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Student name: MARY GRANT

Student ID No.: 816007504

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Supervisor: ERIC MAITREJEAN

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**A STUDY ON THE LINGUISTIC BENEFITS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE
IMMERSION PROGRAMS OFFERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST
INDIES, ST. AUGUSTINE (UWI)**

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TITLE OF ASSIGNMENT – A Study on the Linguistic Benefits of Foreign Language Immersion Programs Offered at the University of the West Indies (UWI)

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ABSTRACT

“The traditional way of learning a language (cramming 20–30 words a day and digesting the grammar supplied by a teacher or course book) may satisfy at most one’s sense of duty, but it can hardly serve as a source of joy. Nor will it likely be successful.” - Kato Lomb, Polyglot: How I Learn Languages

For many years, foreign language immersion programs have been a part of the university’s agenda, notably for students of the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL) and those in the process of acquiring proficiency in a second language. Recently, it has become a more popular choice among students as a means of enhancing second-language acquisition. Consequently, the effectiveness, and the success of these programs on the students’ linguistic growth remain at the heart of the discussion.

Throughout the years, students have returned home with a newfound perspective on life, a greater desire to travel and have all been through the process of self-discovery. However, while these aspects make up a core part of the stay-abroad experience, this dissertation aims to analyse the efficiency of and to examine the role and impact of the immersion programs on the language proficiency growth and the L2 acquisition process of the students.

Based on the research it has been deduced that many factors abroad positively contribute to the improvement of language skills and the increase in confidence when using the language. These include the availability or accessibility of extra-curricular activities, opportunities for travel, and easy integration. On the contrary, there are factors which may negatively impact language proficiency growth, for example, length of stay, fear, difficulty with fitting in and the unavailability of other extra-curricular activities.

The study concluded that immersion is a remarkably effective way to develop one's linguistic skills as the student is exposed to the L2 language for an extended period and is required to use said language beyond the walls of a classroom, However, while this has proven to be the case for a vast majority of students, there are others who do not experience the same level of linguistic growth in the target language.

Key words: *Immersion, Linguistic, Language proficiency growth, Language acquisition, Target language, Extra-linguistic factors, L2 language*

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RATIONALE

The study was born out of a personal five-month study-abroad experience and the desire to critically analyse the benefits of these programs on language proficiency. Immersion abroad, allows for individual growth as one is forced to adapt and adjust to a new way of life. As a past participant, many benefits have been noted with respect to the linguistic components and as a result, the main motivation for embarking on a research as such is to take first-hand experiences and observations and put them on a larger scale to assess the effectiveness and linguistic contributions of these programs.

With the continuous participation in these programs over recent years, it is important to ensure that the main objectives are being met and if not, investigate ways in which they can be. Recently, immersion programs have become a common topic of discussion at the UWI as lecturers aim to encourage students to participate with the goal of improving their language proficiency. This topic is of immense importance and relevance as it will allow both lecturers and students to see the impactful benefits of these programs.

The research places considerable focus on the linguistic benefits since previously, research has highlighted personal benefits of these programs such as self-discovery, adaptation to a different lifestyle, problem solving, decision-making, meeting new people and general life experience. Hence, many questions are left open regarding the impacts on the language skills. For example, do students return home with greater confidence and fluency when speaking the language? Are linguistic obstacles overcome during and after spending time abroad? To what extent are language skills improved while abroad and what factors contribute to its growth or stagnancy? Is the level of growth attained based solely on individual factors? These are some questions often left unanswered from previous research done and therefore, this paper aims to

respond to these questions by presenting a critical analysis of the role that immersion programs play in the language acquisition process through an extensive research-

In conclusion, while the research aims to emphasize on the benefits attained from participating, it will, as a result, look at the shortcomings for students who may not have experienced a great level of language growth and what factors contributed to this shortcoming. Consequently, it will provide recommendations and highlight ways in which future students can ensure a higher level of language growth is attained when taking part in these immersion programs.

Title: A Study on the Linguistic Benefits of Foreign Language Immersion Programs offered at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine (UWI)

Thesis Statement: While foreign language immersion programs offer a plethora of opportunities for self-growth and discovery, it plays a more vital role in the second-language acquisition process among students.

Parameters:

Specific parameters were chosen for this study to observe and analyse the changes in these programs in the last 10 years as studies have been done for previous years by lecturers at the UWI. The group of students was chosen to present a varied group and thereby present a varied prospect of the programs offered and its respective impacts on the linguistic growth and development of the students. Regarding the chronology of the study, it focuses on an estimated period of 10 years. Every participant interviewed or given a questionnaire were participants of programs within the last 10 years at the University of the West Indies.

The study was limited to the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies. The themes highlighted are both social and educational. The study examines how a social environment abroad impacts and benefits one's language proficiency. It focused on 40 students, all of whom participated in one or more of the immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies within the last five years, regardless of the duration of the program. In choosing the lecturers to be interviewed, they were chosen based on their involvement with the immersion programs offered at the UWI as well as their close engagement with the students upon their return from abroad.

Objectives:

- To examine the effectiveness and success of the immersion programs offered at the UWI and its contribution to the student's language proficiency growth.
- To assess the role and impact of immersion programs in the language acquisition process of students who have participated in these programs.
- To identify and assess the factors which contribute to a successful growth in language proficiency and the factors which hinder/hamper this growth.
- To examine the student's experience abroad and their attitudes towards these programs after having participated and how it has impacted their language skills.
- To determine what percentage of students, experience a greater level of growth in their linguistic skills as opposed to those who do not and what agents contribute to this.

INTRODUCTION

Immersion, defined as instruction based on extensive exposure to surroundings or conditions that are native or pertinent to the object of study (Merriam-Webster, 2020), is often described as “a vital part of university education.” (James R. Keese & Jennifer O’Brien). Immersion has quickly become a global phenomenon and is said to be one of the most effective and efficient means of learning a foreign language and of developing and obtaining fluency in the language outside of what is learnt in the classroom. Language acquisition is more than sitting in a classroom and repeating the words taught by the professor, it is more than simply remembering grammatical rules and concepts to reproduce, it goes beyond recitation and memorization.

Apart from the ability to comprehend, perceive and understand languages, language acquisition is a process which involves intercultural learning and is enhanced through full immersion and interaction with language, culture, and social life. As a result, the concept of completely immersing oneself into the culture, language and lifestyle of another country has proven to be one of the most apt ways to fully develop linguistically in a target language and to further develop one’s language proficiency. As a writer once stated, “*Not all classrooms have four walls.*” (Unknown). This statement helps us to understand the importance of immersion as it removes the physical perception of the classroom and shows that learning can take place in a more natural environment.

In recent years, “the study-abroad experience for language learning is a subject of increasing importance in foreign language education.” (Hernández) Foreign language immersion programs have been a part of the University of the West Indies (UWI), notably in the DMLL for many years and continues to be, as it plays a considerable role in the language acquisition and development of the participants. In past years, these programs have had a low

participation rate, and this may have been due to lack of or limited access to necessary resources. However, in recent years the number of students willing to participate and participating has increased due to greater accessibility for some through scholarships and students sharing their past experiences as a form of encouragement to the future students.

Presently, through the DMLL, students have access to various immersion programs offered in different countries. These include:

- Five-month study-abroad program with the Universidad de Valladolid, Spain
- English Assistantship Programme in France. A 7-month exchange/work abroad program for recent UWI graduates.
- Study-abroad program - Université Michel de Montaigne (Bordeaux III), France. 1 semester or 1 academic year.
- Study-abroad program - Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG). 1 semester or 1 academic year
- Study-abroad program -Université de Montréal, Canada. 1 semester or 1 whole academic year
- Student Assistantship. An exchange programme of one academic year with the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), Bogotá.
- Program de Asistente de Idiomas en Colombia - ICETEX [ICETEX Language Assistantship programme.

The main goal and purpose of this study is to assess the linguistic benefits that arise from participating in foreign language immersion programs offered at the UWI. The UWI annually offers a wide range of study-abroad programs, exchange programs, summer immersion programs as well as English assistantship programs for the students of DMLL and

as such, it is of paramount importance to research and analyse the ways in which these programs benefit the students on a linguistic level.

Copious research has been done on the topic of study-abroad and immersion programs and its benefits in general. However, many have failed to assess and explore the benefits of these programs on the language acquisition process of the students. Previous research done have dedicated less time to the linguistic benefits that are attained from participating in these programs and as a result have highlighted and examined the general and individual experiences and benefits arising from these programs. Stay-abroad programs undoubtedly generate numerous personal benefits and for this reason, much research has been centred around these aspects. Consequently, this thesis does not overlook the important linguistic contributions of immersion programs.

On that account, this research paper precisely focuses on the factors that contribute to the development of the language skills of the students who take part in these programs and how the language proficiency levels of students have been impacted. In addition, it examines the linguistic obstacles encountered by students and other challenges which may have negatively impacted their growth while abroad. It is important to identify and examine the value of and the benefits that come from participating in these programs that are offered at the UWI as it reflects the impact of these programs to the students who are pursuing a French and/or Spanish degree at UWI and in turn how this participation benefits the DMLL and the institution itself.

Immersion programs offer endless possibilities and opportunities for personal development such as a wider perspective, exposure to diverse cultures, allows room for personal growth and discovery, reduces stereotypes and preconceived notions about different countries and cultures while allowing you to share your own. However, do they always have a similar positive and long-lasting impact on our language skills and abilities? Do we improve

as much of our language skills as we do personally? This study is aimed at assessing these components and how much they are improved from the beginning of the study-abroad period until the end and what factors contribute to these improvements.

As undergraduate students at the UWI and as part of the DMLL, each student undergoes a process of language acquisition which begins at secondary school for most people and takes full root at university level. As Andrea Honigsfeld expressed in her research paper, “language proficiency growth is not a one-size-fits-all.” This is to say that the process of language acquisition for everyone occurs at a different speed and depends heavily on other individual factors.

In recent years, immersion programs have become of more interest to students at the UWI, and the experience gained from these programs are often irreplaceable and invaluable. However, as immersion is known to be an efficient and effective way to become proficient in a foreign language, the question remains, how many become fluent in the target language and if not so, why not? Are the linguistic benefits outweighed by the personal benefits of staying abroad? How many return home fluent in said language? These are some of the questions which will be investigated in this study to assess to what extent is there development in the target language. Every experience abroad is in some way a contributing factor to the language acquisition process and this research paper will therefore look at how personal growth experiences along with other experiences contribute to linguistic development.

In conclusion, this study’s goal is to present a closer insight into the contributions of immersion programs on the language development of students. It will highlight the challenges and limitations connected to these programs and ways in which they can be improved to ensure a higher percentage of language proficiency growth. It aims to evaluate the various approaches to immersion abroad and to establish which approaches are effective for ensuring optimum

language proficiency growth. Finally, it hopes to contribute to the evolution of new teaching strategies and new proposals for learning activities both home and abroad to enhance L2 proficiency growth.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions which guided the research for this paper:

1. What is the role of immersion in the language acquisition process and how does staying abroad contribute to language proficiency growth?
2. How does immersion positively impact language proficiency growth and language acquisition?
3. What aspects of immersion programs abroad facilitate faster learning and improvement among the students?
4. What are the effects or impacts of extra-linguistic factors on second-language acquisition?

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology for the research paper and as such, it used two main data collection methods to gather the necessary information for analysis. The qualitative approach took the form of a questionnaire with a few open-ended and multiple-choice questions and one-on-one interviews with the purpose of collecting qualitative data. A quantitative methodology, though important in this study, was not the main data collection method as more human insight and experience was needed to analyse and draw conclusions.

Firstly, using Google forms, questionnaires were distributed to 40 students at the UWI who were participants of immersion programs. The questionnaires were composed of 34 questions, both multiple-choice and open-ended with the aim of gathering general information regarding the program as well as personal insights into their time spent abroad. The open-ended questions were included to give students the opportunity to elaborate and freely express themselves without limiting them to a few choices. Though data collection from open-ended questions took a greater effort to analyse, it allowed for a wider variety of answers which benefitted the discussion on the topic.

In order to have a larger sample size for more accurate answers, these questionnaires were sent to past students who participated in these programs from since the year [year]. At the beginning of December, questionnaires were sent to students via social networking sites, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Amidst the current COVID-19 context, the questionnaires were sent out via social media sites to facilitate greater convenience for the participants, allowing them to respond in their own time and in the comfort of their own homes. The data was electronically collected and stored on Google form.

Secondly, five interviews were conducted with students at the UWI who also participated in several immersion programs. To allow varied responses and to facilitate greater

analysis, each student chosen for the interview was a participant in a different immersion program. The interview was composed of 21 open-ended questions. During the month of December, interviews were carried out with students and lecturers of the DMLL. Due to the limitations of physical meeting with the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews, which lasted for 20 minutes, were carried out over the Zoom platform. With the consent of each interviewee, the interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The interviews were indeed a more effective qualitative method of data collection as it allowed the interviewees to better express themselves as opposed to responding to a written questionnaire. Consequently, this gave room for open discussion on the topic without restrictions, thus providing a more in-depth analysis and assessment of the research topic. However, there were limitations to this data collection method in that the student may have felt a sense of intimidation when answering the questions with the presence of another person as opposed to answering a personal questionnaire anonymously.

The transcribed interviews were closely examined as they were a crucial source of primary information for this study in formulating a complete and thorough analysis of the topic and in ensuring that a personal, yet holistic insight was provided. Particular attention was placed on the comments made by the students in response to questions 7 - 17 to observe any common trends and attitudes in relation to confidence levels when using L2, language proficiency growth, linguistic obstacles encountered, culture learning and other comments that highlighted the influence of the immersion program on their language development.

Apart from students, 3 interviews were also conducted with lecturers of the UWI to gain a more professional outlook on the positive impacts of immersion programs on the language acquisition process of the students. The lecturers chosen for the interviews were those who are intricately connected to the respective programs and who interact continually with the

students who have participated in these programs. This interview was composed of 10 questions and lasted for 20 minutes. The questions were geared towards identifying and discussing their observations as lecturers regarding language proficiency development of the students who have had the opportunity to travel abroad. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewee.

All data gathered via questionnaires and interviews was electronically stored and analysed. Through questionnaires, the responses to multiple choice questions were easily noted and converted into quantitative data while the open-ended questions in the questionnaires and the interviews were converted into qualitative data. In total, 40 questionnaires were distributed and collected, and 8 interviews were successfully conducted.

The 1st chapter will provide insight into previous studies and research done on the respective topics, highlighting the main components as well as other necessary factors which were not assessed within these research papers to contextualize the research and bridge important gaps. The 2nd chapter will present the accumulated data collected for this research and the 3rd chapter will present a detailed analysis of the data collected, giving a clear interpretation of the findings, highlighting observations, and forming comparisons and contrasts with the previous research done on the topic.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

In recent years there has been increased interest and participation in the immersion programs offered at the UWI. Numerous qualitative and quantitative research and literature have been conducted on the benefits and contributions of these programs to students at various levels and amongst different variables. However, a greater quantity of literature on stay-abroad programs places a great emphasis on the personal benefits attained from these programs while a fewer number focus on the linguistic contributions of these programs.

Owing to the increase in globalisation and development in the field of education, foreign language immersion programs have become a more popular choice among students. Various authors have added their stance on the general influence of study-abroad (SA) and immersion programs stating that “SA is widely believed to be a beneficial environment for language learners to develop their abilities, particularly in the domain of speak.” (Di Silvio, Diao, Do) Others believe that “SA has been consistently shown to contribute to students’ cultural awareness and sensitivity, openness and flexibility in interpersonal interactions, and knowledge about the interdependence of the global economy and world geography among other benefits.” (Issa, Faretta–Stutenberg, and Bowden) Furthermore, the authors Nipoli Kamdar and Tony Lewis supported these statements by adding that “it is widely believed that studying abroad is one of the best ways for students to achieve individual growth and to develop the global mindset that employers demand.”

In an article published by William Lenz and Joseph Wister called *A View from Out Here: Short Term Study Abroad Benefits*, a study was done on the benefits obtained by a short-term study-abroad amongst a group of students. The article highlighted the numerous personal benefits that can come from the internal environment created abroad. Many of the participants

highlighted the cross-cultural benefits that are often obtained, the shift in perspective and view of the world, global awareness as well as the new-found coping mechanisms which come out of engaging in these programs. For many, “the short-term abroad experiences create a comfortable set of personal and group relationships” (Lenz & Wister) and as such, immersion abroad creates an inclusive bubble which allows for personal growth and development and contributions to the study-abroad groups of which they are a part.

As a result of study-abroad and immersion programs, students often develop in their oral and speaking skills after spending time abroad when compared to the student who studies the L2 at their home university. As Michael Vande Berg expresses in his research paper *Intervening in Student Learning Abroad: A Research-Based Inquiry*, where he does a comparison between students who travel and those who do not (control students), “those enrolled in a wide range of different types of study-abroad programs did in fact make significantly greater gains in oral proficiency, on average, than Control students who had studied second languages at home institutions during the study.”

An interesting observation introduced by the author in his comparative research is the fact that students, those who do not travel and before the students travel, arrive at a plateau in their language proficiency growth and skills. He therefore established that, “while Control students didn’t advance beyond this plateau during the study, students abroad did, on average, they reached almost an Advanced Low proficiency level.” This highlights a significant difference in oral proficiency gained between control students and those who went abroad.

While numerous research has contributed to our understanding of the general and personal benefits that come out of foreign language immersion programs, “most research has not compared improvements in speaking skills among students learning different languages or examined how gains in particular aspects of speaking,” and as such, “there remains the need to

further understand the complex ways in which an experience abroad may benefit a student's target language development.” (Di Silvio, Diao, Do) Fluency, one of the main intents for study-abroad participation, is an area that is often researched and examined regarding immersion programs to determine gains in their oral production after returning from their abroad experience.

As Di Silvio, Diao, Do stated in the article *The Development of L2 Fluency During Study Abroad: A Cross-Language*, various methods have been employed to establish and examine growth in levels of proficiency through observations in “their rate of speech, signs of struggle, and the amount of speech produced between these signs.” In addition to this, the authors of *Grammatical and Lexical Development During Short-Term Study Abroad: Exploring L2 Contact and Initial Proficiency* also highlighted the increased level of fluency among students who participated in stay-abroad programs owing it to day-to-day interactions with the target culture, engagement with native speakers and the viewing of local television while abroad.

The linguistic component of grammar has been the focal point of very few research and literature conducted on the topic of stay-abroad programs. In the article, *Grammatical and Lexical Development During Short-Term Study Abroad: Exploring L2 Contact and Initial Proficiency*, the authors expound on the fact that “less research has examined gains in receptive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary” and therefore wish to present a study centralised on the aspects of grammar and lexicon. As explained by the authors, the improvement in these aspects is highly dependent on two main factors: “the contact with L2 while abroad and the learners’ L2 proficiency at the outset of SA (study abroad).” To a lesser extent, research has also examined the development of written L2 production abilities during SA, with studies finding that SA leads to improvements in complexity and fluency in writing and as such, receptive grammatical and lexical abilities have received less attention in the SA literature.

The authors of this article delve into the grammatical components of L2 learning and the comprehension of how these aspects are impacted by SA programs. They highlight gains attained in areas such as grammatical sensitivity (i.e., a learner's ability to process grammatical information and identify errors of a grammatical nature), sensitivity to word order and number agreement on adjectives, learners' sensitivity to violations of word order and gender agreement on articles and lastly, grammatical knowledge of the passé composé/imparfait distinction by French learners after one semester or 1 year of SA. On the contrary the article highlights the fact that there was little to no improvement in the certain grammar components such as gender agreement on adjectives.

Regarding the lexicon component of language learning, the authors of *Grammatical and Lexical Development During Short-Term Study Abroad: Exploring L2 Contact and Initial Proficiency* provide a clear and concise analysis on the benefits of SA programs on this linguistic component. Through an investigative study done by the authors with participants who were abroad for varying periods of time, there was evidence of general lexical development. Further to the analysis done, the authors noted that the results of the learners' lexical development varied based on the length of time spent abroad. "the short-stay (6–10 weeks) and long-stay (16–20 weeks) groups made gains in receptive vocabulary knowledge, but, surprisingly, the medium-stay (11–15 weeks) group did not." (Issa, Caretta–Stutenberg, and Bowden)

Spending time abroad in a country where the L2 language is the native language positively contributes to one's level of confidence when using and interacting in said language. Often, the length of time spent abroad can impact on the level of improvement obtained by the student. "Participation in short-term study-abroad programs have also shown to build a student's confidence and increase their global awareness" (Lewis and Niesenbaum, 2005).

Regarding immersion programs, there are often extra-linguistic factors which positively and negatively impact one's language growth. These factors include living conditions (host family or apartment), length of stay as well as interaction and rapports established with natives. Regarding the first factor mentioned, Michael Vande Berg explains that "students in homestays gained more than students at home only when they spent a large amount of their free time with homestay members: being housed in a homestay was not, in other words, a predictor of improved oral proficiency." This consequently suggests that being exposed to a 'homestay' environment does allow for oral improvement. In addition to this observation, the author added that "the more free time students spent with members of their host families, the higher were their oral proficiency gains." Students who stay on their own are not constantly exposed to such an environment where they continually speak the language in an everyday setting.

Similarly, the length of stay can either positively impact the improvement or it can be a challenge for students abroad and therefore be a hindrance to language growth. In the research paper, *Deriving Long-Term Benefits from Short-Term Study-abroad Programs* done by Nipoli Kamdar and Tony Lewis in the year 2015, they explored the impacts of the length of stay on the language proficiency of students and have derived that "relative to longer trips, short-term trips provide lower incentives for students to engage with the people of the host country or to assimilate to their cultural norms." They further explain that "on longer trips, students perceive a greater need to overcome their social anxieties and engage with local people" and as a result, "long-term study-abroad students will reap the benefits for a much longer period than on short-term trips." Therefore, as opposed to long-term immersion programs, "short-term study-abroad trips require a focused effort aimed at pushing students to explore and engage on their own because the incentives to do so are minimized on short-term trips." (Nipoli Kamdar and Tony Lewis, 2015)

In addition to these factors highlighted, the impact of immersion and international experiences depends heavily on and encompasses other contextual variables which the author R. Michael Paige categorizes as “attitudes of host nationals toward internationals, degree of cultural similarity and dissimilarity of the host to the home country, degree of cultural isolation from home country peers while abroad, and the overall psychological intensity of the intercultural experience.”(Paige, 1993) All these factors and more are essential to understanding the contributions of immersion programs and the extent to which they impact the language growth and development of the students.

In researching this topic, few researchers have particularly focused on the role of initial proficiency before going abroad and have placed more emphasis on their improvement and changes after returning from abroad. However, the authors, Issa, Faretta–Stutenberg, and Bowden, in their article *Grammatical and Lexical Development During Short-Term Study Abroad: Exploring L2 Contact and Initial Proficiency*, believe this aspect to be an essential piece in clearly understanding the impact that these immersion programs have on students and as such, has labelled it as “another factor posited to play a role in linguistic gains during SA.” As such, it is important to highlight and examine this aspect of immersion and study-abroad programs to completely measure and understand its impacts.

In conclusion, while many authors and literatures present varying views and contributions to the topic of stay-abroad and its effects on language proficiency, many, through research and surveys done, have concluded that “The SA context can offer unique opportunities for learners to experience extensive, meaningful, and authentic contact with the L2 through input, output, and interaction. In fact, such L2 contact has been touted as an explanation of greater linguistic gains often evidenced among SA students as compared to at-home students.” (Issa, Faretta–Stutenberg, and Bowden) Finally, based on the research findings, the abroad environment allows for a more effective learning experience because “it offers more varied

opportunities to use the target language as a tool for exchanging information and participating in social and interpersonal functions.” (Hernandez)

CHAPTER TWO

Data Presentation

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the data gathered through the electronically distributed questionnaires and the interviews conducted. The first section, Section 2.2 will present the data collected from the questionnaires distributed through Google forms, Section 2.3 will recapitulate and paraphrase the responses of the students while section 2.4 will present the summarized responses of the interviews conducted with the lecturers of the UWI.

2.2 Results from Questionnaires

Forty students from the UWI who were past participants in immersion programs were chosen for the questionnaires and of the 40 questionnaires gathered, there was a close ratio of male-female respondents with a total of 30 females and 10 males. The students were all part of the Humanities and Education Faculty and were part of various degree programs such as BA French and Spanish, BA Spanish and Linguistics and BA Spanish and History. Out of the three main types of programs offered at the UWI (student exchange, study-abroad and English assistant), 33 students were past participants of the English assistantship programs, 5 students participated in study-abroad and 2 participants from student exchange programs.

Out of the total number of students, 21 (52.5%) students conducted their immersion program in France while 14 (35%) students travelled to Colombia, 4 (10%) travelled to Spain and 1 (2.5%) respondent went to the French Caribbean on their exchange program. The following pie chart provides a visual aid of the responses given.

5. Which country have you traveled to for your immersion program?

40 responses

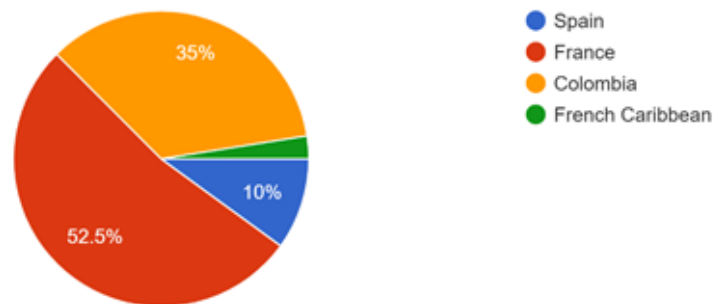


Figure 1 Pie Chart showing the countries students travelled to on their immersion programs.

A total of 32 students spent 1 academic year abroad (approx. 7 months) while 7 individuals were abroad for 1 semester (approx. 5 months) and 1 individual spent more than 1 year abroad. This question was important in the data collection to determine how the length of time spent abroad affects one's language proficiency.

In addition to gathering specific data on the immersion program chosen by each student, data was also collected to better understand the main objective in wanting to participate in an immersion program at the UWI. For many of the students, their main aim was to improve and hone their language skills in the target language, for others they were more focused on increasing confidence while for others they wanted a new experience away from home. The following chart displays the results of the question.

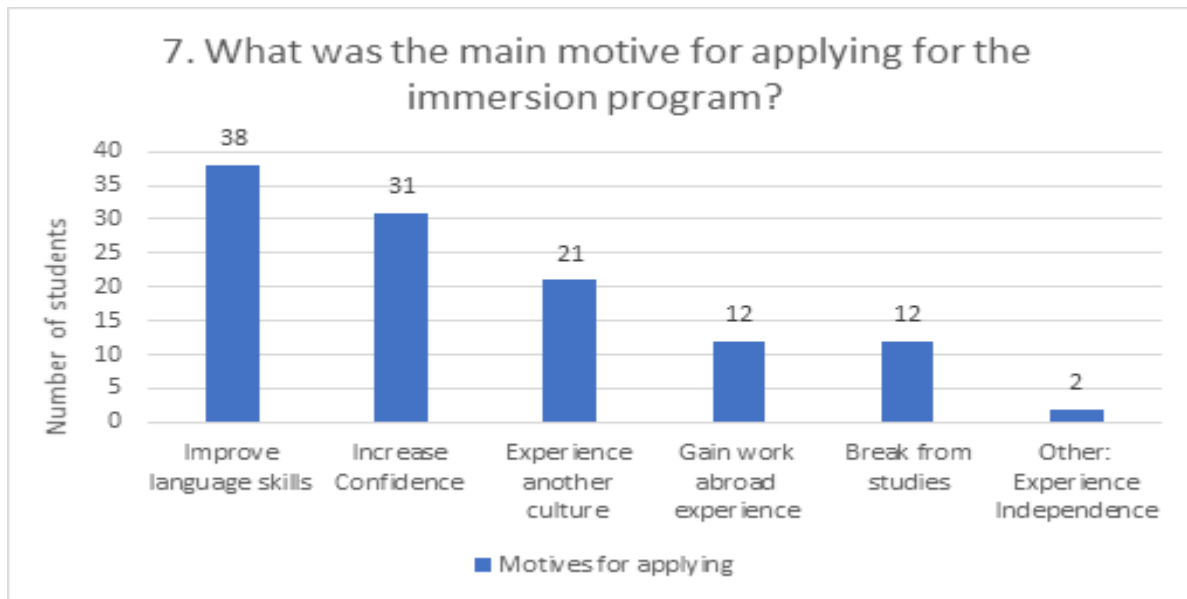


Figure 2 Bar Graph showing the motives for which students applied to the programs.

Based on the various motives selected above by the respondents, 97.4% (38) of the students agree that the motive was met and accomplished while the other 2.6% (2) were not certain or 100% convinced that their motive and objectives were met. For the 2 students who selected ‘Maybe’, one of them explained that they did not spend much time with the locals while the other student stated that the lockdown period brought with it a sense of isolation which then affected their interaction.

Immersion abroad comes with its personal challenges, however, as this study aims to present a more linguistic perspective of immersion, they were asked to identify some of the challenges encountered abroad which had an impact on the experience and linguistic development. Twenty-five students had difficulty using and expressing themselves in the language, another 20 expressed having difficulty with using and communicating effectively and 20 students highlighted fear and reluctance to communicate as a challenge. However, three of the students indicated language barriers were a challenge and 2 students experienced trouble understanding the local jargon.

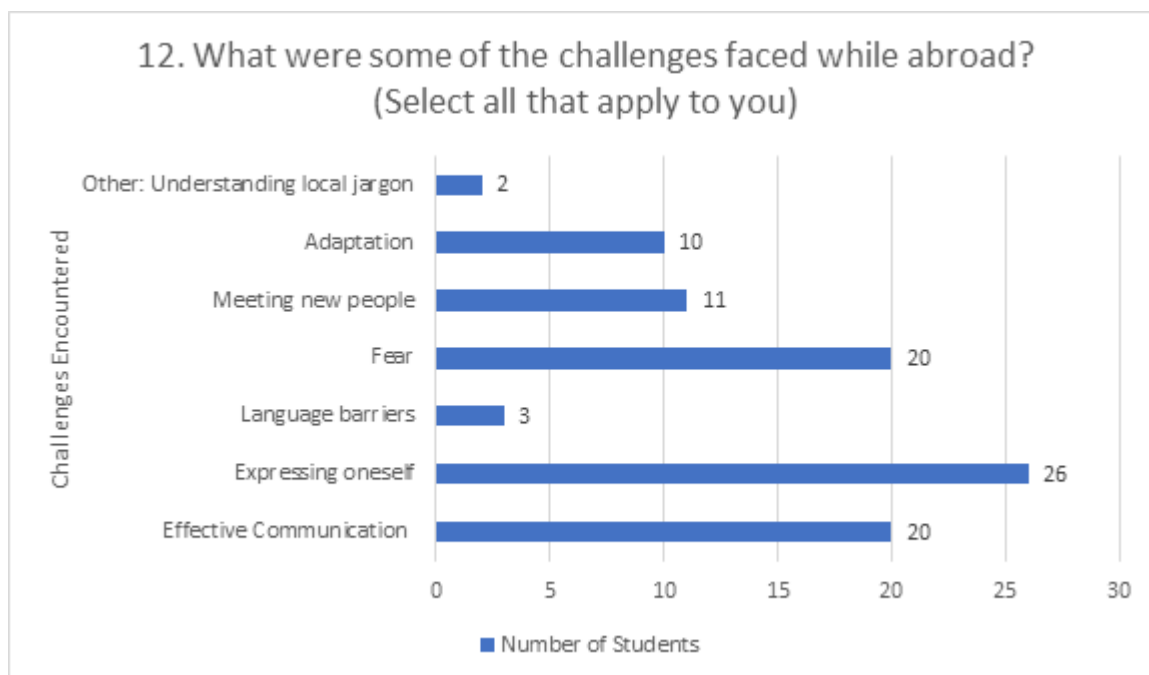


Figure 3 Bar Graph showing the challenges encountered by students.

Despite having encountered obstacles at the beginning of and during the immersion programs, all 40 students indicated that immersion has positively impacted their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in some measure. However, for the Grammar component, 20 of the students indicated that there was no improvement after completing the program, 15 noted minor change in their grammar skills particularly on their return to the UWI while the remainder 5 students, all participants in a study abroad, noted excellent improvement in this component as they were forced to use it in an academic context and in some cases, grammar was a part of their core courses entailed Spanish grammar.

Amongst all the five language components highlighted in the questionnaire, the conversational component was the most improved with a total of 28 students selecting this option. In second place was the listening component where 12 students indicated that this was the most developed during the immersion program.

19. Which one of the five language skills were honed and developed the most while abroad?
40 responses

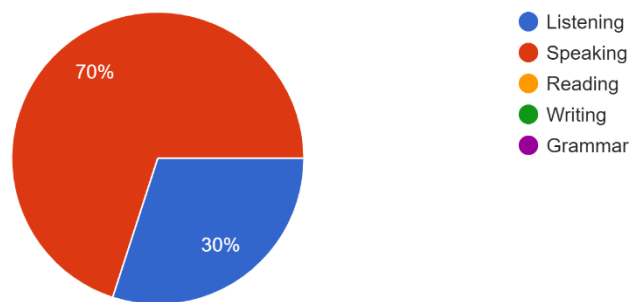


Figure 4 Pie Chart showing the most developed language component.

On the contrary, grammar was highlighted as the least improved component with a total number of 22 (56.4%) students choosing this option. In second place was the writing component chosen by 11 (28.2%) students and finally the reading component selected by 6 (15.4%) students as the least improved.

23. In which of the components did you notice least improvement?
39 responses

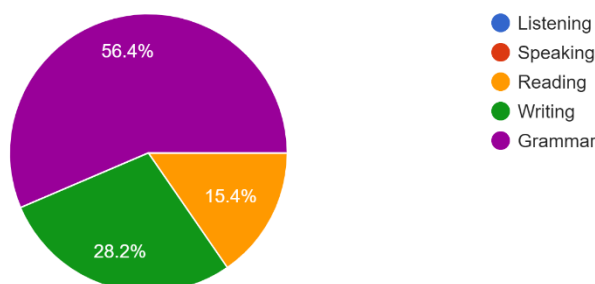


Figure 5 Pie Chart showing the least developed language component.

Concerning the positive impact of extra-linguistic factors on language proficiency, students selected diverse options out of the four given. The first option regarding one's living condition was selected by 14 of the students, the length of stay was selected by 25 students, creation of social networks was chosen as a contributing factor by 26 students and the

interaction with native speakers was chosen by 23 of the students. It is therefore evident that creating social networks while abroad plays a fundamental part in one's stay-abroad experience.

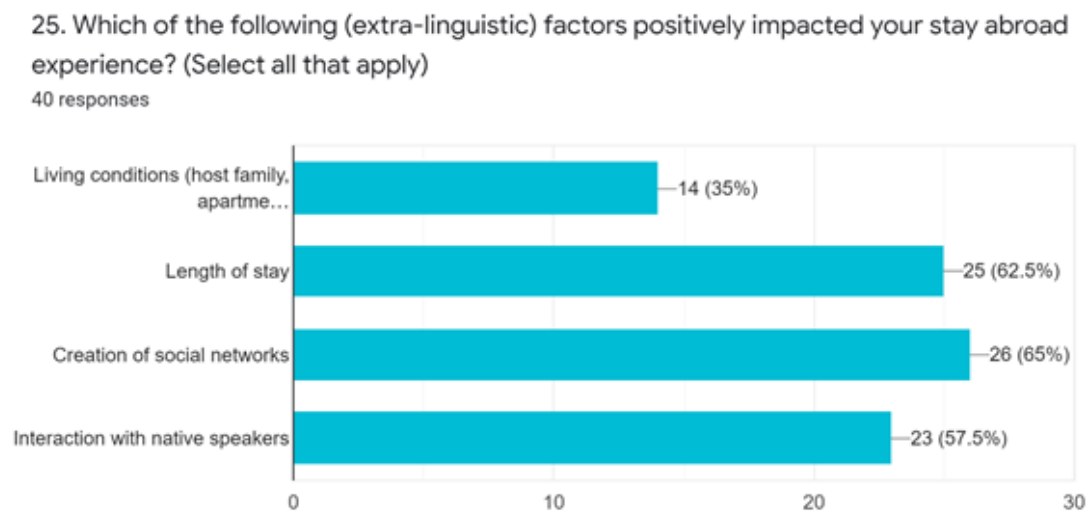


Figure 6 Diagram showing the extra-linguistic factors which impact immersion.

In order to assess the increase in confidence on returning to the UWI, students were asked to select between 1 to 5, 1 being little to no increase and 5 being a notable increase. Nineteen students graded their increase a level 5, while 15 students selected a level 4 increase, and 6 students chose a level 3 increase in confidence. Moreover, the improvement in oral fluency was also assessed and as a result 33 students noted a clear increase while 7 of the respondents were indifferent about the oral fluency improvement.

29. Would you say that your oral fluency has greatly improved?

40 responses

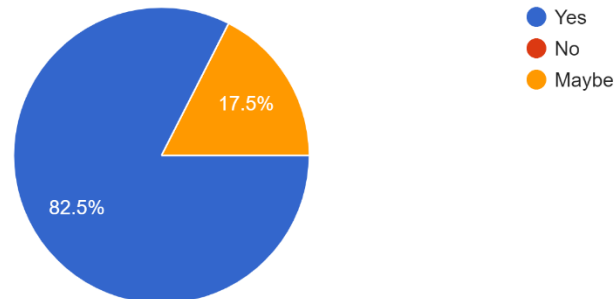


Figure 7 Pie Chart showing the percentage of students whose oral fluency improved.

Finally, in response to the question, “does total immersion allow for effective learning?” 28 of the students agreed totally that immersion is indeed the most effective approach to language learning while the remaining 12 students neither agreed nor disagreed, as many of them indicated that proficiency from immersion is more than travelling to a foreign country. The following pie chart is a representation of the responses gathered.

31. Would you say that total immersion allows for effective language learning?

40 responses

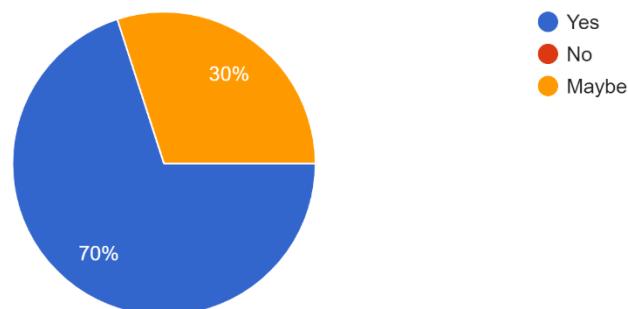


Figure 8 Pie Chart showing students' thoughts towards immersion.

2.3 Results from Interviews (Students)

Five university students were interviewed for this research paper, 2 of which were participants in the English assistantship program in France, 2 students who went to Colombia as English assistants and 1 student went to Spain on a study-abroad program. The main objective expressed by the five students was the need to improve confidence and the desire to enhance one's language skills and all five students agreed that the objectives were accomplished.

The students who participated in the English assistantship program noted a significant improvement in all language components except grammar as it was not often the focus when speaking. However, the student who travelled to Spain saw vast improvement in all components including grammar due to the academic nature of the immersion program. Three students indicated that speaking was the most improved while the other two highlighted listening as the most improved. On the contrary, the four English assistant students indicated that grammar was the least improved while the study-abroad student chose writing as the least improved.

On the other hand, all the students interviewed experienced similar challenges while abroad such as: lack of confidence, difficulties expressing oneself and challenges understanding the accent and local terms. Yet, despite all challenges they were involved in frequent activities abroad to enhance their language skills. Regarding extra-linguistic factors, three students of the English assistantship program highlighted the vital role that staying with a host family played while the other noted the considerable contribution of communicating with students and the final student spoke of creating social networks.

Overall, all five interviewees identified notable increase in their level of confidence, fluency, and speech. Upon finishing their programs, all 5 students left with a newfound

perspective on language learning and the process of language acquisition. Four (4) students agreed that immersion is an effective means to language learning while 1 student partially agreed, stating that immersion and its impacts depend heavily on one's mindset. Finally, all five students recommended the respective program to other students of the UWI due to the benefits obtained.

2.4 Results from Interviews (Lecturers)

This section presents the results obtained from the interviews conducted with the lecturers and the results gathered were qualitative responses as they were open-ended questions to allow for discussion. The questions for the interviews were geared towards the immersion programs, the participation over the years, the general benefits noted from these programs among the students upon their return, the impact of time on their improvement and their perspective on the concept of immersion as an effective means of learning a language.

As indicated by the lecturers, there has been a notable decrease in the number of students participating in the programs over recent years. However, this is not due to lack of interest but changes in the programs and changes in the students' priorities. The lessened participation is principally linked to fewer vacancies in the host country, for example, "for the UPN program, there were previously 3 openings, now it has decreased to 2 and for the ICETEX program, there were previously 20 openings, and it is now down to 11 slots." (Paola Palma) In addition, budget cuts have also been an influential factor in the participation of the students in the respective programs. Another determinant noted is a change in students' priorities and each year less and less students participate as they no longer want to pause their studies and instead prefer to participate after having completed their studies.

All lecturers noted that there was considerable advancement in general oral language proficiency and not necessarily the language components such as grammar, reading and writing as these require a much more conscious approach. Yet, significant improvement is noted in their confidence, their listening skills as well as their socio-cultural knowledge of the country and the language and a vast expanse of vocabulary. As Paola Palma stated, “the students are more curious about learning slang, interacting in informal situations, they learn a lot of local expressions and they are definitely more confident when speaking.” As another lecturer stated, speaking is not necessarily an issue but the lack of confidence to speak. However, spending time abroad greatly improves one’s confidence and this increased level of confidence attained stems from being able to survive alone in a foreign country and as such they gain a sense of empowerment.

However, all lecturers noted that grammar was the least improved among English assistants because the grammar taught academically is not used nor practiced abroad. While abroad, the students place more importance on understanding and being understood and on reaching a level of fluency as such, little attention is paid to constructing grammatically accurate sentences. In addition, the lecturers noted that native speakers do not use the same grammar structures that a foreign language student will learn in the classroom and as such, the students pick up a lot of the slang and shortened terms and structures used by the natives and even speak that way when they return to their home university.

An interesting observation made by the lecturers was the concept of time spent abroad and the impact it has on the language growth of the students. They indicated that the length of time spent abroad is not necessarily a contributing factor to growth but rather, this is also dependent on the environment abroad. As one lecturer noted in an example, you stay abroad for 10 years and in those 10 years you have a normal job that does not require a higher academic level, for example you work in a store or supermarket. For those 10 years you will be using

basic grammar, you do not need advanced grammar. If you go abroad, for example in Spain for study abroad, the context is different, you are not only using it for everyday conversations and to communicate, but you are using it in an academic context to study, you must read, write, do exams in Spanish and that forces you to use the more complex structures and as such, develop more academically in the language. Finally, all lecturers indicated that immersion is not the most and only effective approach which facilitates language learning, but it entails many more aspects and approaches to ensure success.

CHAPTER THREE

Discussion

3.1 Introduction

This chapter serves to analyse the data gathered from the research and determine how the findings validate or contradict those gathered in the literature review. The following section, Section 3.2 will discuss and explore the benefits of the programs offered on the language proficiency levels of the students at the UWI from both the students' and lecturers' point of view. Section 3.3 seeks to answer the question of, is immersion through these programs the most effective approach.

3.2 Benefits of Language Immersion Programs on Language Proficiency

The immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies have proven to be a tool to improve language proficiency. In identifying and analysing the benefits attained from these programs, the focus is not only on the personal aspects, but on the contributions made to one's growth in the second language and ways in which this environment stimulates language learning.

The greatest benefit of these programs has been identified in the oral areas of the language as students have noted the greatest improvement in speaking and conversational skills. For many, this has been the most improved as they are placed in surroundings that not only encourage continuous use of the language but at the same time, one that compels the student to speak and communicate in the target language. Immersion as an approach to second language learning has been beneficial to many as it allows for open and constant communication as opposed to the classroom environment which presented many limitations for students. A great part of the success in these components is due to the increased confidence obtained by the students, making them more self-assured when speaking in the second

language. Remarkable improvement was also noted in areas of fluency, adapting to the accent, oral communication skills as well as vocabulary and use of connectors.

Following the oral component, listening proved to be the second most improved while abroad and similarly, due to the environment in which the students were placed, where they were constantly surrounded by the target language. The main benefit highlighted with being abroad is hearing the language in every area that you go, whether it be at the supermarket, at the bank, at the airport, on public transport, at restaurants and even on the streets which is not available when studying the language in one's home country. The constant exposure to the language and the accent allows for improved listening and oral skills and these components slowly become second nature to the student. Many students have noticed an enhancement in their listening skills and in identifying different accents upon returning to UWI. While abroad, a considerable amount of time is spent hearing and listening to the L2 in comparison to what is done in one's home country and this immensely contributed to one's growth.

At the commencement of the programs, there were challenges identified with the listening component such as, understanding and adjusting to the accent spoken in the country, adjusting to the speed of the natives, and understanding local and colloquial expressions. Many quickly understood that listening goes hand in hand with speaking and one must first understand what is being said before responding. Therefore, emphasis is no longer placed on comprehending every word or every grammatical structure used in the sentence, but listening, understanding, and grasping the general concept. Time and patience played a vital role for many before seeing any improvement as time, observation, practice, and training was needed to refine one's listening skills before noting remarkable progression and improvement.

The students who participated in the various immersion programs identified pros and cons of the programs on the reading and writing components of the language. It was noted that

the immersion program chosen was highly dependent on how much one improved in these components. For example, students who participated in study abroad programs and who were obligated to read texts and literature and write academically in the target language observed an excellent improvement in their vocabulary, their literacy as well as in their sentence structures when writing. Apart from the academic context, reading skills were improved in a day-to-day context for many as it made up part of the daily life in reading signs, labels, menus, and other everyday documents.

However, students who did not participate in a study abroad program and who were not continually engaged in these activities saw less development in these areas. While these skills did not particularly worsen, they were neither improved for some students. This is because this was not the focus when abroad and many others did not engage in activities to enhance these skills. As such, it was necessary to implement methods and strategies to use and practice these skills. Few students highlighted reading the daily local newspapers in Colombia and France which introduced them to a world of new and complicated words and expressions. Others kept a daily journal while abroad where they incorporated new expressions and things learnt as a means of maintaining their writing. Although no improvement was noted while abroad, in building vocabulary and enhancing sentence structuring, there was inevitably an improvement in writing on returning home as they are now able to incorporate the vital aspects of the language learnt into their academic writing.

Grammar was unfortunately noted as the least improved component among the five skills highlighted and the common response generated regarding the impact of immersion on grammar skills was that there was little to no improvement or understanding of grammar while abroad. This is because natives do not speak the same way that we learn grammar and it was often not the focus when speaking and interacting especially outside of an academic context. For some students, they noted a better understanding of formal and informal registers, standard

and colloquial grammar constructs as well in particular grammatical structures such as the subjunctive.

A major difference noted in this response is that the students who studied abroad and participated in student exchange programs observed greater improvement in their grammar as they were forced to use it in an academic context as opposed to the students who went abroad on an assistantship program. It is also worth noting that many students saw more development in the grammar component of the L2 on their return to Trinidad rather than during their program, meaning that, on continuing their studies at the UWI, they were able to better understand grammar rules and grasp certain concepts. They are now better able to make the link between English grammar rules and those of the L2 and why they implement certain rules and structures.

Except for the five language components, immersion abroad has proven to be a more intensive approach to learning as it has been a greater contribution to one's language proficiency and students have learned and adapted different language-learning skills which had helped boost retention and fluency in the target language. Students who spent an extensive period abroad observed a vast improvement in their ability to formulate and construct more complex sentences in their everyday speech in a more natural way. Others have adapted different methods for learning new vocabulary and expressions apart from writing down and memorizing while others have learnt new colloquial expressions and the appropriate way to incorporate them into their everyday speech.

Moreover, extra-linguistic factors are indeed an important aspect of language immersion programs and contributes both positively and negatively to the one's language proficiency. These factors refer to contextual variables of the abroad experience which does not necessarily link to the linguistic aspects nor is it included within the realm of language yet

affects one's language growth. According to Michael Paige and Michael Vande Berg, these include factors such as destination, attitudes of the natives towards internationals and the degree of cultural similarity, however, this study focused on four main extra-linguistic factors which are: living conditions (host family or student apartment), length of stay, creation of social networks and interaction with natives.

For example, the students who stayed for 1 academic year saw greater improvement in their language skills than those who stayed for 1 semester. This difference owes to the fact that they were given more time to adjust, adapt, settle down and overcome obstacles, therefore making them more at ease and, hence facilitating more improvement. Seven months abroad allowed the students more time to better understand the language and to immerse themselves in the language and the culture. On the other hand, students who stayed abroad for 1 semester indicated that the moment when they were beginning to see improvement, their program was ending because, after having adjusted, settled down and overcome obstacles, not much time was left for them to fully immerse themselves in the language as they desired. This however is not an indication that there was no improvement, but rather, an indication that, if they had stayed longer, there would have been greater advancement and development.

Apart from the general benefits, there were some obstacles encountered during the stay-abroad period which impacted the experience of the student and their language proficiency. In some instances, these difficulties arose at the beginning of the program, such as: language barriers, fear of communicating with the natives, difficulties with integration into society due to cultural and social differences, difficulties making new connections and rapports with native speakers and even lack of confidence. These obstacles negatively impacted the language development of students as they found it hard to adjust and relate to the natives abroad while for some this was the determining factor for their success as they saw these obstacles as

steppingstones towards their improvement and desire to perfect the language. As a result, they took extra measures abroad to ensure that these obstacles do not impede their growth.

Upon their return from abroad, many students indicated that they implemented different activities into their everyday life to create a some-what immersive environment. While immersion goes far beyond these daily activities, they expressed that it did help to ensure they do not lose all the progress obtained and it was a means to continue developing while being away from the natural immersive environment. For example, numerous students indicated that they would often change or in some cases keep the language on their phone as the target language, others listen to the Spanish radio and news online daily while others watched television series and movies in the target language and others stayed in contact with their friends from abroad to maintain that environment around them.

In conclusion, the numerous programs offered at the university of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus presents an abundance of benefits on language proficiency. Despite the decreased participation highlighted by the lecturers of UWI and the various obstacles encountered by the participating students, these programs have indeed proven to be a success in the second-language acquisition process. As such, the aim and mission of the students, lecturers and the institution are to work towards encouraging its participation and discovering innovative approaches for students to be more involved in these programs. At the end, one remains optimistic that this research can open new doors to more in-depth research an analysis of these programs and their benefit to the school population.

3.3 Immersion: Is it the most effective approach to language learning?

For many years immersion has been identified as a cognitive approach to language learning and research findings have shown and proven that it has indeed been a positive contribution to the second language acquisition process. However, the success of a language

immersion program depends heavily on numerous variables which include, length of time spent abroad, the linguistic level of the student before going abroad, the country where they travelled to, the linguistic and cultural obstacles encountered and many more.

Based on the research gathered, 70% of the students agreed that immersion is the most functional approach to mastering a second language for numerous reasons. Spending time abroad comes with a lot of benefits as it has proven to be “the most practical language learning tool” (Respondent Unknown) and because it provides the students with the opportunity to interact regularly with native speakers and as such, it permits faster learning of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

When asked to indicate how immersion in the respective country abroad impacted language proficiency, it was met with mostly positive responses from the students. However, the interesting part of this question is that the students took a more personal approach when responding. Apart from the linguistic benefits obtained, many expressed the profound impact that immersion has had on their confidence when speaking and using the target language. For many, their concept of language learning has evolved, and immersion has opened their mind to a more natural perspective on language learning in that, immersion allows for learning outside of the four walls of the physical classroom and as such, removing limitations and allowing for more growth in the language.

A great percentage of the students indicated that immersion helped to overcome the fear of speaking in the language. During their studies at the home universities, students stated that the fear of speaking to natives, speaking orally and the fear of making errors has been a major hindrance in their second language growth. However, due to being outside of the classrooms and socializing in an unfamiliar environment, they were better able to overcome these obstacles and fears. Many adopted strategies to assist in conquering these fears such as; participating in

the local activities of the country, finding a ‘language buddy’ or someone who they can speak and practice with in the target language while they assist that person in their native language, some forced themselves to speak in the L2 and worked on finding new ways to formulate sentences and not “automatically default to English” (Anonymous Respondent) and others even learned to be patient with themselves, understanding that errors are part of language learning.

As two students indicated, immersion for them was the ‘push’ and ‘extra piece’ that they needed to move forward with the language, where previously they found themselves stagnant in their learning. Immersion facilitated this as it presented opportunities and contexts that would not have been made available at the home university. For many, they have learned to undertake a different approach to language learning. This means that more emphasis is now placed on effective communication and the active use of the language in place of memorization. As a different approach to language learning was obtained, the students then developed a better and clearer understanding of the target language.

Immersion in a foreign country provides benefits beyond the general scope of the language components. Immersion contributes tremendously towards one’s socio-cultural knowledge of a country or culture and sparks that curiosity to want to explore. As stated by the lecturers, it enhances cognitive skills thus contributing to better memory and better understanding of one’s primary language. Immersion abroad places students in a natural environment which eliminates the constraints of the classroom, places them in a better state of mind and consequently, they are more open to learning.

On the contrary, while many students observed growth in the above-mentioned areas, very few presented the other side of the spectrum stating that the immersion program in which they were involved did not increase their confidence nor fluency in the language. Even though general language improvements were noted, the main expectation was to improve fluency after

spending time (specifically 1 academic year) abroad, yet upon return, their oral proficiency remained the same as before they left. On completion of the program, they realized that language learning is more than just travelling to a country and expecting to learn or become fluent, rather, it entails continuous studies, efforts and strategies that work for you and perhaps, immersion might not be the only most effective strategy to ensure language fluency and proficiency.

Although some have agreed that immersion is an effective approach, they expressed the popular opinion that language development due to immersion is also contingent on one's mindset. For example, as stated by one respondent, many individuals from non-Spanish countries travel to Colombia for 2-3 years, yet they spoke little to no Spanish and this was because they did not want to nor do they set their mind to, while there were others who spoke no Spanish initially and left with a lot of improvement and indeed their immersion was effective. However, its effect came due to the individual's mindset to socialize, to create new social networks and to communicate with the natives. Therefore, simply spending time in a country is not a sure guarantee that it will be effective.

Apart from this, extra-linguistic factors identified by the students may have negatively impacted one's experience and one's development in a language. For some, they may have experienced a culture shock which made it difficult to adapt, for others they started their immersion program with a fear or with a lack of confidence to communicate, for others there was a feeling of physical and psychological isolation from their home country, for some it was affected by the nationals' attitude towards the internationals and for others there have been hindered by the degree of cultural differences of the home country to that of the host country. Therefore, as a result, their immersion experience may not have been the most effective.

The lecturers of the UWI presented a contrasting perspective to those of the students. Unlike the students who have agreed fully or partially with the statement, the lecturers who are actively involved with these programs stated that immersion or simply going to a foreign country unfortunately will not guarantee an improvement nor is it the most efficacious means of developing fluency and proficiency in a language. For them, immersion is only part of the second language acquisition process, but it is not the best not the only way to learn a language. In order to learn a language and to be confident to do anything in the foreign language, studying and learning the rules of the language play a vital role.

Immersion becomes effective after having studied the language for a period as it exposes you to things that you do not get from the books. Immersion enhances areas of interaction, cultural knowledge, as well as pragmatic knowledge which in linguistics is explained as knowing what to say and how to say it and what not to say as different expressions and gestures have varying meanings in each country and culture. These are some of the aspects that the lecturers indicated can only be learned through being immersed in the culture of a country. Therefore, the teaching and learning aspects of language learning is esteemed as being more important and necessary in ensuring a successful language acquisition process.

With immersion, the lecturers highlighted the significance of being present and conscious of everything around you while in a country to further enhance language growth. For example, if you see a street sign, it is important to be conscious about what the sign says and why in order to learn and add to one's vocabulary. While many persons believe that they can simply travel to a foreign country and by being immersed in said country they would eventually learn the language, the lecturers mentioned that this will not be effective. Therefore, one must first study the language to put the points learned into practice because by going abroad without studying, one will only learn slower and will not be able to put anything into practice.

Consequently, immersion is key part of language learning process but is not considered the most effective nor the only way to learn a language.

Therefore, can one truly say that immersion is the one and only effective way to learn a language? Based on the data gathered and the research findings, there is no one-size-fits-all response to this question. As such, in an attempt to answer this question and look at its aspects in relation to the University of the West Indies, it is essential that each variable affecting one's stay-abroad experience be studied and analysed. Can we therefore come to one concluded answer about the impact of immersion? Perhaps not, since immersion is a personal and individual experience that cannot be compared as the academic impact of the international experience varies for all.

In essence, the determining factors to establish the true effectiveness of language immersion programs cannot truly be quantified nor generalized. As observed by the responses of both the students and the lecturers, immersion is based on and determined by everyone's experience. While most students agree that immersion is an effective and efficient approach to language learning, others add that this is still heavily reliant on the individuals experience and many other contributing factors. On the other hand, all the lecturers expressed that immersion is not the most effective approach as many other elements are involved in the second-language acquisition process.

CONCLUSION

This research paper focused on the linguistic impacts that come out of the immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. It aims to determine the success and efficiency of these programs in the language acquisition process of the students who have participated in relevant programs. In addition, the study was aimed at determining whether the process of immersion in a foreign country where the L2 is the native language is indeed an effective approach to learning a language.

A total of 50 persons were interviewed and questioned to gather data on the abovementioned topic. Of these persons, some were students who were past participants in various programs at the UWI and others were lecturers who are actively involved. The lecturers were chosen to conduct interviews to obtain a more professional perspective on the impacts of these programs on the language development of the students.

Based on the data collected from the questionnaires and the interviews conducted with the students and lecturers at the University of the West Indies, it was found that immersion programs do indeed provide a lot of opportunity and room for linguistic development in the various language components and skills such as grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The study revealed that persons have often returned to their home university with a newfound confidence to speak and use the target language after spending time abroad in the host country.

The respondents highlighted a plethora of factors which have positively contributed to their language growth and on the contrary, they underlined a few factors which may have hindered their growth. Moreover, more than half of the student respondents considered immersion to be the most effective and key approach to learning a language while few indicated that a lot of other factors were involved in language learning. On the contrary, the lecturers

expressed the idea that this was not the sole means to ensure effective language growth as many other factors account for a successful second language acquisition journey.

On completion of this study, it is important to evaluate the results gathered and target elements which can open the door for further discussion and in an effort to better apprehend the possibilities and challenges in obtaining definitive and purposeful data on foreign language immersion programs. Primarily, it will be beneficial to look more thoroughly at ways in which one can merge the students' concept of immersion and that of the lecturers. This means understanding that while immersion is indeed effective, it is also important to manage expectations and look at ways in which immersion can build on your academic knowledge and add to one's academic experience of language learning rather than looking at it as a separate entity.

Secondly, it will be valuable if we change the focus on the narrative of stay-abroad programs and place more emphasis on its contributions to language development rather than solely its personal benefits. When asked to speak on one's experience, the factor of personal growth is often immediately and unconsciously highlighted, and the language learning factor is less highlighted among students of the UWI. While language immersion programs accelerate students' personal growth, it is important to ensure that this is not the focus when participating in these and when encouraging other language students to do the same. Both personal and linguistic benefits should be analysed and passed on to future students to ensure that its goals and objectives are carried out.

In conclusion, this research paper sought to provide a clear analysis on and underline the benefits that are obtained from foreign language immersion programs offered at the UWI and as such, look at ways to encourage and increase the participation of more students each year. It will hopefully pave the way to and open new doors for more in-depth discussion on the

topic of immersion and how incorporating it into the academic journey of a university student can generate numerous personal and linguistic advantages.

APPENDIX A

(Student Questionnaires)

Questionnaire

Hi there! My name is Mary Grant, and I am currently a fourth-year student at the University of the West Indies pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in French and Spanish. For my HUMN 3099 thesis, I am conducting a research study on the positive linguistic benefits that arise from the immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies. The following questionnaire consist of a few multiple-choice questions as well as open-ended questions to collect data on the experience of the individual and how it has impacted their language proficiency. Your participation in the questionnaire will be appreciated and as the researcher, I assure you that all information shared will be kept confidential and will only be used by the researcher and for the sole purpose of the research paper. Many thanks for your contribution.

***Required**

1. Sex:

☐Female

☐Male

2. Age:

☐18-20

☐21-23

☐24-25

3. Degree Programme: *

Your answer

4. Immersion Program in which you participated: *

☐ Study Abroad

☐ Student Exchange

☐ English Assistant

☐ Other:

5. Which country have you travelled to for your immersion program? *

☐ Spain

☐ France

☐ Colombia

☐ French Caribbean

☐ Other

6. Length of time abroad: *

☐ 1 academic semester

☐ 1 academic year

☐ More than 1 year

7. What was the main motive for applying for the immersion program?

☐ I wanted to improve my language skills.

☐ I wanted to increase my level of confidence and fluency in the language.

☐ I wanted to experience another culture.

☐ I wanted to gain work abroad experience.

☐ I needed a break from my studies.

☐Other:

8. Do you think the main motive was met and accomplished?

☐Yes

☐No

☐Maybe

9. If no, why do you think the goal was not met?

Your answer

10. Has the length of time abroad affected your language skills, your adaptation, and adjustment?

☐Yes

☐No

☐Maybe

11. In what way has the length of time affected these aspects? (Positively/negatively)

Your answer

12. What were some of the challenges faced while abroad? (Select all that apply to you)

☐Linguistic – using and communicating effectively in the target language, especially to natives.

☐Difficulty speaking and expressing yourself in the language.

☐Language barriers

☐Fear and reluctance when communicating with the natives.

☐Difficulty meeting new people and establishing new rapports.

☐Difficulty adapting and adjusting to the new culture.

☐Other:

13. Explain any one of the challenges selected above.

Your answer

14. After spending time abroad, has your understanding, perception and attitude towards the target language changed, or is it the same? Explain.

Your answer

15. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your conversational/speaking skills in the target language?

Your answer

16. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your grammar skills in the target language?

Your answer

17. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your listening skills in the target language? (Were there any challenges with regards to listening and adjusting to the accent of the natives?)

Your answer

18. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your reading and writing skills in the target language?

Your answer

19. Which one of the five language skills were honed and developed the most while abroad?

☐Listening

☐Speaking

☐Reading

☐Writing

☐Grammar

20. What factors contributed to this improvement?

Your answer

21. What activities (cultural, sports, religious) did you participate in while abroad which has contributed to the development of your language proficiency?

Your answer

22. How often did you participate in these activities?

☐1 Rarely

☐10 Frequently

23. In which of the components did you notice least improvement?

☐Listening

☐Speaking

☐Reading

☐Writing

☐Grammar

24. What do you think was the cause for this?

Your answer

25. Which of the following (extra-linguistic) factors positively impacted your stay-abroad experience? (Select all that apply)

☐ Living conditions (host family, apartment)

☐ Length of stay

☐ Creation of social networks

☐ Interaction with native speakers

26. Explain any one of the options selected in the above question.

Your answer

27. Apart from these five main language components, what other language skills were developed while abroad? (Select all that apply)

☐ Greater memorization of words and expressions in the target language

☐ Ability to formulate more complex sentences in everyday speech.

☐ Ability to formulate more complex grammatical constructions.

☐ Positive change in learning strategies and methods (to what you learn at your home university)

☐ Learning and appropriate use of new idiomatic expressions and colloquial terms

☐ Other:

28. Since returning to UWI, has your level of confidence increased when using and speaking the language?

☐ 1 No/Very little

☐ 5 Yes/Great increase

29. Would you say that your oral fluency has greatly improved?

Yes

No

Maybe

30. How do you feel spending time in [country] on this immersion program has helped your language learning process?

Your answer

31. Would you say that total immersion allows for effective language learning?

Yes

No

Maybe

Explain:

Your answer

32. Would you recommend this program to other students at the University of the West Indies?

Yes

No

Maybe

33. Why would you/would you not recommend this program?

Your answer

34. What, if anything, do you feel you learnt abroad that you would not in a university-level language class?

Your answer

35. If you wish, can you share something new that you have learnt in the language while abroad? It can be a new vocabulary, new expressions in the language, or something cultural.

Your answer

APPENDIX B
(Student Interviews)

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mary Grant, and I am currently a fourth-year student at the University of the West Indies pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in French and Spanish. For my HUMN 3099 thesis, I am conducting a research study on the positive linguistic benefits that arise from the immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies. Your participation in the interview will be appreciated and it is important to answer all questions honestly. As the researcher, I assure you that all information will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this research paper. Many thanks for your contribution.

1. What is/was your degree program at the University of the West Indies?
2. Tell me a bit about the immersion program that you did, which immersion program were you a part of what country did you travel to and how long did you stay-abroad?
3. What was the main motive for applying for that immersion program?
4. Do you think the motive was met and accomplished?
5. If no, why do you think your goal not met?
6. Has the length of time affected your language skills, your adaptation and adjustment?
If so, in what way?
7. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your conversational/speaking skills in the language?
8. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your grammar skills in the language?

9. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your listening skills in the language?
10. In what way has the immersion program impacted (positively/negatively) your reading and writing skills in the language?
11. Which one of the five language skills were honed and developed the most while abroad?
What contributed to this?
12. Do you think that there was any component which had not really improved and what do you think is the reason for this?
13. Apart from these five components listed, what other language learning skills were developed or impacted? (For example, greater memorization of words and vocabulary, more complex sentence structures, more complex grammar structures, oral proficiency. Do learning strategies change? From that which you would have learnt while studying at home?)
14. Has your level of confidence increased when using the target language?
15. What were some of the activities (cultural, sports, religious) you participated in while abroad which contributed positively to the development of your language proficiency? (e.g., group travels with natives, making new friends with natives, class activities and discussions etc.)
16. What were some of the challenges faced while using and interacting in the target language?
17. How do you feel spending time in [country] on this immersion program has helped your language learning?
18. After your experience abroad, would you say that total immersion allows for effective and rapid language learning? Explain.

19. What, if anything, do you feel you learned abroad that you would not in a university level language class?
20. Would you recommend this program to other students at the University of the West Indies? Why?
21. If you wish, can you share something new that you have learnt in the language while abroad? It can be new vocabulary, new expressions in the language or something cultural. 😊

APPENDIX C

(Lecturer Interviews)

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mary Grant, and I am currently a fourth-year student at the University of the West Indies pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in French and Spanish. For my HUMN 3099 thesis, I am conducting a research study on the positive linguistic benefits that arise from the immersion programs offered at the University of the West Indies and their benefits on language proficiency. Your participation in the interview will be appreciated. As the researcher, I assure you that all information will remain confidential and will only be used for the purpose of the research paper. Many thanks for your contribution.

1. Which of the foreign language immersion programs are you closely involved with at the University of the West Indies?
2. Has the number of students participating in the immersion programs increased over the past 5 years?
3. What do you think may be a causative factor for the increase/decrease in participation?
4. Do you think that there are benefits to these immersion programs for the students and in particular, linguistic benefits?
5. Do you notice improvements and development in the linguistic components/skills of the students after returning from abroad? (Grammar, Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking)
6. And if so, which language components are usually the **most and least improved** amongst the students upon their return to UWI?

7. Would you say that there is a general increase in confidence and oral proficiency among the students after returning from abroad?
8. Do you ever notice a decrease/no increase in the level of any of the language skills/ components among the students? What do you think can be the cause for this?
9. As a foreign language lecturer, do you agree that complete immersion is the best and most effective way to learn a language?
10. As a lecturer, do you have any suggestions for future participants of these immersion programs and ways that they can ensure proficiency growth in the target languages?

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