

# 2 Telecollaboration and student mobility for language learning

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## Abstract

This paper reviews major findings from qualitative and quantitative research on language learning in student mobility in order to consider how telecollaboration might contribute to the success of student sojourns abroad. Evidence is available to demonstrate the effectiveness of student mobility in every domain of language development. As may be expected, an in-country stay is shown to be particularly beneficial for the social-interactive and pragmatic dimensions of language least amenable to classroom instruction. However, throughout the literature a common finding is of notable individual differences in learning outcomes. To understand why only some, but not all students appear to develop language competence abroad, qualitative research has examined the nature of the experience from a variety of perspectives. This research has shown that students encounter challenges in establishing local social networks and often retain strong ties to home. They also position themselves within newly salient national identities, or are positioned by interlocutors as foreigners with questionable rights to appreciate and to learn local sociolinguistic norms. It has become clear that many learners approach their task with little awareness of diverse language varieties and registers within their host communities. Prior socialization in classrooms can also limit the range of their participation in informal conversations and thus, their development of interactive capacities. Whether implemented as preparation for physical mobility or as

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concurrent support for language learners abroad, telecollaboration holds the potential to address these issues. In telecollaborative pedagogies, students can create social connections with their peers, see themselves through the eyes of others, be exposed to specific attitudes and discourses about foreigner identities, experience and analyze spoken or informal forms, and expand their discourse options beyond the strictly pedagogical.

**Keywords: study abroad, student mobility.**

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## 1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how a rationale for telecollaborative pedagogies emerges seamlessly from the literature on language learning in student mobility. Both lay and professional folklore suggest that in-country sojourns involve effortless and “easy learning” (DeKeyser, 2010, p. 89). Moreover, the structure of many language programs suggests that a sojourn abroad is believed to complete the process of language learning such that curricula need no longer address related issues. The findings of research, however, robustly demonstrate that the benefits of student mobility are unevenly distributed among participants, and sometimes quite modest. Moreover, and predictably, it has become clear that a sojourn abroad is most useful for the development of abilities related to social interaction and pragmatics, precisely those capacities least amenable to classroom instruction. Research into the qualities of study abroad experiences has begun to explore the sources of these findings.

## 2. Understanding language learning and student mobility

Why do some study abroad participants register impressive gains in proficiency scores or documented social-interactive capacities whereas others do not?

Qualitative or hybrid studies have revealed a number of significant challenges that students may encounter during their in-country sojourns. One way to approach this question is by exploring the extent of students' integration into their host communities. The LANG-SNAP project (McManus, Mitchell, & Tracy-Ventura, 2014) followed 56 French or Spanish majors enrolled at a British university through their compulsory year abroad in France, Spain, or Mexico, combining measurements of various aspects of language development with language engagement and social network questionnaires. All of these students were highly motivated to enhance their language ability, expressing strong desires to develop local affiliations. Yet, only a substantial minority met these goals. A subsequent study of high gainers (Mitchell & Tracy-Ventura, 2016) revealed that the contemporary language-related sojourn abroad requires resilience and strategic action: the most successful learners were those who found ways to contribute to their host communities, to barter English for French or Spanish practice, or to develop emotional ties to at least one person, whether a peer, a colleague, or a host parent.

Globalization has exerted a profound influence on the nature of study abroad experiences. Today, study abroad is “a multilingual and intercultural experience involving virtual as well as face-to-face relationships, and the maintenance of long-term social relations alongside those created during the sojourn itself” (McManus et al., 2014, p. 112). On the one hand, students who are overwhelmed by the emotional stress of living abroad may retreat from local involvement almost completely. This was the case, for example, of Deirdre (Kinging, 2008), an American student in France who devoted all of her free time to online interactions with family and friends at home. On the other, the relative ease of travel enables international “helicopter parenting” or the interpretation of a child's departure as a motivation for tourism by the rest of the family. Another participant in the Kinginger (2008) study, Delaney, was assigned this pseudonym (‘daughter of the challenger’) because her father visited her in France from the United States three times during her one-semester sojourn to address her complaints about lodging and other aspects of the program. Liza (also from Kinginger, 2008) was accompanied to Strasbourg by her mother, then received visits from her father, sister, and boyfriend, leaving her very little time to learn French.

Another theme emerging from qualitative studies is the potential for students to retreat into discourses of national superiority when encountering new cultural norms. Primed by the resurgence of French-bashing by the American media at the time, Beatrice (Kinginger, 2008) interpreted her Parisian host family's questions about her views on the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as hostility toward her country, and became estranged from her only willing interlocutors. In the early stages of their sojourn in Australia, the French students portrayed by Patron (2007) were appalled by Australian students' informal dress and manners in class, confused by Australian professors' casual demeanor, and shocked by the prevalence of 'bring your own bottle' festivities involving excessive drinking. Gao (2011) documented the arguments erupting in English classes in Britain when students from mainland China encountered peers from Japan, Taiwan, or Korea who contested their version of Chinese history. Ada, a student from Hong Kong sojourning in Britain (Jackson, 2008), lived with a host family who repeatedly mislabeled her as Japanese, and whose culinary practices, she believed, threatened her health.

In addition to prioritizing their own national identities, students abroad may also be ascribed identities as foreigners with questionable rights or abilities to acquire the local language. Brown (2013) illustrated this process in four case studies involving male sojourners of various national origin in Korea, focusing on these students' mastery of the Korean honorifics system. This system involves choosing between *contaymal*, or 'respect speech', and *panmal*, or 'half-speech', and is strongly associated with the performance of Korean identity. Furthermore, "in every single Korean utterance, the speaker is forced into choices between different honorific verb endings and lexical forms" (Brown, 2013, p. 270). In a discourse completion task, the four advanced learners in the study displayed strong underlying abilities to manipulate honorifics appropriately, for example, in displaying respect to persons older or more senior within organizations. However, in their extracurricular interactions, honorifics were often used in inappropriate ways, either because the students were positioned as outsiders with whom standard politeness need not apply, or because the students themselves believed that the honorifics system "clashed with their identities as Westerners [and] preference for egalitarian language use" (Brown, 2013, p. 295).

The literature also suggests, in various ways, that students abroad could profit from enhanced language awareness. Miller and Ginsburg (1995) scrutinized the folklinguistic theories and conceptual metaphors surrounding language espoused by American learners of Russian. For many, language is analogous to architecture, with words as building blocks and grammar as mortar. Notably, in their reflections on their experiences, the students made no reference to the social interactive abilities, such as pragmatics or interactive competence, best developed in study abroad. Another interesting case comes from a study by Riegelhaupt and Carrasco (2002) investigating the experiences of heritage learners in their ancestral homeland. One of their participants, Lidia, was a second-generation speaker of Mexican Spanish from the Southwestern United States. During her five-week immersion program and homestay in Mexico, she was interpreted by her host family as an inappropriate type of foreigner in comparison with another Euro-American guest. In particular, the host family condemned the non-standard aspects of her Spanish: “the family felt that a ‘Mexican’ person [...] who spoke Spanish in such a manner was not really welcome in their home” (Riegelhaupt & Carrasco, 2002, p. 336). Although it would not have addressed her hosts’ blatant prejudice, some instruction on linguistic concepts such as register or geographic varieties might have assisted Lidia in understanding her predicament. Elsewhere in the literature, in terms of language varieties, we find that the tables are turned when, for example, students travel abroad to learn standard Spanish or Japanese for international communication among the global elite, only to observe with disappointment that their hosts speak Valenciano (Mitchell & Tracy-Ventura, 2016) or Kyoto dialect (Iino, 2006).

Homestay arrangements during study abroad are believed to provide significant access to language learning opportunities. However, several recent microethnographic studies reveal that both the quantity and the quality of these interactions can vary significantly. Pryde (2014) undertook an eleven-month study of intermediate-level Japanese learners of English living with local families in New Zealand, collecting samples of informal conversations at regular intervals throughout the students’ sojourn. His findings revealed a strong tendency for all parties to adhere to classroom-style interaction patterns, particularly the infamous IRE sequence (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) and

the use of display rather than referential questions, as in the excerpt below from Pryde's unpublished data:

HF:                    what are we having for dinner, today?  
Miko:                meat pie  
HF:                    meat pie, yes  
HM:                    ((laughs))  
HF:                    meat pie, not meet the pie  
Miko:                mince pie  
HF:                    good girl, yes, and  
Miko:                carrot  
HF:                    yes  
Miko:                potatoes  
HF:                    and  
Miko:                broccoli  
(two response tokens)  
HF:                    very good

Most alarming among Pryde's findings is the absence of change over time. Throughout the homestay experience, 'conversations' involved topic choice, initiation and control by the hosts, formulaic patterns, and banal topics. Moreover, it became difficult to collect data as the sojourn continued, since students and hosts spent progressively less time together.

Another study by [Kinginger, Wu, Lee, and Tan \(2016\)](#) suggests that host families may be variably capable of providing learning opportunities to student guests of modest proficiency. The study involved three high school students of Mandarin Chinese and their host families in Beijing in a short-term program (three weeks). Data include audio recordings by the students of situations deemed most useful for language learning. For Sam, who arrived with advanced proficiency developed over a period of 11 years, including a school-sponsored immersion program, the sojourn was an unqualified success. Most interesting here, however, is the contrast between the experiences of students without advanced proficiency, David and Henry. Although David was a beginner, his host family, the Zhaos, displayed considerable skill in using everyday artifacts such as food or photo albums, to render their language use predictable, comprehensible, and

thus navigable for David. They also routinely engaged in lighthearted, humorous teasing. Over the quite short period of time he spent with his hosts, David first observed this teasing, then became a target of it, and finally began to participate, as illustrated in the excerpt below. Here the family is examining a photo album containing pictures of David's host sister Zhao Yueman as an infant, as Yueman becomes increasingly annoyed:

- Mrs. Zhao: **zhège shì Yueman**  
this is Yueman
- David: **(LAUGHTER)**
- Mrs. Zhao: **hén xiǎo hén xiǎo**  
very little, very little  
**zhè yàng hǎoxiàng dōu bú dào yí- yí- yí suì**  
(she) looks to be not even one, one, one year old  
**yí suì?**  
one year old?  
**ha?**  
right?  
**zhè shì**  
this is  
**(LAUGHTER) <@ zhèige gèng xiǎo @>**  
this one, even younger
- David: **(LAUGHTER)**
- Mrs. Zhao: **tā xiǎoshíhòu jiù zhè yàng**  
when she was little, she already looked like this  
**suóyǐ tā xiǎochéng zhè yàng**  
so she was this small
- David: **(LAUGHTER)**
- Mr. Zhao: **(LAUGHTER)**
- David: **that's you?** ((referring to Zhao Yueman))
- Mr. Zhao: **(LAUGHTER)**
- Mr. Zhao: **mh**
- Zhao Yueman: **oh (LAUGHTER)**
- David: **méi yóu tōufa**  
no hair
- All: **(LAUGHTER)**
- (Kinginger, et al., 2016, p. 47)

The Liu family, Henry's very well-intentioned, conscientious and generous hosts, by contrast, often seemed to be at a loss as to how to interact with a student with

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proficiency estimated as low intermediate. Henry contributed numerous recordings to the project (365 minutes in 8 interactions), but very few of the speaking turns in the data involved him. When the family did attempt to engage him, it was often difficult for Henry to participate because there were no supporting artifacts, making the topic difficult to identify, and there were few attempts to simplify or otherwise accommodate his learning needs. The excerpt below is typical of these data in that the family and Henry's tutor use repetition only in their attempts to communicate, eventually resorting to a translation into English. The party had been discussing the tendency of Chinese parents to be protective of their children's time, doing everything for them from washing their clothes to squeezing out their toothpaste, and decided to ask Henry if the same is true in his family:

- Tutor:           **nǐ de yīfushéixǐ**  
                    who washes your clothes?
- Mr. Liu:         **nǐ de yīfushéixǐ**  
                    who washes your clothes?
- Tutor:           **nǐ de suǒyǒu de yīfushéixǐ**  
                    who washes all of your clothes?
- Henry:          oh yeah
- Mr. Liu:         **nǐ de yīfushéixǐ**  
                    who washes your clothes?
- Henry:          **oh um**  
                    **like um**
- Liu Boyi:        **wash**
- Henry:          **like um**
- Mrs. Liu:        **who- who wash the clothes for you**
- Henry:          **oh ohwǒ de māma**  
                    oh, oh, my mom
- Tutor:           **(LAUGHTER)**
- Mr. Liu:         **(LAUGHTER)**  
                    <@ yíyàng @>  
                    **same**

(Kinger et al., 2016, pp. 49-50)

Students might profit from opportunities to engage in informal interactions prior to study abroad, and all parties might benefit from better understanding of strategies for rendering language comprehensible through the use of physical artifacts to share information or to accomplish tasks.



### 3. Contributions of telecollaborative approaches

The above-outlined research has demonstrated that study abroad is not a “magical formula” for language learning (DeKeyser, 2010, p. 89). Students abroad can potentially encounter social, ideological, interpersonal, and interactional barriers to their achievement. Telecollaborative pedagogies present considerable potential to overcome these challenges. Most obviously, telecollaboration offers sanctioned access to peers who are expert users of the language under study. In our own experience (e.g. Kinginger, Gourves-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999), students of French who later studied in France had a distinct advantage because they could begin to establish social networks immediately, by reaching out to their former classmates.

In contrast to regular classroom instruction, telecollaboration offers sheltered opportunities to engage in socially consequential second language interactions and to begin crafting a foreign-language mediated identity. Especially in relatively isolated locales, these interactions may be the first in which students come to care sincerely for their own foreign language interactional face and for the impression they convey to their partner class.

Another advantage of telecollaboration can be exposure to ideologies students may encounter abroad, including negotiation of attitudes and stereotypes about foreigner identities and linguistic varieties. As for language *per se*, students engaged in telecollaboration will encounter the ways in which their foreign language is actually used by educated persons, in contrast to the sanitized forms enshrined in textbooks and other official materials. This can include experience and analysis of informal or spoken registers routinely excluded from instruction (Kinging, 1998) and opportunities to explore the significance of sociolinguistic variants, such as the address form system in many European languages (e.g. *tu* versus *vous* in French, see Kinginger & Belz, 2005). In the future, it is much to be hoped that educators will continue to develop articulated curricula linking telecollaboration with student mobility.

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**New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education**  
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