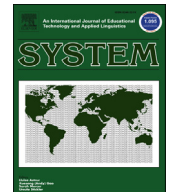




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Editorial

Introduction: Methodological diversity and innovation in study abroad research

1. Introduction

According to the [Institute of International Education \(IIE\) \(2015\)](#), 304,467 U.S. students studied abroad in 2013/14 for academic credit. This number not only marked an increase of 5.2% from the previous year but constituted a tripling in the size of the study abroad (SA) pool of participants over the past two decades. However, as observed by [Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura and McManus \(2015\)](#), this burgeoning interest in SA is not a uniquely U.S. phenomenon, but one that permeates tertiary and secondary educational levels across the globe. Not surprisingly, this strong interest in SA research has also resulted in the inception of a new SLA journal that focuses exclusively on SA: *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education* (published by John Benjamins). This SLA-specific journal nicely complements the open access study abroad journal *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* (published by The Forum on Education Abroad), which is now in its 26th publication year.

Central to the SA SLA research agenda has been an examination of the effects of SA on different aspects of language learning such as its impact on learners' cognitive capacity (e.g., [Grey, Cox, Serafini, & Sanz, 2015](#)), willingness to communicate (e.g., [Kang, 2014](#)), oral fluency (e.g., [Di Silvio, Diao, & Donovan, 2016](#); [Du, 2013](#); [Segalowitz & Freed, 2004](#); [Trentman, 2017](#)) and accuracy (e.g., [Leonard & Shea, 2017](#)), accent (e.g., [Llanes, 2016](#)), lexical and grammar development (e.g., [Briggs, 2015](#); [Isabelli, 2004](#)), pronunciation (e.g., [Diaz-Campos, 2004](#); [Nagle, Morales-Front, Moorman, & Sanz, 2016](#)), reading ([Dewey, 2004](#)) and writing (e.g., [Sasaki, 2007](#)). Also investigated has been SA learner strategy use (e.g., [Gao, 2006](#)) and interactional competence (e.g., [Shively, 2015](#)), learner perspectives on language learning (e.g., [Isabelli, 2006](#)), and the changes in learner beliefs as a result of SA (e.g., [Amuzie & Winke, 2009](#)). Additionally, SA researchers have compared second language development as experienced by learners who have stayed “at home” as opposed to those who have gone abroad (e.g., [Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004](#); [Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2016](#)), and how the international social networks SA students formed while abroad impact learning over those who don't have such SA experiences (e.g., [Dewey, Ring, Gardner, & Belpap, 2013](#)).

At the same time, however, and in light of the complexities surrounding the SA L2 learning experience, [Kinging \(2008\)](#) adds that SA should not be treated as a “unitary variable” (p. 3). This observation, in turn, spurred investigations into the different dynamic aspects of SA that were garnering less attention. To delve into the language learning experiences of SA learners, recent SA work has also looked at the social and cultural aspects of language learning ([Kinging, 2013](#)), with a number of researchers focusing on the development of pragmatics (e.g., [Alcón-Soler, 2015](#); [Schauer, 2009](#); [Taguchi, 2011, 2015](#); [Xu, Case, & Wang, 2009](#)), attitude and motivation (e.g., [Jackson, 2016](#)), and identity (e.g., [Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017](#); [Shively, 2013](#)). The latter body of work, in particular, centered on various aspects of identity such as nationality (e.g., [Kinging, 2008](#)), gender (e.g., [Anderson, 2003](#)), age (e.g., [Llanes & Muñoz, 2013](#); [Muñoz & Llanes, 2014](#); [Spenader, 2011](#)), and race (e.g., [Jackson, 2010](#)).

In short, the established body of SA work, which includes investigations into the cognitive, linguistic and social dimensions of L2 learning, clearly exemplifies the epistemological diversity ([Hulstijn, Young & Ortega, 2014](#); [Ortega, 2012](#)) that has characterized SLA research in recent years. Such epistemological diversity, we argue, needs to be matched by methodological rigor ([Mahboob, Paltridge, Phakiti, Wagner, Starfield, Burns, Jones, & De Costa, 2016](#)), methodological diversity ([King & Mackey, 2016](#)), and methodological innovation ([Choi & Richards, 2016](#); [Ellis, 2015](#); [Norris, Ross, & Schoonen, 2015](#); [Phakiti, De Costa, Plonsky & Starfield, forthcoming](#)) in order to create a robust contemporary SA research agenda.

2. Special issue focus

As noted, the vast and expanding repository of SA literature validates and reflects the significance of studying language learning processes and experiences outside the traditional and domestic classroom. This growing research paradigm has spawned a creative set of methodologies, such as ethnographic case studies (e.g., [Shin, 2014](#)) and narratives ([Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013](#)), that has been mobilized to explore how SA can enhance the second language learning experience through L2 contact in various contexts.¹ Such methodological diversity is also captured in [Yang's \(2016\)](#) meta-analysis of SA research studies which showed that “in regard to methodological orientations, quantitative and qualitative research methods were about equally distributed” (p. 82). Importantly, the need to explore *both* quantitative and qualitative methods was echoed by [Riazi \(2016\)](#) through his emphatic call for innovative mixed method research (see also [Mackey & Gass, 2015](#)).

Building on these developments, this special issue illustrates how future SA research can be enriched through deploying a range of methods that include pre-post-SA grammaticality judgment (GJT) and lexical decision tasks (LDT) (e.g., [Grey et al., 2015](#); [Marijuan & Sanz, this issue](#)), the Language Contact Profile (LCP) (e.g., [Freed et al., 2004](#); [Dewey, this issue](#)), and ethnographic interviews (e.g., [Lee, 2012](#); [Zaykovskaya, Rawal & De Costa, this issue](#)). Further, we demonstrate that engagement in longitudinal studies (e.g., [Barkhuizen, this issue](#); [Geeslin, García-Amaya, Hasler-Barker, Henriksen, & Killam, 2010](#)) and corpus-based work (e.g., [Fernandez, 2013](#); [Tracy-Ventura, this issue](#)) can further illuminate our understanding of SA learner development.

Through an examination of various methods and methodologies deployed in SA research involving various languages (e.g., Chinese, French, Spanish, and Russian), our thematic issue also responds to recent calls for methodological innovation. These calls have urged for an investigation of a wider range of SA participants in terms of age and country of origin ([Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014](#)), an examination of students' personality ([Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Koylu, & McManus, 2016](#)), and an analysis of the impact of SA experiences on L2 identities in different settings ([Benson et al., 2013](#)).

3. Papers in this special issue

In the spirit of examining different methodological approaches to SA research, our collection of 13 papers (nine feature articles, three commentaries, and our introduction) brings together SLA researchers who work from diverse methodological orientations and theoretical perspectives in order to extend the methodological roadmap for future SA work. The papers in this special issue address the crucial question, “What methodologies have been used in SA research, and how can we build a methodologically diverse and innovative SA research agenda?”

Brandon Tullock and Lourdes Ortega introduce us to the genre of scoping reviews in their paper. Used widely to systematically synthesize emerging knowledge in healthcare, engineering, and education, scoping reviews allow researchers to inform research agendas where emerging knowledge has begun to accumulate. Tullock and Ortega's scoping review synthesizes 401 SA reports published between 1995 and March 2017. Specifically, they examine SA research on oral fluency and qualitatively oriented SA research. The first scope revealed that gains in oral fluency remain inconclusive because of inconsistencies across measurements. The second scope of qualitative SA research showed that SA learning is highly multilingual in nature, prompting the authors to call for a multilingual turn in SA research, that is, one that examines the linguistic diversity in sojourners and host contexts.

Technological advancements, according to [Marijuan and Sanz](#), have allowed SA researchers to use contemporary procedures such as latency, eye-tracking, and event-related potentials to analyze the processes underlying L2 language development, a sub area that had been previously overlooked. According to [Marijuan and Sanz](#), L2 processing entails (1) an increase in speed and automaticity as result of the immersion experience, and (2) a shift in brain activity, and thus a change in the locus of attention. Also underscoring the importance of studying individual differences within SA groups, the authors add that other online techniques such internet surveys, e-journals, computed-mediated communication, and e-learning modules during the SA program can be used to complement and triangulate psycholinguistic results.

Also recognizing the role that technology can play in advancing the methodological landscape of SA research, [Nicole Tracy-Ventura](#) draws on a wider study, the Languages and Social Networks Abroad Project (LANGSNAP; [Mitchell et al., 2017](#)). She combines (1) learner corpora drawn from two oral communicative tasks, a picture-based narrative, an interview, and a written argumentative essay, and (2) experimental data from the Spanish version of the ‘X-lex’ test to examine the lexical sophistication development of 27 English-speaking university learners of Spanish who spent an academic year in Spain or Mexico. Her findings revealed that after a nine-month stay abroad in Spain or Mexico, her participants' knowledge and use of low-frequency vocabulary increased significantly. Moving forward, [Tracy-Ventura](#) proposes a mixed methods approach to studying vocabulary development, recommending that questionnaires on language use and social networking patterns be used to augment SA research.

¹ As noted by [De Costa et al. \(2017\)](#), methodologies (e.g., ethnography) need to be distinguished from methods (e.g., interviews, observations). The former is generally embedded in a long intellectual tradition that is discipline specific. The intellectual lineage of ethnography, for example, can be traced back to the field of anthropology. In addition, because a researcher's methodology is influenced by his/her theoretical framework and paradigm, epistemological and ontological concerns also need to be addressed ([De Costa et al., 2017](#); [Friedman, 2012](#); [Phakiti & Paltridge, 2015](#); [Zhu Hua, 2016](#)).

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