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## Second language acquisition and the language tourism experience

Montserrat Iglesias Xamaní\*

*Escola Universitària d'Hoteleria i Turisme CETT-UB, University of Barcelona, Av. Can Marçet 36-38, Barcelona 08035, Spain*

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### Abstract

There is a general consensus that study abroad fosters the development of communicative competence in a foreign language. This is the principle underlying the promotion of international mobility in academic environments and the growing demand for language learning courses in a foreign country. However, language travel as a typology of educational tourism has drawn relatively little scholarly attention. This paper focuses on language tourism as a holistic activity providing meaningful learning experiences in and beyond academic contexts, a phenomenon which needs to be analysed from the two complementary perspectives of supply and demand considering the determining factors, components and impacts.

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*Keywords:* Language tourism; study abroad; second language acquisition; language travel market

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### 1. Introduction

According to Marca España, in 2012 language tourism as a source of income for Spain exceeded €2,000 million, a growth of 28% compared to 2011. For the vast majority of the visitors who travel to Spain to learn Spanish their language learning requirements go beyond purely linguistic concerns: they look for full study experiences abroad.

Language travel is a healthy sector, a sound service industry involving a wide range of stakeholders, from language learning providers to travel principals. In the past, the main focus of an overseas language trip package used to be on language learning. Accommodation, pick-up service, insurance, weekend excursions and extra activities were not the core of the business for travel advisors. Nowadays customers are more demanding and have

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-93-4280777; fax: +34-93-4286777.

E-mail address: [montserrat.iglesias@cett.cat](mailto:montserrat.iglesias@cett.cat)

higher expectations regarding other components of the package they buy, as they are better informed and wish to make guaranteed, optimised investments (Smith, 2011).

Since study abroad (SA) sojourners use several tourist services and engage not only in language learning tasks but also in tourist activities, they can be therefore considered language tourists as well as language learners. This exploratory paper will be looking at this duality from an integrated perspective.

**2. Language outcomes of SA**

Global reviews of second language acquisition (SLA) studies conducted since the 1960s on the linguistic advantages of SA programmes have reached a number of general conclusions. To start with, language gains have been reported at all proficiency levels, although to different extents (Freed, 1998). Lower-level learners seem to be in a better position to benefit from the SA experience (Brecht et al., 1995; Churchill & DuFon, 2006), while more advanced students may take more advantage of interaction opportunities with members of the local community. However, the latter show fewer gains apparently, perhaps because of their own perceptions concerning the difficulties of using higher order skills to move up the scale which at best just enable them to approach native-like norms. To this respect, some researchers have claimed that the ceiling effect of the tests used to measure language development might contribute to this perceived constraint (Brecht, et al., 1995; Freed, 1998).

With respect to the language-related outcomes of SA, Kinginger (2013) concludes that the SA experience can potentially enable learners to develop their communicative competence in every domain, albeit sometimes to a modest degree. In particular, learners’ oral skills and abilities for meaningful social interaction in a second language (L2), which cannot be promoted in the same way by means of formal instruction at home, can be boosted. Thus, they “broaden their repertoire of speech acts, become more aware of register and style, develop greater autonomy as conversationalists, and incorporate fluency-enhancing formulaic language into their speech” (Kinging, 2013, p. 4).

Current research also focuses on how learners’ attitudes towards the host communities can either facilitate or restrict social interaction, as well as the relevance of some SA programme features such as course length, leisure options, and housing and classroom arrangements (Churchill & Dufon, 2006). The success of the language learning experience abroad can definitely be determined by these and other ingredients, which turn the learners’ educational pursuit into a full language tourism activity.

**3. Language tourism**

Language tourism may be defined as “a tourist activity undertaken by those travellers (or educational tourists) taking a trip which includes at least an overnight stay in a destination outside their usual place of residence for less than a year and for whom language learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip” (Iglesias, 2014, p. 10).

The conceptualisation of language tourism presented in this article is based on Ritchie’s model of the educational tourism market system (Ritchie et al., 2003, p.15) and adapted to the idiosyncratic features of this specific niche. The working model presented in this paper aims at putting a spotlight on the main ingredients that make up the language tourism experience concerning both the demand and the supply. Table 1 sums up the aspects related to the consumer -i.e. the demand-, whereas Table 2 shows the product-related factors -i.e. the supply.

Table 1. Language tourism market system: demand.

Demand: the language tourist	
1. Demographics	1.1. Age 1.2. Gender 1.3. Education 1.4. Occupation 1.5. Origins 1.6. Travel party

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