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Personal growth and intercultural awareness development through studying abroad: The case of American university students in Morocco

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Abstract

The world has been greatly influenced by globalization which inspires many students around the world to study abroad. Learning has no barriers and new education standards recognize the importance of venturing towards new environments, exploring different cultures and breaking misrepresentations. Existing theoretical models related to the field of intercultural learning have demonstrated the significance of studying abroad in enhancing the students' awareness at various levels. The current paper is an attempt to investigate the impact of such experience in Morocco on a group of American university students who spent one-year learning content courses and practicing Modern Standard Arabic. Based on convenience sampling, 23 American study abroad students have been invited to take part in this study and respond to a survey containing 27 items. Students' answers were collected before and after completing the experience in Morocco. A likert scale served to get feedback for quantitative statistics while qualitative data has been obtained via semi-structured interviews, conducted with 5 volunteers. All the data gathered was meant to help answer three research questions, namely

- What are the challenges American study abroad students faced while studying in Morocco?
- What is the impact of the study abroad experience on the students' language learning and personal growth?
- What are the factors that enhance the students' intercultural awareness?

The data analysis and interpretation revealed that the experience had a significant contribution to the students' language growth, personal development, intercultural awareness, and professional enhancement.

Keywords: Study abroad; Experience; Environment; Arabic language; Intercultural awareness

1. Introduction

For the past two decades learning Arabic has been exponentially attracting a large number of American university students who opt for a study abroad experience within an Arabic-speaking country like Morocco. Scholars from the intercultural field of research have repeatedly stressed on the benefits of studying in a new environment, and its role in building up an accurate awareness of new languages, traditions, and cultures. The present study is an attempt to depict the significance of the impact of studying abroad in Morocco on American university students spending one academic year learning content courses, and seizing the opportunity to develop their linguistic and communicative skills in Modern Standard Arabic and the local varieties "dialects" as well. The present research makes use of the survey established by Ingraham & Peterson (2004), which entails four main factors, namely *language growth*, *personal growth*, *intercultural awareness*, and *professional development*. The use of these factors helped to investigate the impact of the students' experience in Morocco on their personal growth and intercultural awareness development. To set the context for the study, a brief account on the evolution of the field is provided.

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1.1. Study Abroad: An Overview

Culture is a complex term with a multidimensional conception that makes it difficult to define. The leading scholars Schollon & Schollon (2001) have pointed out two main levels of understanding related to the term “Culture”, which they explain as *High culture* and *Anthropological culture*. According to them, *High Culture* stresses on the intellectual and artistic achievements during a historical period of a nation, while the *Anthropological Culture* refers to clothes, materials, instruments, and even the linguistic heritage that belongs to a specific distinctive group of people living within the boundaries of a specific area. Edward Burnt Taylor (1964), who is also a pioneering researcher in the field, explains that: “Cultureis that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (cited in Scupin, 2000, p.38). Another anthropologist, Ralph Linton (1954), inspects Culture within its global capacity of reflecting all the aspects of the life of a significant group of people (cited in Ember & Carol. R, 2002, p15). Celce-Murcia et al. (2001) is more explicit about the distinctive feature of the transmissibility of culture that maintains its continuity of existence through some external (e.g., artifacts, roles institutions) and internal factors (e.g., values, attitudes, beliefs, and epistemologies) (cited in Samovar & Porter, 2001, p.33).

As language learning is decisive to human existence, Richards, Heidi, and Paltt (1992) define language as a human system of communication that consists of various structured arrangements of sounds or their written representation. Communication occurs whenever an interaction between individuals, organizations, and countries takes place, to share information and reach a common understanding (*European and Mediterranean Conference on Information Systems, 2009*). In this respect, Language is vital to human survival due to numerous functions it serves. The interaction function, for instance, is concerned with sharing and communicating ideas or emotions (Samovar & Porter, 2001). Context has also a significant importance when trying to transmit any intended meaning as people hold into various social groups, and therefore use words differently (Ember & Carol.R, 2002). Asuncion-Lande (1977) claims that, in an intercultural communication process, both the sender and the receiver hold various cultural backgrounds with different values, beliefs, and attitudes which affect their selection, categorization, organization, and perception of messages. This view is supported by Littlewood (1985) who agrees that culture mainly helps to enhance linguistic proficiency for all the function fulfilled through communication. Additionally, Kinginger (2009) suggests the concept of ‘Linguacultural’, which clearly demonstrates the connection between language learning and cultural learning in the appropriate context. Kinginger also argues that “Communicative Competence” is the parent of proficiency.

In a world with the size of a village, it is critical to overcome cultural differences to reach coexistence. The different existing ethnicities, social practices, political beliefs, and religions offer a wide variety of social models to adhere to as a world citizen (Tesoriero, 2010). According to Deardorff (2009), “Intercultural competence is often considered as a subfield of “communication competence”. Intercultural competence is known as the capacity to change one’s knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures (Byram et al. 2002, p: 2). Intercultural communication is the ‘interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event (Samovar and Porter, 2004, p: 15). Intercultural communication is based on intercultural understanding. This provides a new standing base where intercultural competence and communicative competence are combined. Chen and Starosta (1998) define Inter-Cultural Competence as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment” (Cited in Byram et al., 2002). The above discussion helps us highlight three basic components including: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural adroitness. All these aspects are examined in the present study.

There are various existing models meant to identify and assess the intercultural competence relying heavily on adjustment, assimilation, or adaptation patterns. Deardorff (2009) explains that Assimilation is the degree to which a visitor blends in with or becomes similar to the host culture. This simply means that assimilation represents a kind of an attitudinal and cognitive shift toward the new culture by means of mimicking behaviors distinctive to the hosting community leading progressively towards the adoption of these patterns for regular daily life encounters. In a study abroad context, there is no doubt that developing the communicative competence occurs simultaneously with the enhancement of an intercultural understanding of the target community. Thus, communication becomes more than a simple exchange of information and affects the effectiveness of communication as it goes beyond the correct choice of words.

1.2. Context of the Study

Among the existing organizations dedicated to cultural exchange around the world, “One World Now” is a leader that helps building up ties between the United States and other countries from all the world. One World Now (OWN) was founded in Seattle, Washington in 2002; it targets underserved high school students by offering them the necessary

support to access study abroad opportunities and gain critical language studies for leadership development (OWN, 2022). The organization's website (www.oneworldnow.org) displays opportunities that include study abroad and summer language programs in addition to customized initiatives related to after-school timing. AMIDEAST (the America-Mideast Educational and Training Services) is a key institution when it comes to providing American and Moroccan students with opportunities to discover both cultures and interact with local communities. Thanks to the active commitment of its branch in Morocco, students from both countries can spend up to one year stay of studies and cultural discovery. Regularly, AMIDEAST hosts American students and facilitates their stay across the country. The scholarship covers all expenses during the entire experience in the hosting country. For Moroccan students, it is a unique opportunity to peruse a one-year study in the US while being accommodated by American families. This combination is meant to strengthen their skills in English and additional academic courses. American students are also hosted by Moroccan families, which offers them a better chance to develop their fluency in Modern Standard Arabic as well as the Moroccan Colloquial variety (dialect). Upon completion of the one-year stay of the program, students are expected to return back home and share their experience with their peers and within local communities. This initiative has a long-term impact on their professional lives and frequently opens further opportunities to learn more about new cultures abroad.

Such rigorous initiative is backed by extensive research related to the impact of the study abroad experience on students and how it contributes in their cognitive and cultural development (Institute for International Education, 2007). Students are also expected to come out of this experience with a significant increase of their intercultural awareness about the world and improve their language skills in using foreign languages (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Bates, 1997; Ryan & Twibell, 2000; Dolby, 2004; Souders, 2006).

2. Material and methods

The present study adopts a descriptive study design to investigate the case of American graduate students spending one year of study abroad in Morocco. It adopts a mixed approach and makes use of both qualitative and quantitative research instruments. Combining both research approaches is meant to overcome the limitations of each instrument and where quantitative findings would provide a remarkable support to qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). A case study design helps conducting an intensive study about a person or a group, in a way to generate conclusions that can be extended to a much larger sample with similar characteristics (Gustafsson, 2017). Given the limitations of the number of participants who successfully provided their feedback before and after the experience, a pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design could not be fully implemented.

The current study address and attempts to answer three research questions, related to

- The challenges American study abroad students face during their experience in Morocco,
- The impact of the study abroad experience on the students' Language Learning and Personal Growth, and
- The factors that enhance the students' Intercultural Awareness.

To answer these questions qualitative data has been collected using an online survey that has been administered to the target participants based on convenience sampling measures (Patton, 2002). The first section of the survey helps to collect the demographic information, i.e., age, gender, past study abroad experiences and familiarity with Arabic. The second section contains 27 items adopted by Ingraham & Peterson (2004) for the assessment of the impact of studying abroad on 2500 students from Michigan State University. It has a likert scale where 1 = not at all, 2 = very little, 3 = some, 4 = quite a lot, and 5 = very much. Four areas were designated as the main factors, including the intellectual growth, personal growth, intercultural awareness, and professional development (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 87). The study has a total of 23 participants, exclusively made of American students learning Arabic in Morocco during the academic year 2013-2014, including 12 males (52.17%) and 11 females (47.82%). The limited number of participants is due to the fact that access to study-abroad students via the hosting institutions is prohibited. The researcher relied on public places in the city of Rabat where study abroad students would frequently meet and invited the participants to voluntarily answer the survey with full consent and free will to provide their thoughts. Upon acceptance, the students were given a printed copy of the survey to provide their answers during the orientation week before engaging in the one-year study and upon its completion. Quantitative data has been processed using the SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics relying on frequencies and values of the Mean and Standard Deviation. Five semi-structured interviews were also conducted to collect qualitative data. Processing and analyzing the transcripts of the interviews helped to identify two main themes that are related to personal perception and cultural awareness regarding the other.

3. Results and discussion

As mentioned earlier, the population involved in the present study includes ten Junior students eight Senior students, and five Sophomore students, and notably, no Freshman students. As American institutions of higher education operate under a credit-based system, students may get their grades transferred to their home institutions if the study abroad providers hold a proper accreditation from the US? Students are encouraged across all the different stages of their studies to take at least one learning experience abroad before graduation.

All students have had prior experiences in study abroad programs before coming to Morocco. The data displayed in *table (1)* reveals that Egypt attracted 30.43% (N=7) of the participants and was the first Arabic-speaking country they have visited. Three locations in Europe received a large portion of the population including 26.08% (N=6) in Germany, and 17.39% (N=4) in Spain, followed by 13.04% (N=3) in France. Typically, American study abroad students come to Morocco under a flagship of programs funded by the US government or through their home universities. The number of American students interested in learning Arabic has significantly increased over the last two decades. The post 9-11 attacks on the US soil and the geopolitical conflicts rising in the Middle East region are substantial driving factors to such increase as the US holds high interests in many Arab nations. Another significant point that encourages American university students is the internationalization process most institutions of higher education are advocating for.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics Past destinations before study abroad experience in Morocco

| Countries visited | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Egypt | 7 | 30.43 |
| France | 3 | 13.04 |
| Germany | 6 | 26.08 |
| Spain | 4 | 17.39 |
| Mexico | 3 | 13.04 |
| Total | 23 | |

Students' testimonies revealed that going abroad for the first time is a major step to gain accurate understanding of the real world. Mark (20 years old) declared that:

"Visiting Paris was a must to do in my list of long-term plans... life there is full of new routines... I guess commuting from home to school offered me a chance to chat with different people about different subjects..."

Every institution of higher education in the US has an office for international studies that takes in charge and facilitates the programs for short and long stays either in exchange or language immersion programs. International educational forums are also unique opportunities to attract more participants in the future.

3.1. Language Learning and Personal Growth in a Study Abroad Experience

One of the main objectives of the present study is to depict the existence of a significant impact on the students' Language Learning development and Personal Growth enhancement. Ingraham & Peterson (2004) listed *item.1* and *item.2* under the "language learning factor" to investigate how students have improved while learning a foreign language. In alignment with that, participants were asked to state their answers to the following two sentences:

- Item 1. "As a result of my study abroad experience, my ability to speak a foreign language has improved"
- Item 2. "Studying abroad has contributed to my desire to begin learning a foreign language."

Study abroad providers work closely with home institutions in the US to support the students' development through all the stages of their experience abroad. The language learning factor is by far one of the most valuable elements that all collaborators would seek to enhance. The students' answers collected via the survey reflect how American students studying abroad in Morocco were able to increase their language competence in using Arabic while studying and living with the local community (*see table.2 below*). Records related to *item.1* show an increase of the mean value by + 3.054 when comparing the pre-study abroad (M = 1.380, SD = 0.497) with post-study abroad (M = 4.434, SD = 0.589) results. Additionally, records related to the pre-study abroad stage (M = 1.761, SD = 0.624) and the post-study abroad stage (M

= 4.217, SD = 0.671) of *items.2* reveal an increase of the mean value by + 2.456. With these results, it can be concluded that students were able to invest in the study abroad experience to boost their linguistic abilities as they had various opportunities to practice the language with native speakers in Morocco.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics The Language Learning factor

| | Frequency | | | Valid Percent | | |
|--|------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Pre-Study Abroad | | | Pre-Study Abroad | | |
| | N | M | SD | N | M | SD |
| Item 1. "As a result of my study abroad experience, my ability to speak a foreign language has improved" | 23 | 1.380 | 0.497 | 23 | 4.434 | 0.589 |
| Item 2. "Studying abroad has contributed to my desire to begin learning a foreign language." | 23 | 1.761 | 0.624 | 23 | 4.217 | 0.671 |

Testimonies from students confirm the importance of enhancing learning foreign languages while studying abroad. In the case of the students involved in this study, the ability to interact with native speakers is the ideal context textbooks cannot provide. Maliha (20 years old) explains that:

" Talking Fusha in classroom and with the professor has been made mandatory from day one... I remember we had some kind of a pledge to use only Arabic while talking to friends and members of the host family as well..."

The more students are able to practice the new language with the target community, the more they are likely to develop their communicative skills in that language. They are also exposed to a wide range of vocabulary every day as they deal with different people in different situations. It is worth mentioning here that the linguistic context in Morocco includes other Moroccan and Amazigh varieties depending on the region, in addition to the presence of French words in most conversations.

Academic performance has a significant importance while identifying the expected success once the study abroad experience is over. American universities resort to their own customized scientific tools to assess how students have evolved academically side by side with all the other elements that include cultural awareness and negotiation of differences. In the case of the survey developed by Ingraham & Peterson (2004), two items are listed to help depict the significance of any academic progress and the development of critical thinking skills. The comparison of the pre-study abroad (M = 1.714, SD = 0.643) values of *item.3* to the post-study abroad (M = 4.260, SD = 0.688) records, reveals that the mean value has increased by +2.546. Another increase has been noticed of the mean value of *item.4* by + 2.812 when looking at the pre-study abroad (M = 1.666, SD = 0.795) values of *item.3* to the post-study abroad (M = 4.478, SD = 0.593) records (*table.3*).

Table 3 Descriptive statistics Academic Performance factor

| Academic Performance | Frequency | | | Valid Percent | | |
|---|------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Pre-Study Abroad | | | Pre-Study Abroad | | |
| | N | M | SD | N | M | SD |
| Item 3. "My study abroad experience has led to an improvement of my academic performance" | 23 | 1.714 | 0.643 | 23 | 4.260 | 0.688 |
| Item 4. "Studying abroad has enhanced my critical thinking skills." | 23 | 1.666 | 0.795 | 23 | 4.478 | 0.593 |

Students undertaking a study abroad experience engage themselves in a learning experience in a different cultural context (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). This is supposed to help students realize how they have evolved while building their personal characters. The survey includes 9 items targeting the students' opinions about their personal growth which help identify the significance of any change once they come out of the experience. The data in *table.4* shows that *item.5* highlights the students' perceptions of personal independence. The comparison of the pre-study abroad (M = 2.285, SD = 0.902) values to the post-study abroad (M = 4.391, SD = 0.782) ones, discloses an increase of the mean value

by +2.106. Another increase of the mean value is also recorded regarding *item.7*, which is directed towards the ability to cope with unfamiliar situations. The pre-study abroad (M = 2.047, SD = 0.589) records of *item.7*, when compared to the post-study abroad (M = 4.347, SD = 0.775) values, show that the mean has increased by +2.3. The analysis of *item.10* and *item.11* helps to gain further understanding of how students evolved throughout the study abroad experience, as it reveals the students' level of comfort while dealing with different people from various backgrounds. A close look at the pre-study abroad (M = 1.761, SD = 0.700) and the post-study abroad (M = 4.434, SD = 0.843) records related to *item.11*, unveils an increase of the mean value by +2.673. As a highly revealing element, *item.12* helps understand how open-minded students have become out of the study abroad experience. The comparison of the pre-study abroad (M = 1.128, SD = 0.462) and the post-study abroad (M = 4.652, SD = 0.572) records of *item.12* shows a clear increase of the mean value by +3.524,

Table 4 Descriptive statistics Personal Growth factor

| Personal Growth | Frequency | | | Valid Percent | | |
|---|------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Pre-Study Abroad | | | Pre-Study Abroad | | |
| | N | M | SD | N | M | SD |
| Item 5. "Study abroad has enhanced my independence" | 23 | 2.285 | 0.902 | 23 | 4.391 | 0.782 |
| Item 6. "Study abroad has enhanced my self-reliance" | 23 | 2.238 | 0.889 | 23 | 4.434 | 0.662 |
| Item 7. "Studying abroad has increased my ability to cope with unfamiliar situations" | 23 | 2.047 | 0.589 | 23 | 4.347 | 0.775 |
| Item 8. "My study abroad experience has improved my problem-solving skills" | 23 | 2.428 | 0.810 | 23 | 4.260 | 0.619 |
| Item 9. "Studying abroad has helped me develop leadership skills" | 23 | 1.952 | 0.669 | 23 | 4.086 | 0.733 |
| Item 10. "My study abroad experience has increased my level of comfort with people different from myself" | 23 | 1.523 | 0.813 | 23 | 4.478 | 0.593 |
| Item 11. "My study abroad experience has increased my ability to interact effectively with people from different backgrounds" | 23 | 1.761 | 0.700 | 23 | 4.434 | 0.843 |
| Item 12. "As a result of my study abroad experience, I have become more open-minded" | 23 | 1.128 | 0.462 | 23 | 4.652 | 0.572 |
| Item 13. "Study abroad has increased my feeling of personal effectiveness." | 23 | 1.714 | 0.462 | 23 | 4.260 | 0.619 |

The above table reveals a lot about the gains American students claim to have attained from their study abroad experience. Qualitative data consolidates these findings as students spent the last week of their stay practicing various reflection activities. Laurentina was explicit about how her study abroad changed her mind about Morocco. She states that:

"Morocco as I know it now is far different from what I had in mind while being in the US... one thing for sure! people are not riding on camels hhh... my family here made me feel different, which I appreciate a lot, ... I was afraid at the beginning; you know me being a girl with a Muslim family and how am I going to fit. It simply turned to be an unforgettable experience as I have connected a lot with them, especially with my sister Sara... I think because we have almost the same age."

3.2. Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness is an essential element investigated throughout the survey in this study. Ingraham & Peterson (2004) designed 6 items to measure any significant development upon the completion of the experience. Table 5 depicts data related to the Intercultural Factor. Visibly, the analysis of the pre-study abroad (M = 1.76, SD = 0.889) and the post-study abroad (M = 4.478, SD = 0.790) records of *item.15*, which targets the student's ability to understand other cultures, discloses an increase of the mean value by +2.718. Additional data supports an increase in students' curiosity towards other cultures as shown in *item. 17*, as well as their understanding of their host country, as marked in *item 18*. The values recorded in the pre-study abroad stage (M = 2.142, SD = 0.358) and the post-study abroad stage (M = 4.217, SD = 0.671) of *item.17* shows an increase of the mean value by + 2.072. Additionally, records related to *item.18* display an increase

of mean value by +2.53 when comparing the pre-study abroad (M = 1.76, SD = 0.889) and the post-study abroad (M = 4.478, SD = 0.790) records.

Table 5 Descriptive statistics Intercultural Awareness factor

| Intercultural Awareness | Frequency | | | Valid Percent | | |
|---|------------------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|
| | Pre-Study Abroad | | | Pre-Study Abroad | | |
| | N | M | SD | N | M | SD |
| Item 14. "My study abroad experience has enhanced my understanding of international issues" | 23 | 1.571 | 0.746 | 23 | 4.304 | 0.634 |
| Item 15. "Study abroad has contributed to my understanding of other cultures" | 23 | 1.76 | 0.889 | 23 | 4.478 | 0.790 |
| Item 16. "Study abroad has increased my appreciation of human difference" | 23 | 2.285 | 0.783 | 23 | 4.695 | 0.470 |
| Item 17. "My study abroad experience has increased my curiosity about other cultures" | 23 | 2.142 | 0.358 | 23 | 4.217 | 0.671 |
| Item 18. "Studying abroad has contributed to my understanding of my host country" | 23 | 1.904 | 0.700 | 23 | 4.434 | 0.506 |
| Item 19. "My study abroad experience has increased my understanding of my own culture" | 23 | 1.523 | 0.813 | 23 | 4.608 | 0.499 |

The testimonies collected from the interviews reveal how students reflected on their experience and the impact this has generated over their perceptions of the different cultures. Adam (21 years old) testified that:

"I have been nervous many times as people here in Morocco are used to physically altering with each other at a close range.... that made me uncomfortable at the beginning ...like when one of the neighbors told me one day that my host dad just got out of the house. I took that as some kind of personal information which was not supposed to be shared this way. It's like he is spying on us. But with time you come to realize that people simply care more about each other and don't take it as interfering in the person's life... I guess I have learned a lot about Morocco."

The study helps to conclude that American study abroad students have invested all elements of their experience in Morocco to learn more about the existing cultures and reduce the differences. The fact that the learning experience took place within the target community allowed students to have a better chance to experience authentic situations and get accurate feedback for a better understanding of the existing cultural nuances.

4. Conclusion

As learning Modern Standard Arabic is increasingly attracting more American university students, studying Abroad in Morocco is an ideal context for learning about a new culture and gain accurate knowledge. Study abroad providers rely on various activities to support the students' abilities to deal with new situations and challenges. This study relied on Ingraham & Peterson's (2004) survey to collect quantitative data, while the semi-structured interviews helped getting the students' testimonies about their experience in Morocco. The comparison of the data of the four factors in the survey revealed an increase of the mean values of the students' language growth, personal development, intercultural awareness, and professional enhancement. The same findings were confirmed by students' testimonies. However, the study holds some limitations related to the number of participants, who were not easy to access. This challenge can be fixed if collaborative research is developed with American hosting universities in future projects. Ideally, a quasi-experimental approach can provide more extensive inferential analysis and would allow additional statistical tests, including the Paired Samples T-test. The population may also include other nationalities in addition to American students as well.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

This survey uses an assessment tool developed by Ingraham & Peterson (2004) under Creative Commons license right and usage for nonprofit purposes.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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