracy-Ventura, McManus, Norris, & Ortega, 2013; Yan, Maeda, Lv, & Ginther, 2015). In administering this test, 30 sentences were played one at a time to the participant; the sentences were between 10–17 syllables long. Following Iwashita and Ortega (2002), each sentence was scored independently from other sentences. The participant was given a score of 0 if she said nothing that could be understood by the rater. A score of 1 was given if only about half of the idea units are represented

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in the string but much of the important information is left out, unrelated or in contrast with the original stimulus. The item is also scored 1 if the string in itself does constitute a meaningful sentence. A score of 2 was given when the content of the string preserves at least more than half of the idea units from the original stimulus, if the string is meaningful, and the meaning is close or related to the original, but departs from it in some slight manner that makes some of the content inexact, incomplete, or ambiguous. A score of 3 is given if the original, complete meaning is preserved as in the stimulus. Strings which violate numerous grammatical rules can score 3, as long as the exact meaning is preserved. Some synonymous substitutions are acceptable. Finally, a participant scored 4 for an exact repetition of the stimulus. With a total of 30 items, overall scores ranged from 0 to 120. This test was used before the students went to the United States and then again after they had returned to Saudi Arabia.

A further language proficiency measure involved a picture description task aimed at eliciting monologic oral L2 production. This task was completed at Time 1 and Time 3 during the data collection period and was familiar to students from previous language learning experiences. It is used in several commercial tests as an elicitation tool (see, e.g., Test of English for International Communication, Pearson Test of English Academic). This task measures the diversity of the respondents' vocabulary, their fluency in the language, their ability to communicate ideas in a new language, and their grammatical and phonetic accuracy within the structure of describing a given image. The researcher provided a pre-constructed picture of the SA town center on a sunny day in summer to the respondent, pre- and post- their SA programme, and gave them the freedom to describe it in the target language. The instructions were not limited to just describing the picture, but it also included giving opinions about the picture. Typically, the evaluation of picture description tests determines if the participant is able to describe places, items, people, and actions, and give impressions and ideas that are consistent with the collection of elements in the picture (Cristina, 2011). Two fluency evaluation protocols were used to assess the outcomes, syllables per minute (SPM) and mean length of run syllables (MLRS).

In this study, the researcher examined the descriptions of each respondent, focusing on fluency, accuracy, and complexity of the participant's English language use. Participants' levels of proficiency were inferred by establishing measurements for fluency, accuracy and complexity.

In order to account for fluency, we employed measurements established as reliable in previous speech production and SA research (Kormos & Dénes, 2004; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), i.e. syllables per minute (SPM) and mean length of run syllables (MLRS). The procedure entails counting the number of syllables uttered by the participant within the length of time in which the participant was describing

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the picture and dividing these by the amount of time (in minutes) taken by the participant. Repetitions, false starts and rephrasing are only counted once (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009). MLRS constitutes a complementary assessment instrument for foreign language learning research, as it is more sensitive than SPM (Muñoz, 2006). MLRS considers the average length of time in which an individual is able to speak in a language fluently and so short pauses and fillers between words can greatly decrease MLRS but may not affect SPM as much (Morley & Truscott, 2006). MLRS was computed following Muñoz (2006): the number of syllables was counted between pauses of at least 0.4 seconds or the articulation of fillers such as 'err'. The resulting series of numbers were averaged to get the MLRS. Pre- and post- SPM and MLRS scores were computed manually for each participant by the researcher and a second rater, an English as a second language teacher, at two points in time, with an interval of one month in between. The results of both raters were compared, and any discrepancies resolved by returning to the original data, until a consensus between the raters was reached. Each pair of tests for SPM and MLRS, a pre-test and a post-test, was analysed using paired t-tests, which tests if there is a statistical difference between two groups of paired scores. For each t-test, a 0.05 level of significance was used for the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores.

Accuracy was measured by the percentage of error-free clauses produced by the participants (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000; Polat & Kim, 2014). This was computed as the number of clauses that did not contain grammatical errors divided by the total number of clauses uttered by the participant multiplied by 100%. The aspect of complexity was accounted for by establishing the percentage of clauses including dependent clauses.

In addition to the picture description test, participants also completed a writing test at Time 1, 2 and 3 during the data collection period. The students were asked to develop their ideas on a general topic in a 200-word paragraph. This paragraph was graded using a rubric that included the elements of grammatical accuracy, appropriateness of vocabulary, relevance to the topic, sufficient length, and content organization. This criterion is in line with that used by Bacha (2001) in a similar study. Similar to the picture description task, accuracy was measured as the percentage of error-free clauses and complexity as the percentage of sentences that made use of dependent clauses.

Finally, Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) were conducted with each participant. In these interviews, each participant was asked questions by the researcher and their responses were checked using a rubric provided by Breiner-Sanders, Low, Miles, and Swender (2000). The OPI is a standardized test meant to provide a holistic measurement of a respondent's conversational language proficiency (Breiner-Sanders et al. 2000).

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4.2 Measurements of interaction

The primary data collection tools for this aspect were the semi-structured interviews, the language engagement questionnaire (LEQ) and the social networks questionnaire (SNQ). The LEQ (McManus, Mitchell, & Tracy-Ventura, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017) is a survey instrument that seeks to determine the language uses of students' multilingual repertoires in typical SA activities, including also virtual environments of language use.[2] This instrument was completed at Time 1 and Time 2 during the data collection period.

Students were presented with a list of 27 activities and asked to specify which language(s) they used for these with a 5-point scale, i.e. every day (5), several times a week (4), a few times a week (3), a couple of times per month (2), rarely (1), or never (0) (Mitchell et al., 2017). Using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient, the LEQ was found to have reliability coefficients greater than 0.70 by Mitchell and colleagues (Mitchell et al., 2017; McManus et al., 2014).

The SNQ (McManus et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017) examines the extent to which the participants have made contact with other people in a new environment. This is measured by such indicators as the number of friends that the participants have, their nationalities, who they spend most time with, which language they use with that person in various social contexts, and so on. The SNQ covers five social contexts, which are work / university, home, organized free time, general free time, and virtual social activities. This instrument was completed at Time 1 and Time 2 during the data collection period.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted at Time 1, 2 and 3 with each of the participants, with the aim of gathering an in-depth perspective of each participant on their SA experience (Creswell, 2012). The interviews focused on students' expectations prior to the program, their feelings on their sojourn, and their social and cultural interaction practices and their perceived influence on language learning. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes and were conducted in Arabic. The interviews also provided insights into students' personal development in terms of independence, confidence, and self-reliance.

Paired t-tests were used in order to compare the scores of the participants across different time periods in the study. They were also used to compare participants' English and Arabic use from the LEQ and SNQ. A significance level of 0.05 was maintained in all statistical tests conducted.

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2. We thank Ros Mitchell, Nicole Tracy-Ventura and Kevin McManus for allowing us access to the data collection instruments developed for LANGSNAP.

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5. Results

5.1 Language proficiency development

Overall, considerable gains were experienced by the group as a whole in general proficiency, writing, accuracy, and complexity ($p < 0.05$). This is in line with expectations that immersion in the study abroad program will lead to significant gains in at least some aspects of second language use (see also Collentine, 2009; Kinginger, 2009; Llanes, 2011) and is an important prerequisite to exploring the dynamics of second language learning and social and cultural interactions. On the other hand, no evidence of significant difference was found between participants' pre- and post-SA fluency scores. This is contrary to the expectation and to the fact that SA represents an opportunity for the development of spoken skills where such improvement is well documented in previous literature.

A possible reason for this result is that, despite being well-established, the instruments used for measuring fluency, SPM and MLRS, were limited by the actual number of words the students produced in each test. Especially during the post-sojourn picture description task, participants were taciturn, which might be accounted for by task-familiarity. Another possibility to consider is that the level of fluency of any individual through measurement using SPM or MLRS must have a ceiling cap. As such, it is also possible that the participants in the study already had high SPM and MLRS to begin with, thereby not being capable of improving these in the post-SA test any longer.

By establishing that the participants in this study were able to realize significant second language learning gains, the study may proceed towards examining possible reasons behind such gains. Table 3 shows the results of the participants' language proficiency tests before and after engaging in the study abroad program.

Table 3. Group gain scores in quantitative tests

Selected group tests	Pre-SA mean	Post-SA mean	Mean gain / loss
Elicited imitation / General proficiency	70	88	+18 *
Writing	66	85	+19 *
Fluency / SPM	92	91	−1
Fluency / MLRS	8	8	+0
Complexity / Dependent clauses	33%	40%	+7% *
Accuracy / Clauses without errors	80%	84%	+4% *

* $p < 0.05$

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5.2 Language use in the SA context

In the LEQ a comparison of English and Arabic use in each activity shows that English language use dominated across most of the activities, except for having long or short phone conversations, engaging in small talk, or having long conversations, where Arabic use remained dominant. Paired t-tests revealed that in 15 out of 27 elements, participants' use of English was significantly higher, while in the remaining twelve elements, no evidence of statistical difference was found. The results highlight that the participants mainly made use of English on campus, as well as when interacting with different cultural artefacts (watching films, reading literature and magazines). Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of participants' activities where they reported making use of the Arabic language within the SA setting in the USA. Among the different activities, the top ten based on the average scores were identified as the most popular activities and highlighted in the table; these were found to be engaging in small talk, engaging in long conversations, reading text messages, reading emails, having short or long phone conversations, writing text messages, browsing the internet, using instant messaging, and using social networking. The maximum score was (4.89/5) for engaging in small talk in Arabic in the SA setting and the minimum score was (0/5) for teaching a class.

The most active interlocutors for the SA participants in Arabic were their housemates from the same SA study cohort or their family members. Clearly, the preference for Arabic use with these remained unchanged during the SA. In addition, there were a number of Arabic-speaking students at the English Language Centre, from Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. As the SNQ shows, for four SA participants, these Arabic speakers unknown before the sojourn abroad become important members of their group.

Nonetheless, participants were also found to make use of English across various activities in the SA setting. Table 5 shows the frequency distribution of activities of the participants, where they made use of the English language in the USA. As in the previous table, the top ten most popular activities were highlighted and found to be attending class, using social networking sites, reading emails, reading text messages, writing text messages, listening to music, engaging in small talk, browsing the internet, using instant messaging, and engaging in long casual conversation. The maximum score was (4.89/5) for speaking English in class in the SA setting and the minimum score was (0.44/5) for teaching a class.

A comparison of English and Arabic use in both Table 4 and Table 5 shows that the participants still made use of Arabic more often when engaging in oral communication, except in the formal school environment, that is, their classes, where they made use of English. In engaging in written communication, such as through email or chat, both English and Arabic were used. However, overall, a comparison

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Table 4. Use of Arabic during SA

	Every day (5)	Several times a week (4)	A few times a week (3)	A couple of times a month (2)	Rare (1)	Never (0)	Wt. Average
Engage in small talk	8	1	0	0	0	0	4.89
Engage in long casual conversation	5	3	0	1	0	0	4.33
Read text messages	6	0	0	1	2	0	3.78
Read emails	2	3	3	0	1	0	3.56
Have short phone conversation	5	0	1	1	2	0	3.56
Have long phone conversation	2	2	4	0	0	1	3.33
Write text messages	4	0	0	3	2	0	3.11
Browse the internet	1	3	0	3	2	0	2.78
Use instant messaging	2	2	1	1	2	1	2.78
Use social networking sites	2	2	1	1	1	2	2.67
Listen to music	2	2	1	1	1	2	2.67
Write emails	1	0	2	4	2	0	2.33
Participate in organised social activities	1	1	2	2	0	3	2.11
Watch TV	0	0	3	0	0	6	1
Engage in service encounters	0	1	0	0	2	6	0.67
Read magazines	0	0	0	1	3	5	0.56
Watch films	0	0	0	1	2	6	0.44
Read academic texts	0	0	0	1	2	6	0.44
Read literature	0	0	0	0	3	6	0.33
Read newspapers	0	0	0	0	3	6	0.33

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Table 4. *(continued)*

	Every day (5)	Several times a week (4)	A few times a week (3)	A couple of times a month (2)	Rare (1)	Never (0)	Wt. Average
Write reports	0	0	0	0	3	6	0.33
Participate in seminars	0	0	0	0	2	7	0.22
Write for leisure	0	0	0	0	2	7	0.22
Listen to talk radio	0	0	0	0	1	8	0.11
Listen to lectures	0	0	0	0	1	8	0.11
Attend classes	0	0	0	0	1	8	0.11
Teach a class	0	0	0	0	0	9	0

of these two tables indicates that participants make use of English more frequently than Arabic, since the average scores for English are higher than those for Arabic.

The SNQ examined the English language use of the participants per activity type, which were categorized into university, home, organised free time, general free time and virtual interactions. Under each of these categories, participants indicated the people that they interacted with and the rate at which they interacted with these people (every day [4], several times a week [3], a couple times a week [2], and a few times a month [1]), and the language that they used in interacting with these people. In order to obtain a measure of how much a participant makes use of English for conversations under particular categories, the ratios between the total number of conversations that the participant engaged in (represented by the sum of ranks that the student indicated in the survey by the total size of conversations that the participant engaged in using the English language) was obtained. For example, let us say participant X talked to three people at the university. One ranked 4 (every day) in English and the other two ranked 2 each (a couple of times a week) in Arabic. Computation for English use is as follows:

Total Ranks $= 4 \times 1 + 2 \times 2 + 2 \times 2 = 12$
English Ranks $= 4 \times 1 = 4$
English use percentage $= 4/12 = 33.33\%$

Cases where the participant claimed to have conversed with a person using both English and Arabic were noted but were not included in the statistical analysis per group, as there was no way to determine how much the participant spoke to such persons in Arabic and how much in English. A score of 50% for example means that in conversations where the student used only one language, half of them were

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Table 5. Use of English during SA

	Every day (5)	Several times a week (4)	A few times a week (3)	A couple of times a month (2)	Rare (1)	Never (0)	Wt. Avg.
Attend classes	8	1	0	0	0	0	4.89
Use social networking sites	6	3	0	0	0	0	4.67
Read emails	7	1	0	0	1	0	4.44
Read text messages	6	2	0	1	0	0	4.44
Write text messages	6	2	0	1	0	0	4.44
Listen to music	7	0	1	0	0	1	4.22
Engage in small talk	3	5	0	1	0	0	4.11
Browse the internet	6	1	0	1	0	1	4
Use instant messaging	4	1	2	0	1	1	3.44
Engage in long casual conversation	3	3	0	1	2	0	3.44
Read academic texts	1	5	1	0	2	0	3.33
Have short phone conversation	2	3	2	0	2	0	3.33
Listen to lectures	1	4	2	0	2	0	3.22
Write emails	2	1	2	3	1	0	3
Write reports	1	2	1	5	0	0	2.89
Have long phone conversation	3	1	1	2	0	2	2.89
Watch TV	1	1	3	2	1	1	2.56
Watch films	0	2	2	4	1	0	2.56
Organised social activities	1	2	2	1	2	1	2.56
Read magazines	0	2	2	0	3	2	1.89

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Table 5. *(continued)*

	Every day (5)	Several times a week (4)	A few times a week (3)	A couple of times a month (2)	Rare (1)	Never (0)	Wt. Avg.
Participate in seminars	0	1	1	3	3	1	1.78
Read literature	0	1	1	2	5	0	1.78
Listen to talk radio	0	1	1	1	6	0	1.67
Engage in service encounters	0	1	1	0	4	3	1.22
Read newspapers	0	1	0	1	2	5	0.89
Write for leisure	0	0	1	0	3	5	0.67
Teach a class	0	0	0	1	2	6	0.44

conversations conducted entirely in English and the other half were conducted entirely in Arabic. Paired t-tests were used to determine if there was a significant change in the percentage of conversations that students had using the English language pre-SA and during SA under each of the categories. Figure 1 shows the proportion of English language use per activity.

As shown in Figure 1, in the pre-SA setting, students made use of the English language most in virtual conversations (29.63%) and least in conversations during general free time where English as an exclusive medium was not used at all (0%). During SA, there were increases in students' proportion of exclusive English language use across all the settings. The home remained the place where students made use of English the least at 16.67%, but this was still found to be higher than in the pre-SA setting (11.96%).

5.3 Perceived impact of social interactions on language proficiency development

In addition to increased exposure to the TL through, e.g. TV, cinema and the media, most of the students perceived their interactions with native speakers as a

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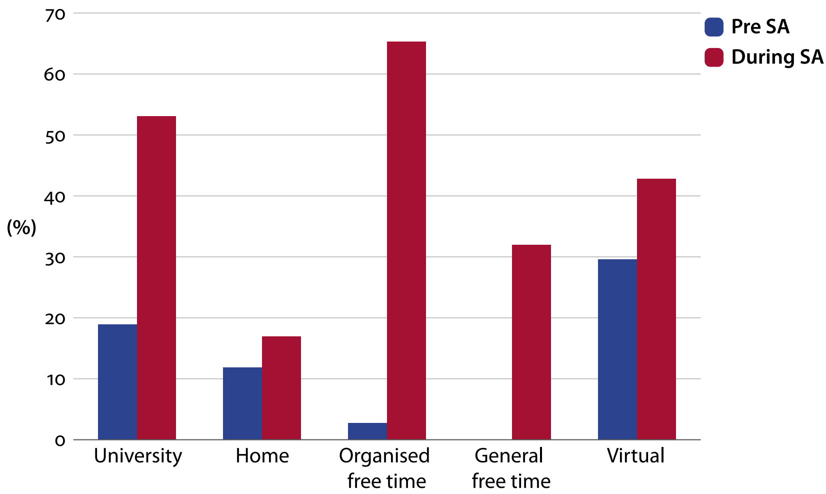

Figure 1. Proportion of English language use per activity

key factor positively affecting their L2 learning. They highlighted especially their increased confidence in using the L2, improved vocabulary and higher fluency.

Extract 1.[3] I used to be afraid of talking in English and making mistakes, but it is different now, the words come out without hesitation. (*Shahd*)

Extract 2. Yes, I feel there's a difference, my accent and vocabulary has improved a lot, now I know lots of things. When I spoke before I'd have to pause a moment and think before speaking and I used to get mixed up a lot, I still do but not as much as before. (*Reem*)

Some also clearly credited specific interaction partners, often their 'buddies', for their improved language skills.

Extract 3. [I gained] … some big words that I'd ask my friends about and try to write down, things like that. (*Ranem*)

Extract 4. My conversation partner added to my language, I would ask her to correct my English and she does sometimes, especially the vocabulary, she would tell me to use that word instead of this. (*Ferdos*)

Extract 5. Speaking was the skill that has improved because I used to hang out a lot with my American friends. I also asked them to correct me if I made grammatical mistakes so that I can learn, and they did. If I don't understand something and ask, they would try to explain. That has really benefitted me. (*Shatha*)

3. The extracts are the author's own translations of the students' interviews.

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These inputs establish that the social interactions in the SA setting helped these participants to develop their confidence and proficiency in the use of English as a second language, despite their usage of Arabic at home with their families, with their Saudi SA friends at social gatherings and with their Arabic-speaking friends from Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Qatar during social and cultural activities such as picnics, sightseeing, going to movie theatres and museums.

5.4 Entering social networks: Buddies as access

The 'buddy' system of the host university was consistently mentioned by the participants as an important part of their social interactive experiences while in the SA setting. Many of the participants discussed how their interaction with their conversation partners evolved outside of the prescribed university requirements, including trips to the nearby mountains (Ranem) and activities in the town, like going shopping or to one of the cafés (Basma). In some cases, these interactions clearly developed into strong personal friendships, as for Ferdos, and thus became elements of close and intensive social networks. Additionally, the American buddies frequently acted as access to other TL speakers, also sometimes SA students for whom they were not officially assigned as 'buddy'. Thus, it seems that similarly to Dewey et al. (2013), access to social networks worked frequently via the 'friend of a friend' scenario.

Extract 6. [My buddy and I] are supposed to meet one hour a week but my friendship with her is more than that. We meet sometimes twice a week and we spend 2 to 3 hours. She is on Facebook and we exchange messages to arrange for meetings. (*Ferdos*)

The Saudi students also acted as a group in meeting conversation partners, so that some participants also interacted with conversation partners of other participants, and in some cases friendship groups emerged.

Extract 7. I spend my free time with Fahda and Shatha mostly. Sometimes we go out with my conversation partner, and sometimes with Fahda's conversation partner. (*Basma*)

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Some of the students also developed strategies to extend their social network and potential conversational partners, acknowledging some of the limitations in not wishing to join all types of American social student events. Thus, Shahd did not confine herself to forming friendships with people of her own range, but actively sought to socialize with females from an older age range.

Extract 8. There's an American lady […]. We went to her place, my classmates and I, to practice. I also met a friend of hers and we went to her place, too, twice to practice English. We brought our traditional Arabic coffee and dates and went to visit her; we enjoyed each other's company. They're older in age, but we gained a lot from them. (*Shahd*)

It seems then that similarly to Dewey et al. (2013) and Mitchell et al. (2017), access to social networks involved the willingness to 'trade', i.e. offer something beyond the social interaction itself to the intended network partners. In this case, Shahd brought coffee and offered this in return for speaking English and interacting.

Most students reported positive interactions and felt that they were met with cultural sensitivity and respect. They managed to participate in social networks which involved both Arab and American students. Only one student withdrew from trying to form new friendships with American students and preferred to interact with other Arabs or people from other nationalities. She reported one incident where she felt the Americans stopped inviting her as she had declined to join them for a party. This was also the only student identified in the SNQ as having a low social interaction score.

Extract 9. I could not go because there is drinking, which is against my religion, so they stopped inviting me to other outings. It is like there is a rule, do everything they do or don't be with them. (*Majd*)

5.5 Engaging in social interactions: Culture as access point

These students identified local media and other organised cultural events as sources of greater exposure to the English language in the SA setting, and very often used these as entry points to social interactions with TL speakers. The participants did not participate in any social or cultural activities organized by the Arab Muslim community, which reflects their intentions on focusing solely on experiencing Western culture during their SA time. The activities participants engaged in involved going to the movies, reading and watching American TV, but some students also participated in more unusual activities; thus, one student went to a political convention to hear the American president and later used this experience to discuss some aspects of the English language used there with her teacher.

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Extract 10. I went to a conference where we had President Obama as the speaker. It was really a new experience for me; there were so many people. I was happy about being able to understand the speech. I understood most of it I think. The president is a very good speaker […] there were some words in [President Obama's] speech that I did not understand. But I discussed it with my teacher and she explained it to me. (*Reem*)

Sara went to the cinema and benefitted from her friend's English proficiency to understand the movie more fully.

Extract 11. We watched movies in the cinema a few times. It was great fun for me even though all of the movies were in English and there were no subtitles. So, we had to use what we know in order to be able to understand the movie. […] When I did not understand something [in the movies], I would ask my friend what it meant. We had to be quiet though because other people were also watching, but she would help me, and I would understand the movie better. (*Sara*)

Another student realised the advice of regular reading and used the available books in a café for it.

Extract 12. They asked us to read a book every week. We were free to choose whatever book we wanted as long as it was in English. I read some short titles that were available for reading at a coffee shop that I went to. They were very good. (*Majd*)

Thus, interactions with elements of the TL culture served as opportunities for these SA students to be exposed to the language more in the typical settings where the language is used, and to bring these experiences into interactions with TL speakers.

5.6 Student agency: Escortee or expert

While the traditional and more apparent interpretation of a young female student needing a *mahram* put her into the position of a dependent, the participants in this study discussed how being away from their extended families and being with escorts who do not speak English forced them to depend on themselves and to take care of themselves and of those travelling with them. Thus, despite most of these participants travelling with family, they experienced a sense of both personal and linguistic achievement at managing certain 'adult' tasks in the target language, also at taking responsibility for their family members. For example, Shahd's guardian was her younger brother, who spoke little English, which contributed to Shahd actually taking on (without her formulating it in that way) some of the roles of a guardian herself.

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Extract 13. Here [USA] I am responsible for myself; I had to rent an apartment on my own, communicated with the owner on my own, called the company for internet and TV. All my communications were by phone and nobody did anything for me. All that helped me pick up speed in talking. I make mistakes, I won't say I don't but I'm much faster than before. (Shahd)

Similarly, Ranem, who was escorted by her parents and siblings on her SA programme, detailed how she was obliged to take care of herself and of those accompanying her.

Extract 14. [They] don't speak English so I'm the one who sees to things if we go out. For example, at restaurants I talk to the waiter, or if we go to a store or something I do all the talking. (*Ranem*)

To some extent then, the SA participants become brokers for their families to accomplish social interactions in their local US community.

5.7 Comparative case analysis: Basma and Reem

In order to exemplify the gains from social and cultural interactions at the micro level, we will in the following compare the experiences of Basma and Reem. Basma's score in the EI test improved by 35 points in the post-SA test given compared to the pre-test that she took before starting the programme. She was one of the three participants who after a brief period with her father lived in a shared flat. Basma was provided with a conversation partner who she interacted with not just on campus but also outside, going to cafés and malls, and she made further friends with other people outside of the university. She engaged in various activities where she interacted with local culture, by going to the movies, reading English magazines and newspapers, and listening to the local radio stations. Basma's proficiency in the English language was found to have improved significantly. At the same time, her confidence in the use of the language also improved, saying that now she "feel[s] like [she] just talk[s] without thinking […] the words just come out and that's one of the benefits [she] got out of speaking with Americans." As such, Basma may be considered as a prime case showing that students who are able to enter social networks and engage more in interactions with TL speakers and aspects of TL culture in the SA setting also benefit more from the program in terms of developing their proficiency in English as a foreign language.

Reem was a very different case; her score in the elicited imitation test did not change in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Reem was one of the participants who lived with her father during the first three months of the program before being left to live on her own. She was not allocated a conversation partner and seemed unable or unwilling to make any close American friends while in the SA

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setting. She did take part in some cultural activities, such as attending a speech by President Obama with Reem and engaged in classroom-based activities. However, she mostly restricted her social interaction to other female Arabs. Reem's experience shows that consistent with the underlying assumption of this study, simply undertaking a SA programme does not translate to second language learning gains. Reem did not experience those gains as much as Basma did in the study and this may be explained by the difference in the level of access to social networks and of social interactions that the two participants engaged in while in the SA setting.

6. Conclusion

The experience of female students from Saudi Arabia engaged in a SA programme in the USA is clearly somewhat different from the SA experience of many Western students, as it overtly involves a joint experience with Arabic-speaking family members and/or extant friendship groups. However, overall these students managed to navigate cultural restrictions in such a manner that access to social networks and thus interactions with TL speakers was possible.

In contrast to Western students, these young women used their L1 in many face-to-face interactions, presumably with their families and friends, which in Mitchell et al. (2017) occur less and usually via telephone or Skype. However, many of the students showed increased agency in striving for access into social networks and thus creating affordances for L2 language use, both through the 'buddy' scheme (which was partly extended to be a group event) and through individuals. Contacting strangers directly, as observed by Dewey et al. (2013), was an option hardly ever used by these students, and so the method of accessing networks via existing contacts became vital. Interestingly, the strategic vision of this cohort of students included a group ethic, so that possibilities to enter social networks with TL speakers were in a sense shared among most members of the cohort. Similarly, an engagement with local events, from going to the movies to attending a presidential speech, was frequently linked to social ones, i.e. through using them as starting points for conversations and through using extant friend networks to clarify some of the cultural aspects.

Given the novelty of Saudi female students studying abroad as part of a degree, and the comparatively small number of students involved, this study could draw only on a small sample of participants. At the outset of the study, we expected that a sense of sociocultural restriction on the part of the participants might limit their opportunities for engagement in activities and the language learning opportunities that may have ensued. The assumption was that travelling with Arabic-

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speaking family members might have restrained them from benefitting from the opportunities that are available to other SA learners. This might have been the case at the start of the SA program due to the novelty of the experience for both participants and their family members. However, with the passage of time and getting to know the US town and culture, it was more the case that they became more active agents in their own language learning and they availed of opportunities in spite of any boundaries. Based on the interviews that were conducted, all of the participants recognized the need for them to interact with other people in the SA environment, particularly those who did not share their Saudi cultural background, and especially those who spoke English as their first language, in order for them to be able to improve their language skills.

The findings give rise to optimism that even for this cultural group, SA shares many of the benefits that are attested for others. Apart from improved L2 proficiency, also issues of developing self-confidence and independence are not hampered by travelling as part of a family, but indeed are sometimes even supported when the students in question become the family's language experts. The unambiguously positive portrayal of the 'buddy' scheme as providing both culturally acceptable access into American society and a willing conversation partner points towards the benefits of acknowledging some of the cultural difficulties facing these students in the planning stage of a SA program.

Based on this research, we would recommend some changes to improve the SA experience, particularly for students like Reem, who did not make much progress. For example, the buddy system could be changed from being a voluntary job to being a part-time job so more native speakers will be encouraged to join in and be more willing to commit to the programme. Also, teaming up with a native speaker for the duration of the SA programme should be a requirement and not an option, i.e. all participants are expected to team up with a native 'buddy' during their sojourn.

Also, it would be more beneficial for the participants to be sent to English centers that do not have many Arabic-speaking students. This would force the participants to interact more with English speakers and benefit more from the SA experience.

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Authors' addresses

Hassna M. Alfayez
College of Languages and Translation
Ladies Main Campus, Building 4
King Saud University
PO Box 7695
Riyadh 11472
Saudi Arabia
halfayez1@hotmail.com

Julia Hüttner
Department of English and American Studies
University of Vienna
Spitalgasse 2-4
A-1090 Vienna
Austria
julia.huettner@univie.ac.at

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