



The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine Campus
Faculty of Humanities and Education
Caribbean Studies Project
HUMN 3099

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Title of Thesis:

Foreign Language Immersion: The experiences of UWI, St. Augustine undergraduate and graduate students abroad.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I wish to thank Almighty God for providing with a very supportive team and allowing me to carry out this study, which I am very passionate about. My deepest gratitude goes out to my family especially my father, Martin Cooper. He willingly worked closely with me on this assignment, being a source of unwavering support and motivation. Thanks to my dear friends, Saloni Kissoon and Riyad Mohammed who have always helped and encouraged me. To my supervisor, Ms. Mathilde Dallier, your methodical critique and incisive comments guided me along this journey. I extend to you, a heartfelt thanks. Last, but definitely not least, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to those who participated in this study. Your input has, without a doubt enriched this research project.

ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Immersion programs have been taking place since the latter part of the 20th century. Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly popular, both in the context of the classroom as well as abroad, and does not limit itself to any one academic level. A variety of previous studies have shed light on the experiences of individuals who have participated in foreign language immersion programs abroad, but almost none have been carried out in the Caribbean region. As such, this study examines the experiences of French and Spanish undergraduate students and graduates of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, who have taken part in either a study abroad (SA) or teaching assistant (TA) program overseas. A group of ten individuals was asked to complete questionnaires, so as to provide the researcher with a general idea of what their experiences were like, while four out of the ten were interviewed in order to gain data in a more detailed form.

The main aspects focused on in this paper include the participants' reasons for going abroad, the challenges faced during, as well as the benefits gained as a result of their stay abroad, mainly based on linguistic, cultural and social contexts and finally, the participants' attitudes towards their second language after having been immersed overseas have also been discussed. This study aims to highlight the aforementioned, with the intention of assisting current and future foreign language students in making an informed decision with regards to taking part in a foreign language immersion program abroad.

Keywords

Foreign Language Immersion program, study abroad, teaching assistant, linguistic context, cultural context, social context.

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign Language Immersion is becoming increasingly popular among language students of every academic level, not to mention that it has become much easier throughout the past years, due to increased connectivity among universities around the world. It is a phenomenon which evolved from Immersion Education that became popular in Canada during the 1960's and incorporates immersion programs in every level of education, from pre-primary to tertiary, and in diverse forms such as discipline-based language teaching to total immersion (*Immersion Education: International Perspectives* xiii). Since then, Foreign Language Immersion has developed into not only experiences in the classroom, but opportunities for individuals to participate in programs which allow them to study or work abroad (in the country of the target language). The experiences of those who go abroad reveal difficulties met as well as benefits derived while in the host country.

Furthermore, theorists Fortune and Tedick, state that “the main objective of programs involving immersion is to increase participants’ proficiency in the target language as well as their cultural sensitivity.” (qtd. in Lenker and Rhodes). Other studies focus on the main aspects of an immersion student’s experience abroad such as the linguistic aspect, discussed in Vanderveen’s research, in addition to the cultural and social aspects that studies of Chen & Starosta and Magnan & Lafford reveal respectively, all which determine the outcome of a foreign language immersion student’s experience abroad.

Rationale

Foreign Language Immersion abroad is one of many strategies used in the process of language acquisition. Foreign language students pursuing French and/or Spanish at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus are introduced every year to the programs available in which they can participate, whether it be study abroad (SA) or teaching assistant (TA) programs. Feedback given by students who have spent time abroad engaging in an immersion program is key in prospective language students' decision to participate or not in such programs, in addition to implementing strategies to cope with challenges faced. This is so that they can have some guidance and so that they can be comfortable enough to pursue such programs. Furthermore, research in this field has not been conducted extensively in the Caribbean, but current literature highlights participants of Foreign Language Immersion primarily from Asia, North America and Europe.

Therefore, this paper which aims to analyze the experiences of undergraduate students and graduates of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine abroad, aids in showcasing the challenges faced as well as the advantages of participating in Spanish and French language immersion overseas. Moreover, given its Caribbean context, this study may be useful to future Caribbean language students in their decision to take part in a Foreign Language Immersion program and can also help foreign language teachers to better prepare their students to confront challenges and embrace opportunities that are most likely to arise while abroad.

Aims

The main objective of this study is to examine the experiences of UWI undergraduate and graduate students who have participated in Foreign Language Immersion programs abroad, in a

French and Spanish language context. The analysis of different aspects that make up the students' experiences abroad will be made in order to determine whether an individual pursuing a foreign language at university would consider such immersion programs or not.

Furthermore, analysis of the aforementioned aspects serves to shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of students' experiences abroad and encourages foreign language educators to adopt strategies which will help their students to feel more comfortable immersing themselves into the foreign language abroad.

Research Questions

The research questions used to achieve the main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. Why do foreign language students participate in immersion programs abroad?
2. What challenges do participants face during their foreign language immersion experience abroad?
3. What benefits derive from the foreign language immersion experience abroad?
4. How do participants' experiences of foreign language immersion affect their attitudes toward their second language after their period of immersion?

Methodology

This study involves the use of qualitative data through conducting interviews and questionnaires of UWI St. Augustine undergraduate students and graduates who participated in a foreign language immersion program in either a Spanish speaking or French speaking country. This was to better understand their experience while being abroad. A total of ten persons participated in this study, four of which were interviewed. A group of four persons was chosen to

be interviewed so as to have a clearer idea of what their experience was like abroad, especially based on the program they participated in. Two out of the four interviewees were immersed in Spanish speaking countries such as Spain and Colombia, while the other two had their immersion experience in a French speaking country- France. Of the Spanish language immersed participants, one was a graduate from the UWI St. Augustine, who had done the Erasmus + study abroad program from September 2018 until January 2019. The other Spanish language immersed participant was a UWI St. Augustine undergraduate year three student who had done a *Student Assistantship Program* at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), which ran from August 2018 until May 2019, in Bogotá, Colombia.

Furthermore, the French immersed participants chosen to be interviewed consisted of one UWI St. Augustine graduate, one who had studied abroad during the time period of September 2017 - May 2018, while the other was a UWI St. Augustine third year undergraduate student who went as an English teaching assistant under the Teaching Abroad Program in France (TAPIF), which ran from September 2018 until April 2019.

Guided by the research questions as well as questions based on the aspects that comprise one's experience during foreign language immersion, the interview questions and questionnaires were created. These interview questions and questionnaires were first piloted to ensure validity. However, due to the covid-19 world pandemic that was occurring at the time, the interview questions had to be sent to the interviewees, which allowed them to freely write their responses. Common themes were then extracted from the responses given by the participants in both the interviews and questionnaires. The results of the data collection methods employed, allowed the researcher to present clearly the objectives of this project.

Chapter one of this thesis will elaborate on the different aspects that make up the experience of a foreign language immersion participant abroad and present background information on challenges encountered during and benefits gained after participating in SA and TA programs, with respect to these aspects. Case studies carried out on similar topics will also be put forward to illumine these aspects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the number of participants in foreign language immersion programs continues to grow on a yearly basis, increased data from this growth reflect a wider range of experiences. The experience of being immersed in a foreign language abroad, specifically through SA and TA programs lends insight into the linguistic, cultural and social aspects of participants' experiences. Moreover, these aspects play significant roles in a language student's decision to participate in an immersion program. It is also extremely important to remember that other elements such as challenges and benefits shape an individual's experience while abroad. This chapter aims to explain each of the aforementioned aspects and present case studies in which they are incorporated.

Aspects which make up part of a foreign language immersion experience abroad:

Language

Popular belief suggests that foreign language (FL) students who participate in immersion programs abroad are expected to become fluent at a native speaker level in the target language. The quality of students' communication in the native language of the host country plays a crucial role in their experience abroad. It can be considered as the determining factor of whether they socialize with natives easily or not, in addition to their level of ease or difficulty regarding their adaptability to the foreign culture. A study conducted by Tamara Nicole Vanderveen in 2015 focused partly on the use French language outside of the classroom. She created a focus group of high school students in a Toronto school who participated in a French Immersion (FI) program. With respect to the linguistic aspect of the students' experiences, Vanderveen found that

generally, “students expressed hesitation to speak French when not in a classroom setting.” (135). This was due to the challenge faced, brought about by their confidence level in speaking French in a non-classroom setting and the fact that “(...) the people in Montreal speak it all the time, but here it is pretty much only in class” (Vanderveen 136), according to a student participant in the study, referring to the French language. Therefore, taking Vanderveen’s research into account, it is clear that students’ willingness to communicate (WTC) in the target language is a major factor when it comes to the linguistic aspect of one’s experience abroad.

Culture

Intercultural sensitivity and cultural adaptation are two terms that fall under the aspect of culture, which also contributes to a language immersion student’s experience abroad. Chen and Starosta refer to intercultural sensitivity as “an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (qtd. in Fatalaki 26). Regarding cultural adaptation, theorists refer to it as “the process and time it takes a person to assimilate to a new culture.” (Cultural Adaptation: Definition, Theory, Stages & Examples). Foreign language immersion students’ ability to understand and appreciate the differences in, as well as the amount of time they take to adapt to the culture of the host country, determine whether they face more challenges than benefits or vice versa.

Socialization

Establishing social networks and interaction with native speakers forms the social aspect of a foreign language immersion student's experience abroad. Theorists, Magnan and Lafford identify three types of social networks: the one that is created between the student and native speakers, the ones that are formed between the student and others of the same nationality (SA context) and the social network that involves virtual interaction with friends and family from the country of origin. (qtd. in Pinar 90). As a foreign language student, one of their aims of being immersed abroad is to make friends especially with natives, in order to improve linguistic competency through conversation. Whether the student interacts often enough with native speakers or stays in contact and forms relationships with persons who speak their first language (L1), can also contribute to a challenging or beneficial immersion experience abroad.

A research paper by Christina Isabelli-Garcia in 2006, shows the cases of American undergraduate SA students in Mexico. The researcher gives examples and explains the difficulty for certain students to establish social networks with native speakers and how frustrations due to this challenge led them to give up and adopt an "ethnocentric attitude", and ended up spending all their time with other students from the same country of origin. Isabelli-Garcia points to the case of a student who was more involved in the culture of the host country, made friends and participated in activities with locals, such as volunteer programs, which affected his linguistic competence positively.

The challenges faced by the individual while being abroad, also contribute to the outcome of their experience, whether they overcome them or not. It therefore aids the participant in forming an overall opinion of what they encountered while being away from their country of origin. Existing literature highlights these challenges which are often linked to the three major aspects

mentioned earlier, that are analyzed to determine both a SA program participant's as well as a language TA experience. Therefore, challenges as they relate to language, culture and socialization will be discussed.

Linguistic challenge

SA context: As seen in the case study carried out by Vanderveen, one of the major challenges that one faces, especially during foreign language immersion is in the ability to communicate in the host country's language, mainly due to their proficiency in the language. Regardless of the field of study that the individual is pursuing, a problem that is often noted is that of their language proficiency. In other words, it is often found that they tend to have serious difficulty with unfamiliar language usage and slang as well as mistakes made while translating from one language to the other, in addition to a lack of understanding regarding usage of idioms, similes and metaphors. (Milian et al. 2)

TA context: Ekaterina Ashavskaya's study done in 2015 states that linguistic challenges in the classroom is one of the main ones a TA encounters while being abroad. Her study focuses on the experiences of international teaching assistants (ITAs) at a university in the US. From her research, it is understood that the speed of the students' speech, their use of informal language and short sentences posed problems for all of the ITAs. An ITA from Nepal shared her experience expressing that "...Students use more informal language, like slang. Like "fishy." It's something unclear or unconvincing [...] They prefer short sentences" (Ashavskaya 61), therefore causing the ITA's frustration due to lack of understanding, an issue that is also faced by the participants of SA programs.

Cultural challenge

SA context: Milian et al states that common cultural challenges that participants of a SA program overseas usually encounter include assimilation into the culture of the host country and potential culture shock. They further explain that adaptation to the new cultural lifestyle also makes reference to food and drink with which the individual may not be familiar and in some cases, will have to compromise their dietary cultural practices in order to adapt. (2). Furthermore, stress symptoms brought about by efforts to assimilate into the new culture can have adverse effects when it comes to adjusting to the host country's academic culture. (Milian et al 3).

TA context: Once again, the cultural challenges faced by SA participants abroad are equally the same as that in the case of TAs. TAs also experience challenges in the classroom, but not with respect to stress to adapt to the culture, but rather brought about by the negative attitudes toward them from their students. Ashavskaya's study shows once again the experience of another ITA at the American university stating that "A student came to [my husband's] first class and said, "Oh, I am so glad I got an American TA" but then he turned to her and said that he was actually an international instructor and then she never came back to his other classes. He doesn't know why for sure but that may be the reason." (Ashavskaya 62). This could show the possible xenophobia that may exist in the US culture, a problem which can actually be faced by both TAs as well as SA participants.

Social challenge

SA context: According to Milian et al, common social challenges that students who partake in SA programs face are limited social support, sentiments of solitude because of the absence of

family and friends (2) and social and emotional obstacles such as homesickness and difficulty in forming social networks, which make adaptation more difficult. (3).

TA context: In the case of teaching assistants, establishing relationships with the natives is often difficult. Such is the case in Ashavskaya's study where she reveals that the ITAs generally had difficulty making friends with the Americans, while in other cases, some ITAs spent a lot of time communicating with their friends and family at home, missing out on the opportunity to socialize with the natives.

The challenges that exist aside from those with respect to the three aspects mentioned above include discrimination, racism (which could perhaps be cultural), homesickness ((Milian et al 3) as well as financial issues. (Otte and Alghamdi 19).

While it is clear that certain challenges tend to stand out for both SA participants and foreign language TAs, a lot of benefits also derive from this experience abroad. As seen with the challenges, these benefits are also found with respect to the three major aspects that form a language student's experience in SA and TA programs. These linguistic, cultural and social benefits will be highlighted.

Linguistic benefit

SA context: Pinar's 2016 study states that an individual's linguistic competency is positively affected as a result of participating in a SA program. He further stresses that fluency and pronunciation are improved. (84). As stated in Pinar's research, a case study carried out by Fred, So and Lazar, compares the language proficiency of American students pursuing French in their own country and others who went abroad for one semester. The findings reveal that those who had

gone abroad saw an improvement in their oral expression ability, especially in fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy and use of vocabulary. (84).

TA context: With respect to linguistic benefits and foreign language teaching assistants, LSE Enterprise and CFE Research's 2014 report for the British Council states that being immersed in another culture allows them to see a drastic improvement in their fluency. In addition, linguistic benefits are also experienced by the students. According to one school mentioned in the report, this is due to the fact of having a 'real' native speaker in the classroom with the students, which enriches their experience of learning the language. (83).

Cultural benefit

SA context: According to Pinar's study, an individual's intercultural sensitivity is usually developed as a result of their time abroad. (88). He gives an example of this through researchers, Engle and Engle's 2004 case study of seven American French language students who spent a semester or a year in France, stating that their intercultural sensitivity and cultural adaptation development was more notable by the second half of the one-year stay. Engle and Engle, therefore, imply that there is a link between the ease or length of time taken to adapt to a foreign culture and the length of time of the program.

TA context: As seen in LSE Enterprise and CFE Research's report, language assistants have admitted that one of the major benefits from their experience was gaining cultural awareness. The statistics from this study show that 97% of the language assistants agreed that "Participating in the Programme has increased my knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures". (LSE Enterprise and CFE Research 82).

Socialization

SA context: Being able to create social networks with native speakers in the host country correlates with the improvement in linguistic competence of the student, according to Pinar. Additionally, stated in Pinar's study, Segalowitz and Freed, claim that the length of stay in the host country plays a part in determining the sufficient development of social networks, and they found that students who spent only a semester abroad weren't able to sufficiently establish social networks. (90). However, in Dwyer and Peters' study, they mention that 23% of the participants in their study admit to maintaining contact with friends gained from the host country during their experience abroad. (56).

The benefits derived from both SA and TA programs don't just stop at linguistic, cultural and social, but also include personal growth, as seen in the case with SA participants, since studying abroad allowed students to quicker develop maturity (Dwyer and Peters 56) and provides work experience which increase their career possibilities (TA context) (LSE Enterprise and CFE Research 82-83). It is also noteworthy that individuals studying abroad also see greater opportunities for jobs, based on the degree of education they receive.

At the University of the West Indies, or even throughout the Caribbean, little to no research has been carried out around this topic. However, a recent study published in 2019 entitled 'Assessing the Value and Effectiveness of Study Abroad and Exchange Programs in Foreign Language Degree Programs: A Case Study' by Dr. Nicole Roberts, at the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL), UWI St. Augustine, confirms that a variety of study abroad (SA) and exchange/student assistantship (EXC) programs are offered to DMLL students pursuing French and/or Spanish and that no research has been carried out on these programs at the UWI, St. Augustine, despite their long history of existence.

Dr. Roberts points out, however, that students who return to the university to complete their degree rarely provide feedback to the Modern Language Department regarding their experiences abroad, but she acknowledges that thanks to “blogs including Garvin’s World: A Blog by Garvin Tafari Parsons or the blog Hunter TT by Theron Thompson, another former student play a huge role in monitoring intercultural connections in addition to determining the impact of SA and EXC programs on our foreign language immersed participants.” (19). Furthermore, this study reveals the importance of such programs with respect to the Spanish and French students at the UWI as they “contribute to the academic and cultural development of our undergraduate student majors of French and Spanish and perhaps even ideally should be a required part of the degree program” (Roberts 19), in addition to the work experience gained (in the case of those participating in teaching assistant programs).

Therefore, considering language, culture and socialization, the three major aspects that comprise an individual’s experience abroad, it is quite clear that the most common challenges encountered and benefits gained stem from these aspects. However, as seen earlier, these experiences are rarely heard of through the student participants at the UWI, St. Augustine. Keeping this fact in mind, the data to be presented in chapter two will be analyzed using the linguistic, cultural, social and additional benefits and challenges that participants in SA and TA programs experienced during and after their stay abroad as references.

CHAPTER TWO - Findings

In this chapter, the qualitative data collected from questionnaires and interviews carried out will be presented. This chapter is divided into two parts. Part one presents graphical representations of the data, while part two showcases specific information gathered through the interviews done. Furthermore, the information to be presented in the interview section will focus more on personal experiences of participants in TA and SA programs in both a French-speaking and Spanish-speaking immersion.

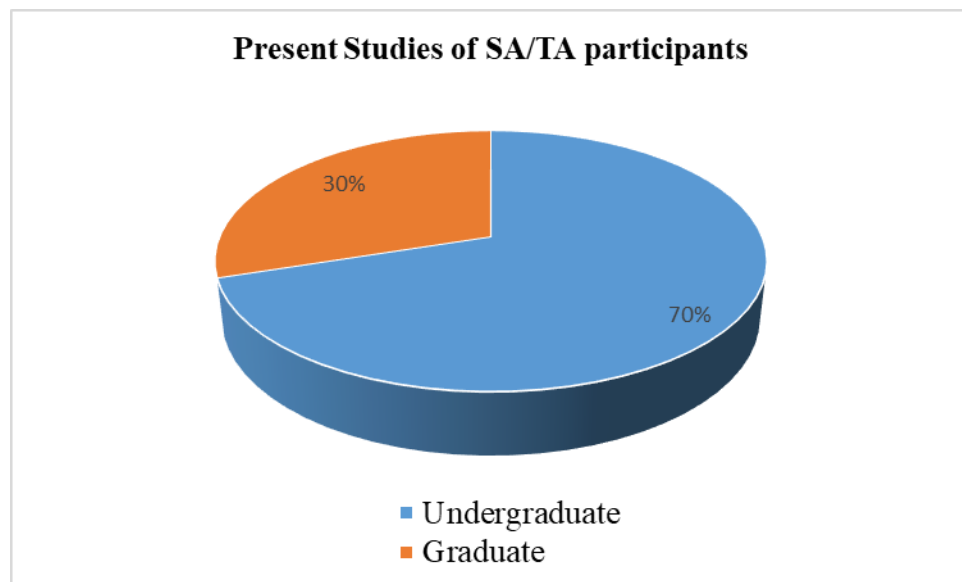
Part 1: Graphical representation of data

Fig. 1. The present studies of SA/TA program participants

The pie chart clearly shows that 70% of the participants are pursuing undergraduate studies at the UWI, St. Augustine, while 30% of them have already graduated from the Institution.

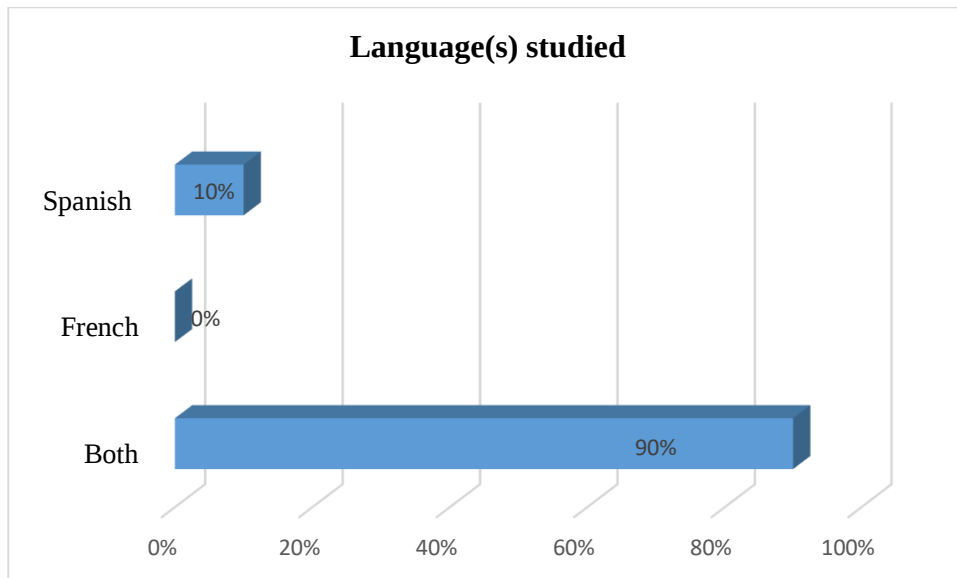


Fig. 2. Language(s) studied

The graph above represents the percentage of participants who study or studied either Spanish, French or both languages at university. The figures show that 10% study/studied Spanish only while 90% study/studied both languages.

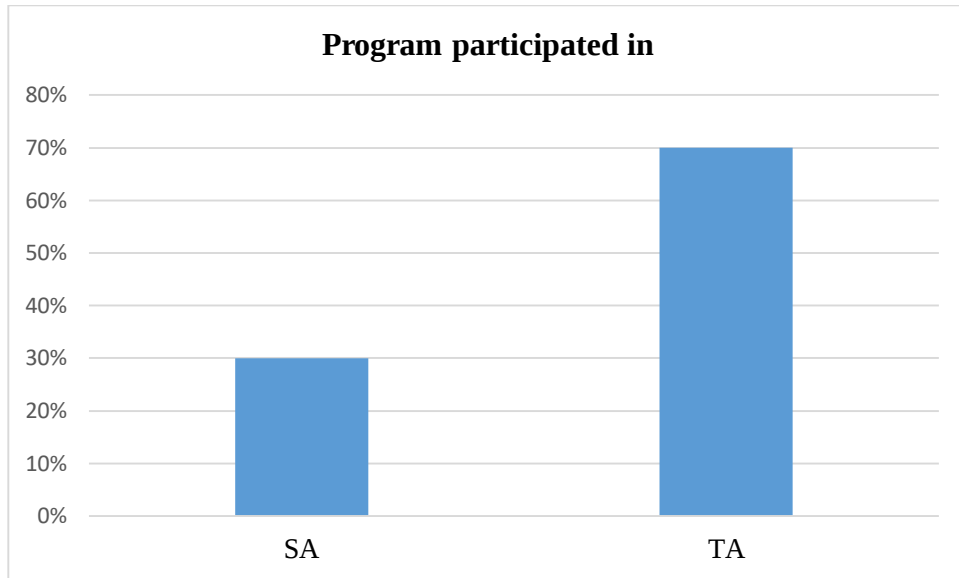


Fig. 3. Foreign language immersion program participated in.

The bar graph represents the percentage of participants in a SA program and TA program. It shows that 30% of the participants have done a SA program while 70% have gone abroad as an English TA.

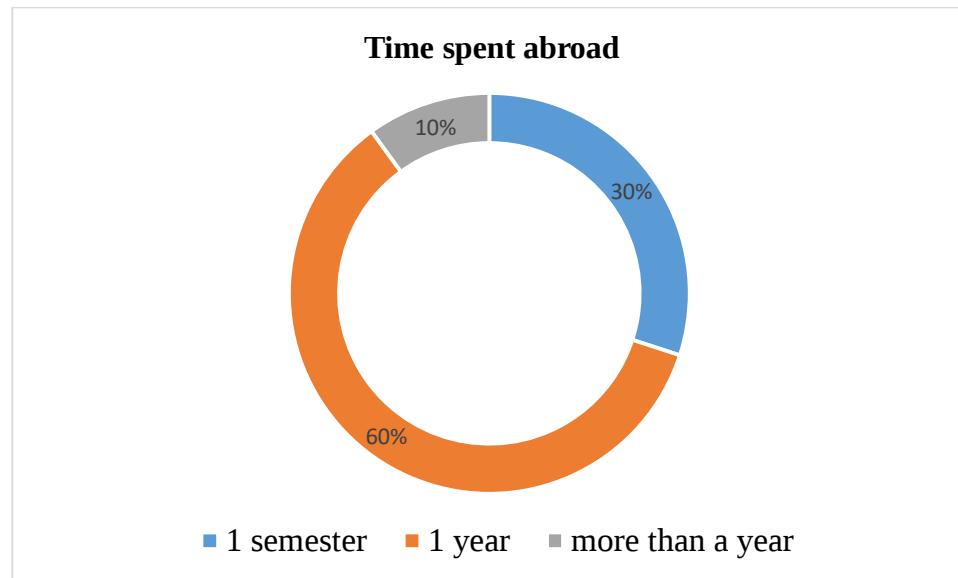


Fig. 4. Amount of time spent abroad.

The doughnut graph above shows that 60% of the participants have spent one academic year abroad, 30% have spent one semester and 10% have spent more than a year abroad.

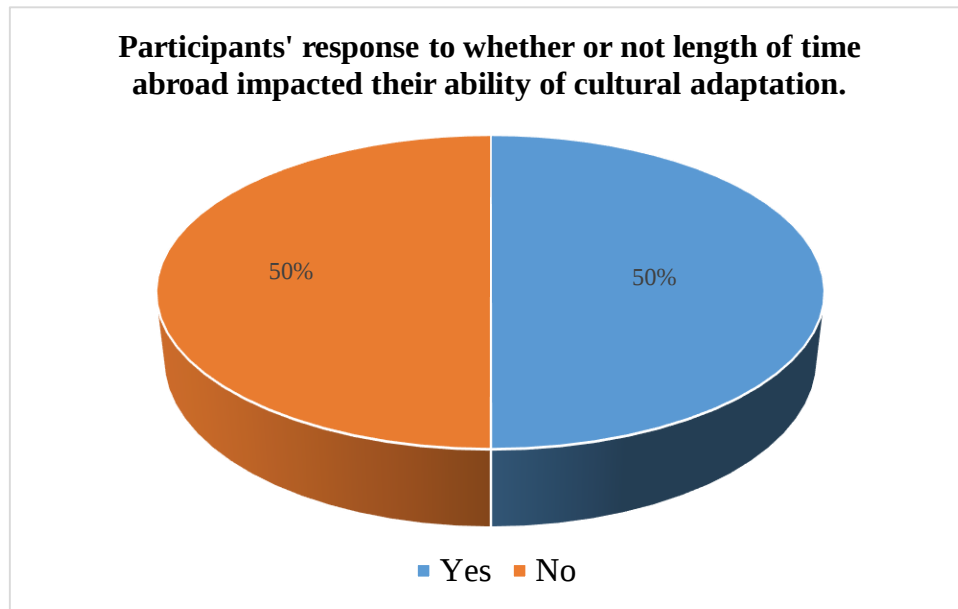


Fig. 5. Participants' response to whether or not the length of time spent abroad impacted their ability to adapt to the culture.

The pie chart represents the percentage of students who think that the length of their stay abroad did or did not affect their ability to easily adapt to the culture of the host country. It is clearly stated that 50% of the participants said 'Yes', while the other 50% said 'No'.

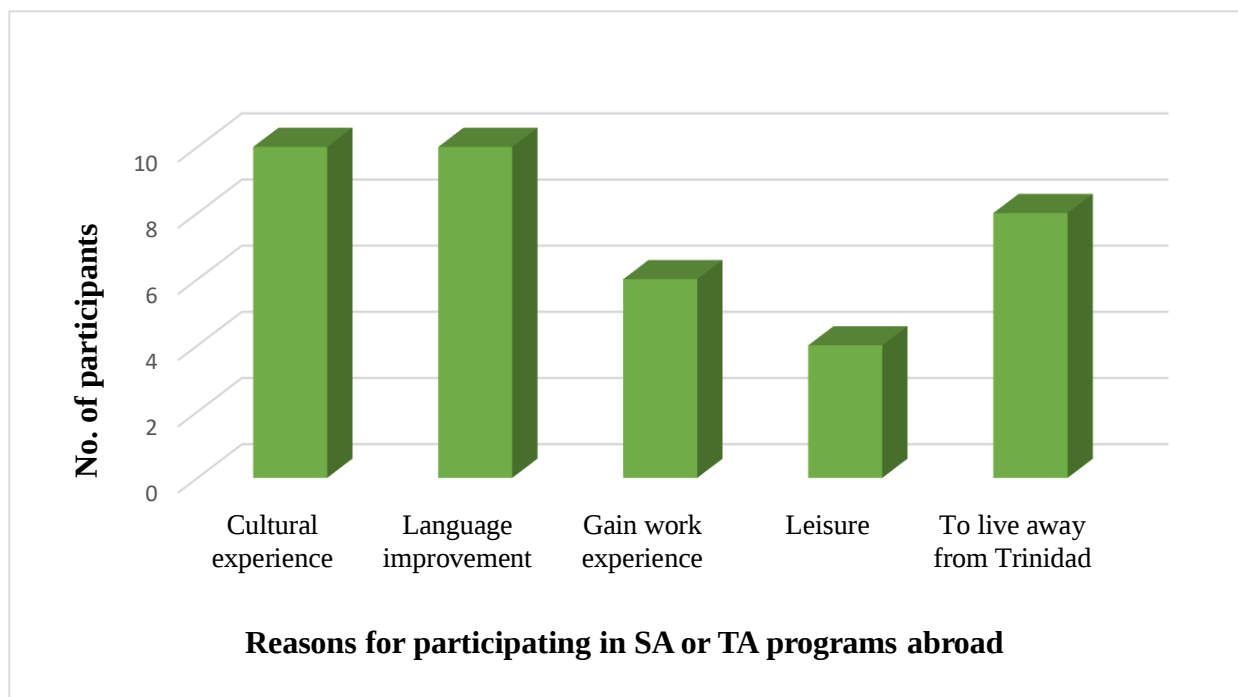


Figure. 6. Participants' reasons for participating in a SA or TA program abroad.

The graph shows the reasons for which the undergraduate UWI, St. Augustine students and graduates participated in a SA or TA program abroad. The bar graph clearly shows that all the participants (10 out of 10) had chosen to go abroad for cultural experience as well as to improve language proficiency. Six (6) out of the ten (10) participants chose the option “to gain work experience”, four (4) out of ten (10) for leisure and eight (8) participants out of the ten (10) participated in a foreign language immersion program to live away from Trinidad.

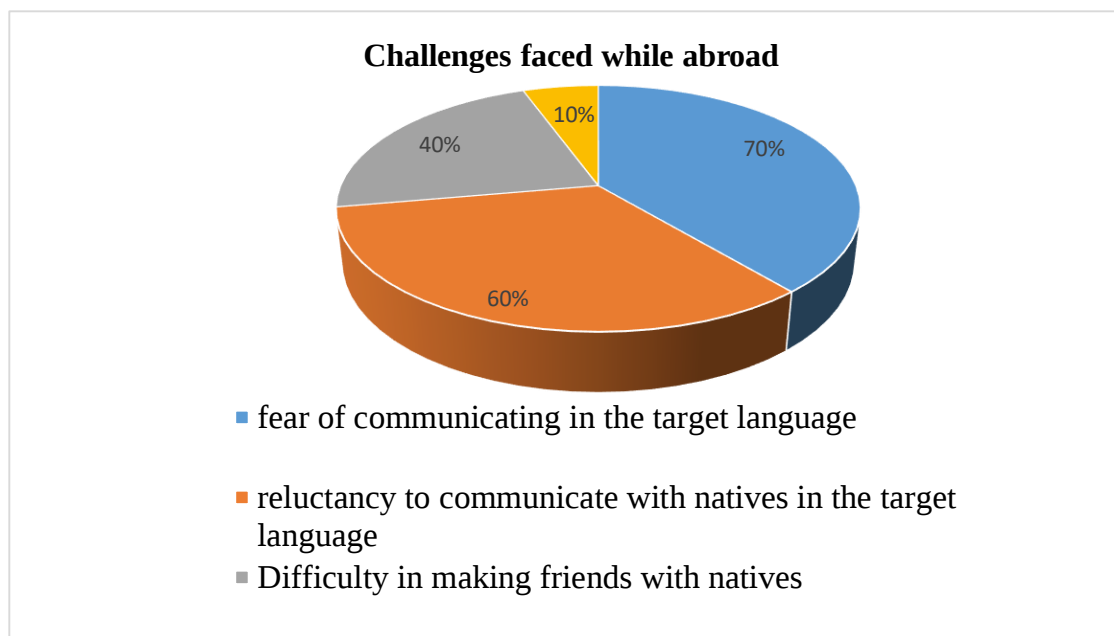


Fig. 7. Challenges participants faced during their experience abroad.

The pie chart shows the percentages of participants that faced certain challenges during their stay abroad. 70% (n=7) represents the most common challenge faced, which is fear of communicating in the target language, 60% (n=6) of the participants have experienced reluctancy to communicate with natives in the target language, which stands as the second most common challenge. The chart also shows that 40% (n=4) of the participants have encountered difficulty in making friends, while 10% (n=1) of them had difficulty in adapting to the culture of the host country.

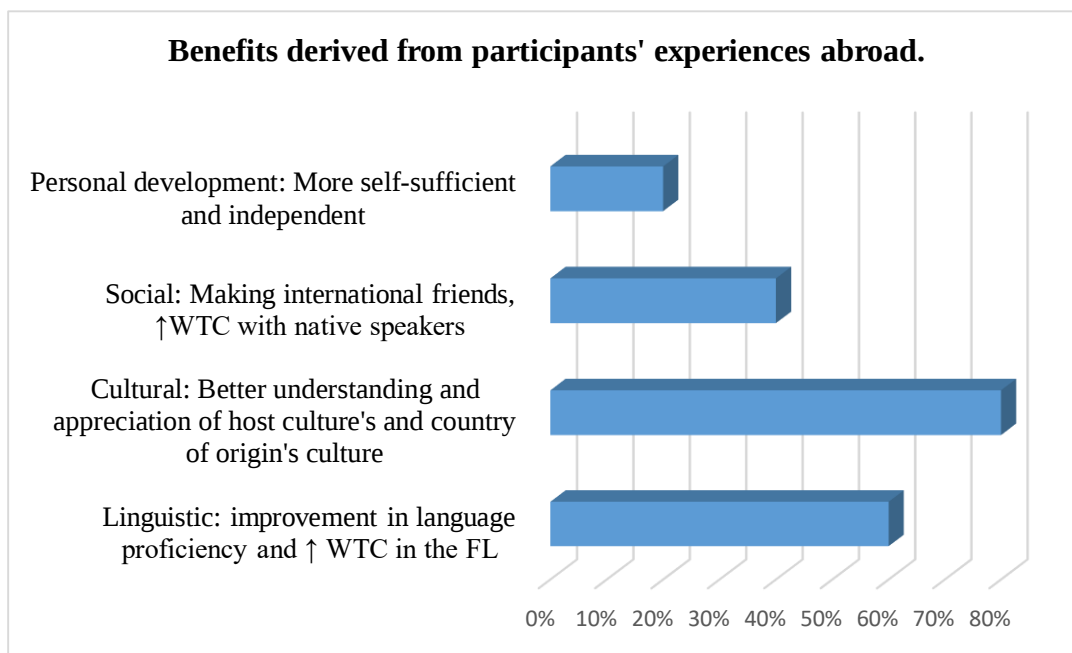


Fig. 8. Benefits derived from participants' experiences abroad.

The vertical bar graph shows the major themes which came out of the benefits derived from participants' experiences abroad. The most common benefit was cultural, as it represents 80% (n=8) of the participants, followed by language at 60% (n=6), social benefits at 40% (n=4) and ended by the least common benefit, self-development, representing 20% (n=2) of the participants.

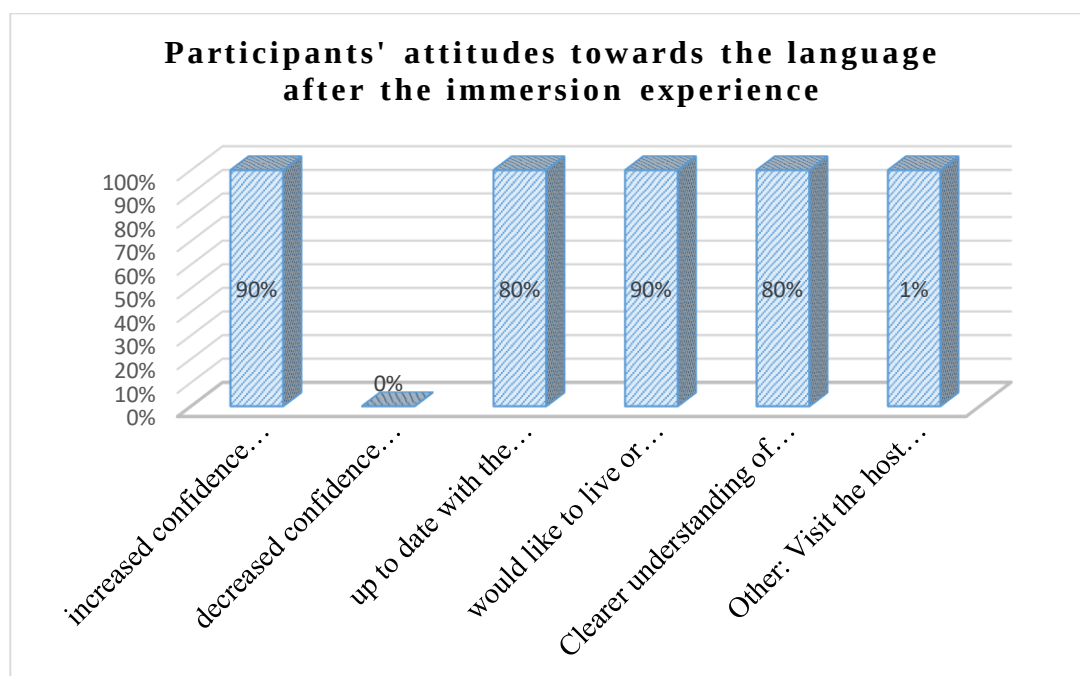


Fig. 9. Participants' attitudes towards the language after the immersion experience.

Legend:

Increased confidence... - increased confidence when using the language

Decreased confidence... - decreased confidence when using the language

Up to date with the... - up to date with the language (through movies, tv shows, books, etc.)

Would like to live or... - would like to live or work in the host country

Clearer understanding of the... - clearer understanding of the language

Other- visit the host country, but not work or live there

Fig 9 represents the percentage of participants that have specific attitudes towards the language of the host country today. 90% of them have increased confidence when it comes to using the language, 80% keep themselves up to date with the language, 90% of the participants have expressed wanting to live or work in the host country, 80% have a clearer understanding of the language and 10% would simply like to visit the host country.

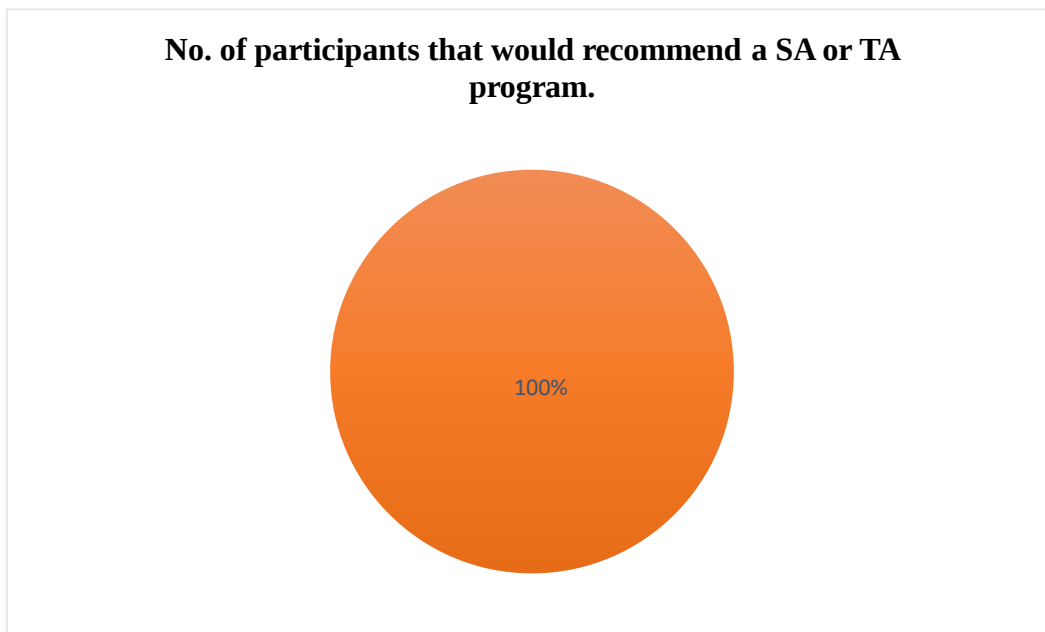


Fig. 10. No. of participants that would recommend a SA or TA program abroad.

The pie chart clearly shows that all the participants (100%) recommend that foreign language students take part in a SA or TA program abroad.

Part 2: Interview section

As previously mentioned, this section aims to showcase the personal experiences of participants in a SA and TA program abroad. The experiences however, will be specific to challenges faced and benefits gained with respect to the linguistic, cultural and social aspects which make up an experience abroad.

Interviewee #1:

This interviewee is currently a third year undergraduate Spanish and French UWI student. She was a participant in a *Student Assistant Program* at the Universidad de Pedagógica Nacional (UPN) in Bogotá, Colombia, for one academic year. She attested to linguistic challenges initially due to her lack of confidence which prevented her from communicating in Spanish. However, over the course of her stay, she overcame this challenge and therefore experienced linguistic benefits such as improvement in her listening skills and increased confidence to communicate in the target language (TL). With respect to the cultural challenges and benefits, she responded “I was not really caught off guard, [...] but I still wasn’t fully prepared.” Her open personality, however, allowed her to easily adapt, “[...] I’m quite accepting when it comes to new cultures [...].” Finally, with regards to socialization, the social network that was easiest for her to establish was one with native speakers because she “met a lot of people that were around [her] age, so it was very easy in that aspect to interact [...].” Additionally, she also credited the Colombian culture for the ease with which she formed relationships with the native speakers, due to “popular [events] [like] language exchanges at clubs or at bars [...].” With respect to the other two social networks, she maintained minimal communication with her Trinidadian colleague at the same university and also with her friends and family at home.

Interviewee #2:

This interviewee is a graduate of the UWI St. Augustine, with a major in Spanish. She participated in the Erasmus + program, which allowed her to study at the Universidad de Valladolid, Spain for one semester during her third year. This SA participant also encountered linguistic challenges which were due to her feeling of not having "...a proper grasp or enough vocab." The benefit gained however, was that she noticed the improvement made over the course of five months, when she returned to the UWI, being in a classroom setting. With respect to her cultural experience, she felt as though she didn't fully adapt to the Spanish culture because she believes that "a lot of Spanish culture is deeply rooted in religion: the majority is Catholic, so I never adapted to that", but she admitted to experiencing more of the social culture such as "going out for tapas and walks in the park [...]." The socialization aspect revealed the difficulty she experienced in creating social networks with the native speakers "because they were [...] unwilling to be friends". However, she had a strong relationship with the Trinidadian students she lived with and her contact with friends and family at home was frequent, "like 3-4 times a week [...] if I interacted with them less, I would've been sad, so interaction with them helped with home-sickness [...]."

Interviewee #3:

This interviewee is currently an undergraduate student in his third year at the UWI, St. Augustine, pursuing a major in French and a minor in Spanish. He participated in the Teaching Assistant Program in France (TAPIF), which lasted one academic year. This participant's linguistic challenges started off the same as the first two interviewees to the extent where he was

hesitant to speak French at first. His reason given was “I’ve always wanted my language to be perfect so if I didn’t know that whatever I wanted to say was grammatically correct, I didn’t say it.” However, that changed as he experienced an overall improvement in his linguistic skills approximately after four months “I got a bit less self-conscious... my listening improved, my fluency improved, my expressions, vocabulary and all those things improved, my accent improved as well”. From the cultural perspective, this TA participant’s adaptation to the French culture was no problem at all, given his open personality “I don’t really fuss that much about certain things... I really just accepted things [...]”. All in all, he had an enjoyable cultural experience despite the fact that he did not enjoy an important component of the French culture, its cuisine. Regarding the social networks that this interviewee established while abroad, he admitted that the easiest to form was that with native speakers. Due to the improvement in his linguistic competencies, he was able to easily integrate himself into the social milieu as he believes that “French people [...] find it easier to accept people who actually speak their language well”. Communication with his family and friends at home was almost non-existent and equally so with the other Trinidadian TAs in France, the latter due to not being in the same region.

Interviewee #4

Interviewee #4 is a graduate from the UWI, St. Augustine with a double major in French and Spanish. She participated in a study abroad program at the Université Michel de Montaigne (Bordeaux III), France for one academic year. Once again this participant encountered linguistic challenges, due to the fact that “the accent varies around France, they speak fast and they don’t really slow down for you to understand.” However, she added that being immersed in the language

eventually made this challenge easier to overcome. From the cultural standpoint, she dealt with the people's disposition and found that "[In] [Bordeaux] people were cold [...]." Through her perception of the unwelcoming personalities of the people in Bordeaux, it was difficult for her to establish the social network with native speakers and she compared the native speakers with international students whom she found to be more open and warm, saying that "...it was hard, I [had] no French friends [...] but native speakers [weren't] as willing to meet new people or learn about new cultures compared to other foreign students [...]." There were no other students from Trinidad also participating in this SA program, nevertheless, she kept constant contact with friends and family in Trinidad, "I cling to my Trinidadian friends and I contact them every day [...]."

Therefore, according to the statements given by the interviewees, as well as the responses of participants in the questionnaire, their linguistic experiences were all more or less similar as they found difficulty in communicating in the target language. With respect to the cultural and social aspects, some assimilated into the culture of the host country relatively easily, while others had difficulty. Finally, not many were able to form social networks with natives due to their unwilling attitudes, while a couple participants became acquainted easily with natives due to their open personality. Overall, despite the challenges faced, all the participants of this study stated that they would recommend the program done to a foreign language student.

CHAPTER THREE – Discussion

The previous chapter presented the findings that came out of the research conducted through questionnaires as well as interviews. To further comprehend the experiences of UWI, St. Augustine foreign language students and past students abroad, the data collected will be analyzed by comparing it with international studies already carried out on similar topics. Therefore, this chapter aims at shedding light on the reasons that foreign language students participate in immersion programs abroad, the challenges faced while abroad, the benefits gained and their attitude toward their second language after the time spent abroad.

Students' motives for participating in a foreign language immersion program abroad.

In Badstübner and Ecke's 2009 study, one of the main aspects focused on is students' motives for pursuing a study abroad program in Germany. The context of their study dealt with a one-month summer-study program in Leipzig, Germany, which was offered by the University of Arizona. They conducted investigations on the reasons why these American university students wanted to participate in the immersion program abroad and found nine goals and motives for doing so. They were listed in order of importance (most important first), which included "to study German", "to travel", followed by "to socialize with Germans", "cultural enrichment", "to get six course credits", "to make new friends" while "to party" and "to live away from home" were ranked as having very little importance and "to conduct a research project" was the least important. (44). Unlike the results of Badstübner and Ecke's study, the findings gained when the UWI undergraduate students and graduates were asked their reasons for going abroad (both TA and SA context) placed "cultural experience" first, followed by "to improvement language proficiency, "to

gain work experience” (TA context) in third position, “to live away from Trinidad” coming in second to last as also seen in the referenced study and “leisure”, which includes travel and socialization, ranked last. A comparison of the motives in the two studies, reveal that the cultural and linguistic motives are within the first three positions on each list. This suggests that they must be given high priority in any foreign language immersion program.

Challenges faced by participants while abroad.

As previously seen, literature shows the challenges faced by individuals specifically in the contexts of study abroad (SA) and teaching assistant (TA) programs. Furthermore, these challenges were discussed with regards to language, culture and socialization. The results of this study revealed that the main challenges that the participants encountered during their time abroad were fear of communicating in the target language faced by 70% of the participants, reluctance to communicate in the target language - 60%, social difficulty, such as difficulty in making friends with natives - 40% and the least encountered challenge amongst the group was that of difficulty in adapting to the culture of the host country, faced by 10% of the participants. While these results represented individuals who took part in SA and TA programs, the interviews focus more specifically on the challenges faced by individuals in each context, which can be compared to research already done.

Linguistic challenge

Participants who studied abroad generally complained that they were afraid or hesitant to communicate in the target language and with natives due to lack of confidence in their linguistic ability, as well as the speed of the interlocutors, for example, “the accent varies around France,

they speak fast and they don't really slow down for you to understand." This finding coincides with the research carried out by Vanderveen, in that perhaps the students had issues with their language competency. In other words, they were not at the linguistic level where communication could occur naturally through the use of colloquial language and certain expressions. Additionally, her case study of the Canadian students (English-speaking) in Montreal reflects the experience of the latter, where the native speakers speak too quickly.

The participants of the teaching assistant programs who were interviewed revealed to have a similar challenge with respect to language, where they were either reluctant or felt insecure when it came to communication in the language. This however, doesn't fit into the TA context for linguistic challenges that Ashavskaya presents, but rather that of Vanderveen. According to the interviews, one participant admitted that linguistic challenges were experienced by both student and TA in the classroom, but with regard to the target language, she said "depending on the topic it would be difficult for us to explain it in Spanish". Moreover, she added that given the basic level of English that a certain group of students had, it would have been difficult for them to understand most things taught in English. This finding doesn't coincide with Ashavskaya's case study since the difficulty in communication on both ends wasn't the issue, but that the ITA couldn't understand the students because of the rapidness of their speech, use of vocabulary and "short sentences". This comparison indicates that in a classroom setting, linguistic difficulty can be experienced simultaneously by both TA and student, as well as, it can only occur with the TA.

Cultural challenge

While only 10% of all the participants surveyed agreed that adapting to the culture of the host country posed a challenge, some interviewees reinforced this to a certain extent. One stated that she only adapted to the social aspect of the culture because she couldn't identify with the religious aspect in which, she claims, the host country is deeply rooted. Another SA interviewee simply stated that it was difficult to adapt because the natives were not welcoming. This difficulty in assimilating oneself into the culture concurs with the research of Milian et al to the extent that two common cultural challenges that SA participants face are difficulty in cultural adaptation as well as culture shock. None of the individuals interviewed referenced any experience of culture shock, but difficulty in cultural adaptation was not only encountered by SA participants. Milian et al also talks about having to adapt to the cuisine of the host country, which one of the TA participants revealed was an issue for him, expressing that the food was just not very appealing to him. As for cultural challenges that may have arose in the classroom, no participant reported experiencing discrimination by students as seen in the case study of ITAs in the US carried out by Ashavskaya.

It is important to note however, that despite the difficulty in adapting to the cuisine of the host country, this TA participant as well as the other who was interviewed, found themselves adapting quite easily to the culture because of their open personalities, a point that was not mentioned neither in Milian et al's study nor in Ashavskaya's, but can be supported by a research study carried out by Li et al in which they describe these sort of individuals as *neophiles*. (76). Janda states that this refers to their appreciative and desirous attitude to have fresh, new experiences. (qtd. in Li et al 76).

Social challenge

Out of the four common social challenges that Milian et al mentioned in their study: limited social support, sentiments of solitude because of the absence of family and friends (2) and social and emotional obstacles such as homesickness and difficulty in forming social networks, the most significant that came out of the present study was difficulty in forming social networks. However, this was a challenge faced by less than half of the participants surveyed (40%). Furthermore, the two SA participants interviewed expressed that this was definitely a social challenge for them mainly due to the attitude of the natives, described as an unwillingness on their (the natives) part to become acquainted with them. However, Badstübner and Ecke discuss Herron's 2003 study that investigated the goals and motives that American students had for participating in a study abroad program in France. (43).

One of the goals was to "get to know the French". (Badstübner and Ecke 43). Allen and Herron, however, discovered that the students did not make a great effort to achieve this goal as they rarely interacted with the French natives outside of the classroom. (Badstübner and Ecke 43). While the SA interviewees of this study also didn't report making an effort to socialize with the natives in their host country, the TA participants shared a different experience. Due to their open personalities, establishing social networks did not pose a challenge for them and for one of them, he stated that his goal was to see a great improvement in this language proficiency and that he knew the only way to achieve this was through frequent interaction with natives, thereby making a great effort.

Moreover, Ashavskaya, states in her study that some ITAs spent more time strengthening the social network with friends and family at home via virtual communication and as a result,

missed out on socializing with natives. This was not a similar finding with the participants of TA programs in this study, as they claimed to maintain very little contact with family at home, but was similar especially with a SA program participant who stated that interaction with her family at home was crucial in making her experience abroad an enjoyable one.

Benefits derived from participants' experiences abroad.

In this study, the most common benefits derived from SA and TA participants' stay abroad present themselves under the following themes: language, culture, socialization and personal development. Each benefit gained that falls into the common themes found in the research done, will be discussed.

Linguistic benefit

According to Freed, So and Lazar's 2003 case study that focused on a comparison between the improvement in linguistic competency of foreign language students who spent a semester abroad and of those who stayed in their country of origin, the SA students reported that there was a notable improvement in their linguistic competencies. (Pinar 84). The findings of this study coincides with that of Freed, So and Lazar's, as 60% of the participants attested to noticing a remarkable improvement in the way they communicate in the target language (TL), ranging from their fluency to an increased willingness to communicate with natives. The interviewees made up part of this 60% and have said that they noticed a lot of improvement in their language skills. As seen, previously, CFE Research and LSE Enterprise's report for the British Council, owes this improvement in language ability to simply being immersed in the culture, and it is not unique to TA participants, but SA participants as well, as seen in this study. Therefore, the linguistic benefits gained from being abroad definitely line up with what research has shown.

Cultural benefit

As defined previously, intercultural sensitivity refers to an individual's ability to develop positive emotions towards a foreign culture as well as to develop appreciation for it thereby encouraging appropriate and effective intercultural communication. Engle and Engle's study discusses the cultural outcome of a group of foreign language immersed students abroad, stating that they developed increased intercultural sensitivity. (Pinar 88). Similarly, that was the case for 80% of the participants in this study. These findings also coincide with the common cultural benefit that the CFE Research, and LSE Enterprise's report notices as well, which is increased cultural awareness. The outcome of this study shows that participants appreciate, not only the culture of the host country more, but also that of their home country. Engle and Engle, along with other researchers, Medina-López-Portillo, and Berg also point out that length of time immersed in the culture plays a significant role in ease of adaptation, and all that goes along with it. They claim based on results obtained from case studies, that the longer time spent abroad means greater development with regards to intercultural sensitivity and cultural adaptation. (Pinar 88). For the most part, the findings gained from this study with respect to length of stay playing a role in gaining cultural benefits, does not oppose the outcomes of their research, but half of the participants believed that the length of their time abroad contributed to their cultural benefits, while the other half did not.

Some participants who spent only five months abroad stated that they adapted easily to the culture and that it was long enough. Therefore, one can say that based on the results this study presents, the length of time immersed in a foreign language culture abroad is significant to an extent, with respect to gaining cultural benefits.

Social benefit

As Segalowitz and Freed state that the length of stay in the host country plays a part in determining the sufficient development of social networks (Pinar 90), the findings from this study show no link between the length of time spent abroad and creating social networks with native speakers. As discussed previously, the factors that allowed for forming or not forming relationships with natives was due to either the reticent attitude of the native speakers (in the case of SA participants) or the personality of the individual (in the case of TA participants). However, the SA participants did admit to establishing relationships with other international students (which seemed easier than with the natives).

As for personal development, participants in the present study have seen themselves become more independent as a result of being abroad, as seen also in Dwyer and Peters' study that SA programs allow the individual to mature at a much faster rate than if they were at home. This is true for both SA and TA participants as seen in this study, although it was only mentioned by 20% of the participants. Furthermore, work experience is a huge benefit that TA participants gain as mentioned by both the British Council as well as Roberts and broadens horizons with regards to career options for both TA and SA participants.

Participants' attitudes towards the foreign language after the immersion experience.

Jordana F. Garbati and Nathalie Rothschild's qualitative research on the lasting impact of study abroad experiences reveal a variety of positive and negative changes that individuals experienced as a result of their time abroad. They discuss these changes with regards to several aspects such as language, culture, identity formation and the role of academics. This section of the current study aims to examine the attitudes that participants have towards the language of the host

country, after their immersion experience abroad. According to the findings of this study, nine out of the ten participants mentioned that they feel more confident when using the language. This result concurs with the linguistic impact found in Garbati and Rothschild's study where, due to the participant's confidence in the language, she pursued a career in teaching French, (56), which leads to another impact that the experience had on the Caribbean participants.

While nine out of ten participants in the study agreed that they would like to live or work in their host country, this was not found in the research being compared. Rather, like the SA participant in Garbati and Rothschild's case study, an interviewee stated that she is currently using her second language at her job, while another expressed that the target language has become easier for him and that he'd like to speak it every day. Furthermore, only one out of the ten participants in this study stated that they would not like to live or work abroad, but simply visit. This is also seen among the two narratives of the international study where, due to the social networks formed, they returned to France (Dijon and Bordeaux), for events such as a wedding and for the other, a vacation with friends.

In conclusion, it is clear that, for the most part, both SA and TA participants have had similar experiences with regards to during and after their foreign language immersion abroad. The few differences that were identified among the participants with regards to certain aspects were primarily linked to the type of personality they had (cultural and social aspect) in addition to the length of time spent abroad (which determined their ability to easily adapt to the culture). Furthermore, the research presented in this discussion served to compare itself with the findings of this study, the two either coinciding or opposing each other. Lastly, the findings of this study should help current as well as future foreign language students to decide whether they want to participate in an immersion program abroad or not.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the foreign language immersion experiences abroad of undergraduate students and graduates of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine in both study abroad and teaching assistant programs. The research focused specifically on the reasons for participating in an immersion program abroad, the challenges faced while abroad, the benefits gained as a result of being abroad as well as the attitudes of the participants towards their second language, post-immersion experience. The findings of the current study revealed that the most popular reasons for these individuals participating in an immersion program abroad was to improve their linguistic competencies in the target language, to experience the culture of the host country and to live away from Trinidad.

With respect to challenges faced during their time abroad, the majority of the participants expressed that communicating in the target language, especially at the beginning of the stay was extremely difficult, primarily due to self-doubt, which always caused them to be unwilling to communicate in the language and finally, difficulty in creating social networks with natives (more common among SA participants). The most common benefits gained among the participants included drastic improvement in linguistic abilities as well as a boost in confidence to communicate in the language and increased intercultural sensitivity and cultural awareness.

Finally, the study also shows that the participants' attitudes towards the target language after having been immersed abroad are increased confidence when using the language, they keep themselves up to date with the language (through movies, television shows, books, etc.) and they expressed interest in living or working in the host country.

Limitations

A variety of studies exist on individuals' immersion experiences abroad, however, these were carried out mainly in North America, Europe and Asia and only one relevant study was conducted in Trinidad and Tobago. However, the main challenge faced was difficulty in gathering sufficient and relevant information on foreign language teaching assistants' immersion experience abroad, as the majority of research focused on study abroad programs. Additionally, there seemed to be little investigation done on the impact that a foreign language immersion experience abroad had on an individual's attitude towards the target language, after their time abroad. Moreover, the sample size which consisted of ten persons may not have been broad enough to capture the opinions of other participants' experiences abroad. In light of this, the experiences of other SA and TA participants may have differed from those in the present study.

Suggestions

To bring more awareness to participants' foreign language immersion experiences abroad, forums should be held where future participants are informed about the details of the programs and their duties. In addition, former participants should also be asked to attend in order to share their experiences. Their shared experiences can include their reasons for taking part in the program, the challenges they faced while abroad, the benefits gained and their post-immersion attitude towards the second language. This has already been in effect at the Alliance Française, Trinidad and Tobago, with respect to the TAPIF.

Furthermore, foreign language instructors at the University should consider creating more contact hours for each aspect of the language to avoid students' insecurity especially when it comes to communicating in the language. Additionally, cultural and language days should be held more

frequently at the Centre for Language Learning (CLL), UWI, St. Augustine. At this forum, native speakers from French-speaking and Spanish-speaking should be given the opportunity to promote their language and culture. On this occasion students can familiarize themselves with what to expect when they go to the country, have more interaction with the native speakers and find ways to easily adapt to culture abroad.

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APPENDIX A

My name is Monique Cooper and I am currently a third year student at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, pursuing a Bachelor's of Arts in French and Spanish. My Caribbean Studies project is entitled 'Foreign Language Immersion: The experience of UWI undergraduate and graduate students abroad.' I would greatly appreciate your participation in this project by answering the questions in this questionnaire. I kindly ask that you try to complete every question and be honest. All information will be kept confidential. Thank you.

Sex:

Female ☐ Male ☐

Age:

20-25 ☐

26-30 ☐

30-35 ☐

1. Present Studies:

Undergraduate ☐ Postgraduate/Graduate ☐

Language(s) studied:

French ☐

Spanish ☐

Both ☐

3. Program participated in:

Study abroad ☐

English teaching assistant ☐

4. Length of time:

One semester ☐

One academic year ☐

More than a year ☐

5. Do you think the length of time spent abroad affected your ability to adapt to the culture?

Yes ☐

No ☐

5.a. Please state why.

.....

6. Why did you participate in the program? (You can select more than one)

I wanted to experience the culture of the language(s) that I study/studied ☐

To improve in the language ☐

To gain work experience abroad ☐

To take a break from work/studies (leisure) ☐

To live away from Trinidad ☐

Other:

7. Have you faced any of the challenges while abroad? (You can select more than one).

Fear of communicating in the target language. Please explain. ☐

Reluctancy to communicate with natives in the target language. Please explain. ☐

Difficulty making friends with natives. Please explain. ☐

Difficulty adapting to the culture of the host country. Please explain. ☐

Other:

7. a. Explain any challenge selected.

.....

8. How has the experience changed your attitude towards the language? (You can select more than one).

I feel more confident when using the language ☐

I feel less confident ☐

I keep myself up to date with the language (through reading, watching television or videos, listening to music, etc.) ☐

Now I want to find a job where I need to use the language ☐

I would like to live/work in the country ☐

My understanding of that language has become a lot clearer ☐

Other:

9. What benefits have you gained from your experience abroad? (social, language, cultural, etc.)

.....

10. Would you recommend the program that you have participated in to someone you know who studies a foreign language?

Yes ☐ No ☐

10. a. Please explain why.

.....

APPENDIX B

My name is Monique Cooper and I am currently a third year student at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, pursuing a Bachelor's of Arts in French and Spanish. My Caribbean Studies project is entitled 'Foreign Language Immersion: The experience of UWI undergraduate and graduate students abroad. Due to the current situation that our country and the world is experiencing, I must conduct the interviews online, not orally, but by kindly asking you, the interviewees, to write your responses. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this project by answering the questions in this interview and I kindly ask that you try to complete every question and be honest. All information will be kept confidential. Thank you.

Interviewee #1

1. *Did you do a study abroad program or an English teaching assistant program? What was the name of the program? Which country did you go to?*

I did an English teaching assistant program in Bogota, Colombia. It is a result of a direct relationship between the University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus, and the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN).

2. *What benefits have you gained, based on the program that you have participated in? (for example, if I participated in the Erasmus program, I can say that my study habits/methods have improved, etc.)*

I believe that I am more outgoing and more open to new experiences, especially with regards to opportunities that would positively impact my academic achievements. For example, now I would be excited for language-based events, whereas before I would be shy and reserved.

3. *Can you please elaborate on your experience during your time abroad, with regard to specific aspects such as language, culture and socialization?*

Language: With regards to language, I definitely had both positive and negative, um, but when I first arrived to Colombia, I was very shy and I didn't have that much confidence when speaking to people especially because I felt very insecure and I felt as though I would make a lot of mistakes, but as the experience went along, I became more confident, I realized that I knew what I was saying and that I should have more confidence and that I didn't need to be so insecure, another positive was that I think my listening skills definitely improved, even though Bogota, which is the city that I was staying in, even though their accent is very standard and very understandable, I would of course encounter people from different cities and I would have to speak to them in Spanish and sometimes it would be difficult, but I was able to improve with that. The negative side I would say is that even though my conversation and listening improved quite dramatically, I think that my writing and a little bit of grammar was affected negatively, in that, for example, I'd write what I'd say so I'd write how it sounds rather than what I need to write, so for example, maybe I would like skip out accents, like silly mistakes like that I would say, um but I would say it was generally more positive than negative.

Culture: At first, I was not really caught off guard, like obviously I had heard about the cultural differences, and what to expect in Colombia but I still wasn't fully prepared, so for example, people in Colombia are very very friendly when you first meet, they're very touchy, like they hug, they kiss, they're like... friends will like hold hands when you're walking in the streets or whatnot and I was definitely like taken a back a little bit, not in a negative way but like, oh yeah, I should remember this, but aside from that, I think my cultural experience was extremely positive, I think what helped

with that as well, is I'm a very open person and I'm quite accepting when it comes to new cultures and whatnot.

Socialization:

Student and native speakers: As I mentioned before, I'm a very open person so even though I was shy at first, I quickly was able to integrate with people, so I think what helped was that I had relatives who were already in Colombia, like a distant aunt and uncle who kinda helped me out to get a place and they also kind of helped me interact with some people that were already in their sphere and then when I went to the university, because I was a teaching assistant at university, I met a lot of people that were around my age, so it was very easy in that aspect to interact with people. Colombia has as very heavy, I don't wanna say liming culture, but that's what it is so going out culture, I would say, so there were a lot of bars around, a lot of clubs, a lot of places to meet new people, a popular event would be language exchanges at clubs or at bars and I was invited to a good few of those, especially since most of them were run by the same organizers so I would be invited to those and it was very,very,very easy to make friends there, not just people from Colombia but make different connections with people outside of Colombia, so people from the States, from the UK, from like Asian countries, a lot of different places that I usually would not expect to meet people.

Students and others of the same nationality: very little communication, although she worked at the same University with another Trinidadian assistant.

Virtual communication with family and friends in country of origin: I didn't find it particularly difficult, I mean I would call my family like once or twice for the week if so much, we would interact obviously on social media and through messaging aside from that, same for my friends,

we would talk over social media, through messaging and we didn't call each other that much just because we don't really do that.

It was easier for me to network with people around my age, for obvious reasons, they would be more inclined to use social media, whereas I think the older generation, they kind of don't use that, for example, I made a lot of friends at the university I worked at and we remained in contact, for example my landlady or my neighbours who are much ageable, we kinda fell out of contact.

4. *In what ways does your experience abroad influence how you approach the language of the country you went to today? Do you use it every day? Do you understand it better? Have you seen an improvement in your language skills?*

My main improvement has been in speaking and listening. I am better able to understand the language, and I have gained a lot of vocabulary and phrases that have helped me in both these aspects. Also, I gained more confidence during my trip, allowing me to become more fluent and willing to speak.

5. *Do you view Trinidad and Tobago differently having been abroad? Do you appreciate it more, less or are you indifferent?*

I think I appreciate Trinidad more after being abroad. I noticed that I was very immersed in the culture of my country of exchange, and that I had never viewed the culture of Trinidad and Tobago in the same way. Coming back, I made an effort to learn more about the arts and culture of this country, and therefore I have a better appreciation for it now.

6. *Would you encourage language students to participate in an overseas immersion program?*

Why/why not?

I would. I think that the impact goes further than academic improvements. Yes, I definitely saw an improvement in my Spanish, and I can see the impact even today in my classes. Additionally, I think that going to a foreign country for an extended period of time allows one to be more culturally open-minded, and exposed to new experiences that you wouldn't be able to find elsewhere.

Interviewee #2

1. *Did you do a study abroad program or an English teaching assistant program? What was the name of the program? Which country did you go to?*

I did a study abroad program in Spain for one semester. It was part of the ERASMUS program which had just been made available to students outside of the EU.

2. *What benefits have you gained, based on the program that you have participated in? (for example, if I participated in the Erasmus program, I can say that my study habits/methods have improved, etc)*

Studying in Spain has opened my eyes to new methods of teaching and learning, and I learnt a lot about the areas of the Spanish language that I'm passionate about (eg translation and the history of the language). My methods of study have not changed but I did become more confident in my language proficiency.

3. *Can you please elaborate on your experience during your time abroad, with regard to specific aspects such as language, culture and socialization?*

Language: scared of messing up in front of natives, felt like I didn't have a proper grasp, enough vocab, but that changed over the course of 5 months- it was a gradual process and noticed the improvement when came back to UWI in the classroom setting.

Culture: Felt as though didn't experience much of the culture due to religion. A lot of Spanish culture is deeply rooted in religion: the majority is Catholic, so never adapted to that. Social culture, yes, through going out for tapas and walks in the park; things that we don't really do in Trinidad. Appreciate Trinidadian culture more because of its diversity, for example, there was a small indian population in Spain that didn't really have a voice. In Trinidad, almost every religion celebrates other religious festivals, Catholics might participate in Divali, Hindus, in Christmas, etc.

Socialization:

Student and natives: International friends were easy to make, local, no, zero local friends made because they were unwelcoming/unwilling to be friends. Made friends with a native Spanish speaker, but relationship wasn't difficult to form, he was also an International student from Colombia and bi-lingual (he spoke fluent English), so spoke mostly English with him.

Students and others of same nationality: Yes, because of living in the same apartment with two of them.

Virtual communication with family and friends in country of origin: Would keep in contact with friends and family in Trinidad like 3-4 times a week (semi-often). I interacted with them less, would've been sad, interaction with them helped with home-sickness and was able to enjoy time abroad.

4. *In what ways does your experience abroad influence how you approach the language of the country you went to today? Do you use it every day? Do you understand it better? Have you seen an improvement in your language skills?*

I have definitely seen an improvement in my language skills because I had to lose my fear of speaking to natives. Once I started to feel more comfortable speaking the language, I began to understand the grammar and syntax more and my proficiency was improved. I fortunately found a job where I utilize my language skills every day and as a result I understand the finer points of the Spanish language (colloquialisms, different accents etc.).

5. *Do you view Trinidad and Tobago differently having been abroad? Do you appreciate it more, less or are you indifferent?*

After returning home I had mixed feelings about T&T because I had gotten so used to the European lifestyle. I was simultaneously happy to be back because I missed my family but also somewhat claustrophobic because Trinidad has a lot less to offer than Spain in terms of travel opportunities. I am now quite acclimatized to being back home and am indifferent to the differences between my home country and host country.

6. *Would you encourage language students to participate in an overseas immersion program? Why/why not?*

Of course! I would always encourage others to step out of their comfort zone if they have the opportunity to study abroad, especially if the person studies a language and has the chance to immerse themselves in it. The benefits of participating in such a program are never-ending: increased self-sufficiency and self-reliance, improved language proficiency, broadened

perspectives and changed world views, and overall personal growth. It's also an incredible addition to a resumé!

Interviewee#3

1. *Did you do a study abroad program or an English teaching assistant program? What was the name of the program? Which country did you go to?*

English assistant. France. I'm not sure of the official name.

2. *What benefits have you gained, based on the program that you have participated in? (for example, if I participated in the Erasmus program, I can say that my study habits/methods have improved, etc)*

My French has improved. I feel as though I am French and not just a French student anymore. Also, I became a bit less self-conscious while I was in France.

3. *Can you please elaborate on your experience during your time abroad, with regard to specific aspects such as language, culture and socialization?*

Language: My language obviously got better. I've always wanted my language to be perfect so if I didn't know exactly what I wanted to say and if I didn't know that whatever I wanted to say was grammatically correct, I didn't say it, but then I realized that that was hindering my improvement, my progress in the language so after like 4 months, which is a long time, I was able to be less self-conscious and I spoke about this in the interview, I got a bit less self-conscious so I was able to just speak without planning exactly what I wanted to say then afterwards I realized that, ok, I'm

making a lot of progress by just speaking. My listening improved, my fluency improved, my expressions, vocabulary and all those things improved, my accent improved as well because I was just speaking, the listening improved because I was listening...a lot, can't really talk about writing. Grammar, in my mind, I'm always thinking about grammar so yeah!

Culture: I think, to be very honest, I kinda never...like a lot of people would cry and feel homesick, but I actually never experienced that, I find it was very easy to...I didn't feel alienated in any way so, I was very open to the culture except their food, I don't like their food, which is a huge part of culture, that was the only thing I reject their food so badly, because it's just not good, but um...other than that I think it was pretty simple why...because I felt like the teachers were the main people with whom I spoke...interacted. They tried, probably not really...not like they rel, rel, rel, tried to make me feel welcomed...but they tried. I think the reason why also is because of my personality, like I don't really...um, I don't really fuss that much about certain things, like if it's not really affecting me then I wouldn't really make a big deal about it so like, I really just accepted things...their culture or whatever and really, thinking about their culture, is like is not like anything far-fetched, I mean yeah they should bathe a little more often, but honestly like they bathing and me bathing...one doesn't depend on the other so that didn't really affect me, it's just food really and I mean I didn't eat in the canteen every single day, on vacation or for breakfast or dinner, it was my stuff that I had to make so it really wasn't that difficult to just exist there.

Socialization:

Student and native speakers: This is something that I'm pretty 100% sure, I think French people are...they find it easier to accept people who actually speak their language well and I mean, I'm not trying to toot my horn, but I do speak their language well so I think they...as opposed to like other assistants, like Americans or even British people who don't really speak the language that

well, they'll like find it harder to socialize with them, well obviously cause there's that language barrier, but they wouldn't like go the extra mile to try to socialize with them or explain things, and they didn't have to go that extra mile with me because I would understand most of what they said sooo, I think that yeah, it was easy for my with the native speakers.

Students and others of the same nationality: Well, there wasn't any other Trinidadian in Lille so I cannot answer this question...it was just me, you (Monique), I used to speak to Vernelle and well I used to message Irijah but he used to respond in a not so timely manner, so I didn't really have anybody in my provence.

Virtual communication with family and friends in country of origin: No, I did not speak with my family and friends in Trinidad very often reason being, I never really do anyway, only like when I posted something that they liked, they will message me and be like "OOOO Riyadh, I like that or whatever" or occasionally when my parents wanted to check in on me, that's when I would speak to them, but other than that...not really, why? Because I don't really speak to them that often anyway so it wasn't any different when I went abroad, um probably with my father a little bit cause he has some abandonment issues so when I was not there he wanted to have more interaction, but like yeah, I didn't really want to so...

His easiest network to form: To me, what I wanted to do over there was really improve my French, that's the main reason I went there so I really, really wanted....like my whole...during the whole stay that is what I wanted to do so I kinda...like that was my main goal each day, to speak French with the natives, full stop, I didn't want to speak with, well I didn't have Trinidadians in my region, so I couldn't speak to any Trinidadian there and yeah, so, I mean, the people in my lycée, they were easy to speak to so I was able to speak to the natives, which is what I wanted to do very often,

and it was easy for me, like they used to invite me out and stuff so yeah, the answer is the native because my goal was to improve my French and how do you do that? By speaking with the natives.

4. *In what ways does your experience abroad influence how you approach the language of the country you went to today? Do you use it every day? Do you understand it better? Have you seen an improvement in your language skills?*

French is much easier to me. I don't feel as though I have to pay as much attention as I used to in order to understand when people speak. I have a desire to speak French everyday but I don't have the people to speak with.

5. *Do you view Trinidad and Tobago differently having been abroad? Do you appreciate it more, less or are you indifferent?*

I appreciate our food more, as well as our warm weather. Certain things such as transport, safety I feel can be improved in Trinidad.

6. *Would you encourage language students to participate in an overseas immersion program? Why/why not?*

Yes! I think that it's one of the most natural and rapid ways to effectively learn the target language. You end up speaking and using the language as a native would.

Interviewee#4

***This interviewee participated in both an SA and a TA program, but only her responses for the SA were used in findings.**

1. *Did you do a study abroad program or an English teaching assistant program? What was the name of the program? Which country did you go to?*

Response: Yes – Both

Study Broad – Year 2 – Bordeaux

Teaching Assistant – After graduation - Nice

2. *What benefits have you gained, based on the program that you have participated in? (for example, if I participated in the Erasmus program, I can say that my study habits/methods have improved, etc)*

Erasmus: personally I became more independent, I saw myself overcome difficult situations and grow from them. My studies improved because I was surrounded by the French language, so this became easier for me in every aspect (listening, conversation, writing) when I returned for final year.

Teaching à I have more time and resources to travel, so I can experience new countries and cultures which have had a huge impact on my outlook of life. I love living in Nice and I am focusing on possibly staying here, finding a permanent job. My French is almost fluent, I have new friends, and I'm learning the culture.

3. *Can you please elaborate on your experience during your time abroad, with regard to specific aspects such as language, culture and socialization?*

Language: Study: It was different at first because the accent varies around France, they speak fast and they don't really slow down for you to understand. Eventually it got easier as you're immersed in it.

Teaching (Nice): Same experience but got [better] as I made french friends etc. The people here are warmer and don't mind repeating or explaining.

Culture: Bordeaux: people were cold and it was hard to make friends

Nice: French people are just literally cliquish and don't really explore outside of their circle so even here it was different at first but as a teacher I met other assistants so eventually I made friends. Here people are more laid back and warmer overall.

I like that Trinidadians are more open, for example, in our program we see many foreign students and we are very open and want them to feel included and experience the culture more, so I like that.

But like anywhere, each country has its stereotypes about other cultures so even now in Trinidad we aren't the warmest towards Spanish people, just as in France, they're racist towards arabs.

Socialization:

Student and native speakers (Hardest network to form): Well obviously it was hard, I have no french friends so yeah, but native speakers aren't as willing to meet new people or learn about new cultures compared to other foreign students for example.

Students and other people of same origin: Another Trinidadian [doing TAPIF] is here and we interact every day.

Virtual communication with friends and family in country of origin: I cling to my Trinidadian friends and I contact them every day and night and morning.

4. *In what ways does your experience abroad influence how you approach the language of the country you went to today? Do you use it every day? Do you understand it better? Have you seen an improvement in your language skills?*

BORDEAUX: My French has improved drastically. In Trinidad I would use French almost every day while studying. All my competencies have improved (listening, writing, reading, speaking), which ultimately gave me an edge above my peers.

NICE: I use French every day. I am almost fluent and can easily converse with people. I can understand when they speak, and I read a lot more now.

5. *Do you view Trinidad and Tobago differently having been abroad? Do you appreciate it more, less or are you indifferent?*

Yes, after my exchange I always dreamt of going back. I really enjoyed my year abroad with all the cities and family I visited, friends I made. I definitely told myself I would want to go back. I realised that I can see a future outside of Trinidad.

Assistantship: I have turned those dreams into a reality, and taken the opportunity to work in France. I have applied for other permanent jobs, and hope to stay here and build a future.

6. *Would you encourage language students to participate in an overseas immersion program? Why/why not?*

Mentally, it tests you a lot, but you overcome it and learn how strong you are.

You become independent and self-reliant.

You gain work experience (assistantship), which opens many doors in the sector of education.

You make new friends (my best friend is someone I met from Canada two years ago in Bordeaux).

You visit new places and learn to appreciate the beauty of the world.

You are immersed in the language and undoubtedly you will master it with time.

You can create your future abroad by seizing the opportunities given to you, especially gaining job experience.