Chapter 10
Student interactions during study abroad in Jordan

Jennifer Bown, Dan P. Dewey and R. Kirk Belnap

Brigham Young University

For many years, researchers have assumed that studying abroad produces "fluent" speakers of a given language. However, in the past several decades, researchers have recognized that learners do not always avail themselves of opportunities to interact in the target language, and even when they do, success is not guaranteed. Scholars have begun to recognize that the quality of learners' interactions during study abroad may be more important for ultimate language gains than the quantity of language use. This qualitative study documents the interactions of 82 students of Arabic studying in Amman, Jordan, as well as the factors that influenced the quality of their interactions, and the strategies they used to improve them. Data include surveys, weekly speaking journals, and interviews. Findings suggest that learners' self-regulatory strategies as well as programme interventions can improve the SA experience.

1. Introduction

Study abroad (SA) is often touted as the best path to fluency in a foreign language. The assumption is that SA will provide learners with rich, naturalistic input, as well as ample opportunities for interaction in the target language (L2). However, recent research on SA has challenged these assumptions, demonstrating that SA does not always guarantee a true immersion environment (Churchill & DuFon, 2006; Collentine & Freed, 2004; Freed, 2008).

Isabelli-García (2006) suggests that "contact with the host culture outside of the classroom and attitudes towards the host culture can be related to the development of oral communication skills and accuracy" (p. 232). However, numerous studies have demonstrated that contact with locals in the target language is not as extensive as previously thought. For example, Kuntz and Belnap (2001) found that students studying abroad in Morocco and Yemen rarely spoke Arabic outside of class, perhaps because learners have difficulty gaining access to target language speakers (Magnan & Back, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998).

Even when learners have extensive contact with native speakers (NS) of the target language, out-of-class contact with the L2 may not lead to language gains. Mendelson (2004) found no direct relationship between the students' reported L2 contact hours and their gains in oral proficiency. Similarly, Miller and Ginsberg (1995) found no correlation between amount of interaction with NSs and measured L2 proficiency gains.

On the other hand, studies of learners' social networks, while not focusing directly on learners' language use, offer insights into the effects of interactions on language gain. For instance, Isabelli-García (2006) found that "learners with high motivation…developed more extensive social networks" (p. 255) and that those with more extensive networks had more opportunities to engage in advanced-level tasks. Dewey, Belnap and Hillstrom (2013) found that intensity, a measure of the closeness of an individual's relationship, was positively correlated with oral proficiency gain during SA. Hillstrom (2011) posits that closer relationships allowed learners to have more meaningful social and linguistic interactions with these individuals.

Taken together, the studies cited above imply that type of interaction may be more important than amount of L2 use during SA. As Freed and her colleagues note, it may be that "the nature of the interactions, the quality of the experiences, and the efforts made to use the L2" are more important for linguistic gains than the quantity of language use (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004, p. 24).

Scholars have employed a number of qualitative methods to better understand learners' interactions. Brecht and Robinson (1993) made use of calendar diaries and interviews to examine how and under what circumstances learners use the L2 during SA. Later, Pellegrino (1998; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005) examined learners' choices about when to use the L2 during SA, finding that learners were primarily influenced by their linguistic goals and by perceived threats to their identities.

More recently researchers have made use of audio- and videorecorded conversations to document learners' L2 interactions. Wilkinson's (2002) study analyzed learners' recorded conversations with NSs, finding that learners and their interlocutors tended to replicate classroom discourse patterns even in out-of-class situations. DuFon (2006), Cook (2006) and Iino (2006) used video- and audio-recorded interactions to examine the ways in which learners are socialized into the host culture. From a language socialization perspective, these studies have yielded many intriguing insights. However, recording of naturally-occurring conversations may prove impractical in many situations, particularly in countries where individuals may be mistrustful of recording devices. Moreover, these studies reflect only a portion of the total interactions in which learners engage, choosing specific conversations to analyze, rather than focusing on the totality of the learners' interactions.

In this chapter, we explore the various interactions and tasks in which SA learners engage using three data sources: student speaking journals, interviews with students, and a post-SA Language Task Frequency Survey. These instruments allow a broader perspective on learners' interactions during SA, and particularly on those interactions that they found most helpful for promoting their language skills.

We address the following research questions:

1. What types of interactions did students most frequently engage in during SA in Jordan?
2. What factors affected student interactions on SA?
3. What strategies did learners use in order to improve the quality of their speaking experiences?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and programme

Participants for this study were 82 learners of Arabic who participated in an intensive semester-long programme in Amman, Jordan in fall of 2011 (n=52, 32 males and 20 females) or fall of 2012 (n=30, 18 males and 12 females), organized by a large private university in the US. Each participant was a native speaker of English, including one bilingual speaker of English and Spanish. Participants received four semesters of Arabic instruction (50 minutes per day, 5 days per week) prior to leaving on SA, and scores for participants in this programme are typically Intermediate-Mid on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview at the beginning of the SA (see http://www.languagetesting.com for details on the interview and scores). Intermediate on the ACTFL scale is roughly equivalent to A2/B1 according to the descriptors in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). Both years the programme was led by the same SA director, a faculty member from the home institution. Both groups participated in a predeparture orientation course at their home institution, which consisted of seven 90-minute sessions covering programme rules, history, culture, and ways to make the most of their experience abroad. Emphasis was placed on setting realistic expectations, as well as techniques for engaging NSs in conversations. While in country, students also received regular coaching on maximizing their SA experience, including instruction on cultural differences and strategies for improving the quality of their speaking experiences.

During their sojourn abroad students attended class approximately three hours a day, five days a week. These courses included a conversational Jordanian

Arabic course as well as a current events class (a content course conducted in Arabic). The third hour of class was conducted largely in English and consisted of discussions of language details and quizzes on the readings, coaching for making the most of their time, and brief culture discussions typically in reaction to student experiences that week. Each week a guest lecturer met with the students for an hour to discuss in Arabic a topic of relevance to their stay. In addition, the 2012 group met one-on-one with trained tutors to practise speaking for 30 minutes three times a week and to review their writing twice a week for 15 minutes. Outside of class, participants were required to speak in Arabic two hours a day for five days a week as well as to read articles selected from the newspaper for approximately the same amount of time. Participants resided in apartments with four to six fellow programme participants in an affluent neighborhood near the University of Jordan.

In the last half of the 2011 programme, in response to requests by some of the students, all students were offered the opportunity of additional speaking time with tutors and approximately one third availed themselves of this opportunity. Programme directors discovered that learners found these interviews of a much higher quality than what they typically experienced with friends or acquaintances. As a result, the 2012 programme provided learners with an additional three hours a week of individual speaking practice with hired conversation partners, which counted toward the requirement to speak with locals 20 hours or more per week.

Once a week, the entire group met with the programme director(s) and teaching assistants (TAs) to debrief; In these sessions they were encouraged to talk about their frustrations and challenges as well as their triumphs. Students also met individually on a regular basis to discuss their speaking experiences with a programme director or one of the TAs. Teaching assistants had previously participated in the programme as students and served as role models and coaches for the learners. In these sessions, learners received feedback, encouragement, and coaching in terms of their language learning efforts. Learners spent a total of thirteen weeks in-country, approximately two weeks of which were spent touring with relatively limited study and use of the L2.

2.2. Data sources

A variety of data sources, primarily qualitative, were utilized in this study. In this chapter we draw primarily on learners' weekly speaking journals and the Post-SA Language Task Frequency Survey. Some quotations are also drawn from interviews conducted with select participants in the fall of 2011, as well as from daily speaking reports from the 2012 participants. Our findings are further informed by interviews with the SA programme directors.

Weekly speaking journals (WSJs): Each week learners were required to submit to their programme director and TAs a narrative in which they reflected on the week's speaking experiences and wrote about detailed plans for improving their interactions the following week. Besides the narrative component, learners also rated their efforts to find new people to speak with, their listening comprehension, success in communicating their ideas, fluency, and accuracy on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the highest. The complete survey is available in Appendix A. In this chapter we will focus on the narrative data.

Post study abroad language function frequency survey: Several months after the conclusion of the 2012 programme, researchers administered an online survey in which 2011 and 2012 participants were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in selected language functions drawn from ACTFL's descriptors of Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior levels of oral proficiency. Here we use 'function' in the sense in which it is used by ACTFL: to describe the global tasks which learners can perform in the language, as defined by ACTFL for each proficiency level. Advanced-level speakers are defined as capable of narrating and describing in all tenses in the language and of handling situations with a complication. Superior-level speakers are capable of arguing viewpoints and offering hypotheses. We occasionally use "task" to describe these global capabilities, though the usage differs from the pedagogical usage, in which it usually refers to a communicative exchange in which the learner has a particular goal to meet, such as making an appointment or communicating a message (Ellis, 2003).

For the list of functions covered in the survey, see Table 1 below. Learners ranked the frequency with which they engaged in each function on a six-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Less than once a week*, 3 = *Once a week*, 4 = *2-3 times a week*, 5 = *Several times a week*, and 6 = *Daily*). The response rate for the survey was 43.9%.

Though it is true that the self-report data is unlikely to be an accurate record of practice, especially so long after the study abroad experience, the survey allowed the researchers a glimpse into the learners' perceptions of their SA interactions.

The ACTFL guidelines represent global characterizations of integrated performance in speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The guidelines describe what learners should be able to do at each of four major levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. A more detailed description of the guidelines for each level, and the corresponding sublevels, can be found on ACTFL's website (the 2012 version was used in this research). The ACTFL guidelines have become the national standard in the U.S. for testing and rating and have had a significant washback effect (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996) on curriculum and instruction. The functions were particularly useful for labelling the types of interactions the participants experienced while abroad and informed the design of the survey. However, the survey cannot capture the full range of the ACTFL guidelines, as we

employed only one axis: language functions. The ACTFL guidelines are based on alignment of global functions with three other dimensions, including text types (the type of language that the learner produces to perform the functions of the level), contexts (situations in which the learner can function), and content (the topics the learner is able to discuss).

Personal interviews (PIs): Learners met individually with programme directors or TA mentors to discuss their learning and speaking experiences on a weekly basis. In addition, during fall semester 2011, twelve of the students were selected for in-depth individual interviews with external researchers. Students were selected in consultation with programme directors based on the learners' proficiency level and their apparent satisfaction with the SA experience. Thus researchers selected learners who represented a range of pre-programme proficiency skills, as well as students whose satisfaction and engagement levels ranged from very low to very high. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Other students were interviewed after their return, but these interviews were not recorded. Instead, researchers relied on their interview notes.

Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs): Each student in the study participated in at least one OPI. Participants from the 2011 group were tested twice, once prior to the start of the programme and once at the end of the programme. The 2012 participants were tested only at the end of the programme. The ACTFL OPI is a standard assessment based on the ACTFL guidelines that is often used to gauge speaking gains during SA. OPI scoring is based on a holistic rating encompassing accuracy, content, text type, and functions that learners are capable of. Each OPI is double-rated; if the raters disagree on the rating it is sent to a third rater.

2.3. Data analysis

The Post Study Abroad Language Function Frequency Survey provided quantitative data on the perceived frequency with which learners performed selected functions. For each individual survey item, we calculated the mean response and the standard deviation. Reliability for the survey items involving frequency of occurrence of language functions was moderately high ($\alpha=.85$).

In addition to quantifying mentions of language functions, journals and interviews were also coded with particular reference to research questions 2 (What factors affect learners' ability to interact with NS?) and 3 (What strategies do learners use to engage in "quality" speaking opportunities?) Researchers identified patterns and themes found in the interviews and speaking logs using inductive techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and coded them using the online qualitative analysis program, Saturate (www.saturateapp.com). After initial codes were established, they were clustered into categories.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Research Question 1: Types of interactions

To answer this question, we employed the Post Study Abroad Language Function Frequency Survey, in which learners reflected on how frequently they engaged in a variety of functions. Table 1 presents the average frequencies for each of the items in the survey. Results indicate that learners engaged most frequently in functions associated with Intermediate-level language, such as *asking and answering questions* and *talking about self and family*. Functions such as *describing, dealing with situations with a complication*, and *discussing less-familiar topics* were less frequent. Least frequently reported were functions associated with the Superior level, including *stating and supporting opinions, discussing abstract topics of global or local significance*, and *speculating*.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for post study abroad language function frequency

Function	Mean	SD
Asking and answering questions	5.90	0.44
Talking about daily routine	4.98	1.05
Talking about self and family	5.40	1.03
Describing in detail	4.65	1.29
Telling stories or personal experiences	5.05	0.96
Negotiating situations with complications	4.00	1.07
Participating in conversations on unfamiliar topics	4.35	1.19
Stating and supporting opinions	4.10	1.34
Discussing abstract topics of global significance	4.00	1.50
Discussing abstract topics of personal significance	4.18	1.36
Speculating and hypothesizing	3.43	1.26

These findings are not unexpected in that many native-language interactions do not exceed Intermediate level, that is, they are limited to sentence-level transactional exchanges. Moreover, the mean proficiency level of the students at the beginning of this programme was Intermediate, and the Intermediate speaker is sometimes referred to as the "Linguistic Survivor" (Allen, no date). That is, Intermediate speakers are capable of asking and answering questions and meeting most needs related to daily survival. Their lack of accuracy and limited vocabulary make it difficult for them to function at the Advanced level, let alone at the Superior level,

especially early in the programme. Nevertheless, what is surprising is the relative frequency with which learners reported even Superior-level functions, such as *stating and supporting opinions* (mean=4.10) and *discussing abstract topics of personal significance* (mean=4.00). The scores suggest that learners engaged in such functions multiple times per week. It is important to point out, however, that the survey was completed several months after programme completion and may not represent an accurate picture of learners' interactions, especially those in the early part of the programme. Moreover, in the absence of recorded conversations, it is difficult to ascertain the nature of these exchanges. Opinions are classified as a Superior-level function, yet these can be expressed at an Intermediate level. For example, a comment such as "Obama is a good president" is an opinion although it does not comprise Superior-level speech. Nevertheless, data suggest that learners felt they had opportunities to engage in both Advanced- and Superior-level functions and the fact that almost all of them were rated as either Intermediate High or Advanced Low or Mid by the end of the programme suggests that they could indeed perform a number of functions classified by ACTFL at higher levels. Of the survey respondents at the end of the programme, seven were rated Advanced Mid, fourteen Advanced Low, ten Intermediate High, and five Intermediate Mid. Note that Intermediate High speakers are more like Advanced-level speakers than Intermediate Low or Mid as they can handle many of the same functions associated with the Advanced level, but they are unable to sustain performance on these functions. (http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org/speaking).

3.2. Research Question 2: Factors affecting interaction

Because of the programme's emphasis on the development of OPI skills, learners were encouraged not only to speak the language for two hours a week, but to engage in conversations that would facilitate language growth. Thus, participants on the programme were overwhelmingly concerned with the quality of their interactions (mentioned 259 times in weekly speaking journals, by 63 learners). In their journals, learners often described what they meant by "quality". Quality interactions were those in which the learner was an active participant, in which the learner was able to engage in higher-order functions, such as narrating and describing, or expressing opinions. Interactions in which the learners were not able to take an active role or were otherwise frustrated in their attempts to perform Advanced-level functions were not considered quality exchanges.

A close analysis of narrative data sources, primarily the weekly speaking journals, allowed us to better understand students' perspectives on their interactions. A number of factors were shown to affect the quality of learners' interactions including gender, ability to engage the interlocutor, and the interlocutors themselves.

Gender: At first glance, it appeared that there were differences in patterns on the Post Study Abroad Language Function Frequency Survey between the male and female participants. To assess these differences, several statistical procedures were employed. To determine whether there were overall differences between males and females in terms of the frequency with which they reported engaging in particular tasks, we conducted a t-test. Table 2 depicts the descriptive statistics for this analysis; functions for which the difference between men and women was statistically significant ($p<.05$) are indicated with an asterisk. Results indicate that females reported significantly less frequent interactions in which they discussed abstract topics of global significance, stated and supported hypotheses, or speculated about possible alternative outcomes – all functions associated with the Superior level. These results may be a function of different proficiency levels. While preprogramme OPI scores were not available for all of the respondents, the average pre-OPI score for the female respondents was Intermediate Mid, while the average score for the male respondents was Intermediate High. That is, the males were able to function at the Advanced level at least 50% of the time, while the female students demonstrated random abilities at the Advanced level. Thus, the male students were overall better equipped to handle more linguistically complicated functions. Additionally, the small N in this study may have affected the results.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for males and females on post study abroad language function frequency survey

Function	F	M	*p*	*t*
Asking and answering questions	5.81	5.92	0.55	0.60
Talking about daily routine	4.45	5.24	0.04*	2.13
Talking about self and family	5.45	5.30	0.73	0.34
Describing in detail	4.18	4.88	0.12	1.59
Telling stories or personal experiences	4.63	5.2	0.12	1.59
Negotiating situations with complications	4.00	4.48	0.29	1.07
Participating in conversations on unfamiliar topics	4.27	4.92	0.16	1.45
Stating and supporting opinions	3.09	4.56	0.002*	3.31
Discussing abstract topics of global significance	2.90	4.56	0.002*	3.30
Discussing abstract topics of personal significance	3.45	4.60	0.022*	2.41
Speculating and hypothesizing	2.82	3.80	0.031*	2.25

Data from weekly journals and interviews indicate that women had qualitatively different speaking experiences than men. One issue may have been the availability – or lack thereof – of interlocutors. The female students in the programme were largely advised to avoid conversations with unfamiliar men in order to avoid harassment or any semblance of impropriety. Thus, many of the women in the programme primarily confined themselves to conversations with Arab women, which presented unique challenges. Among them was the added effort required to find female interlocutors, which often necessitated traveling to places such as the university of Jordan or female-only fitness clubs. Six of the female participants indicated that finding women to talk with was challenging, reporting that the male participants had an advantage in this regard. Becca, for instance, reported in an interview with a teaching assistant: "just for the main issue, that there are fewer women on the streets". Lily reported in week 1: "I've noticed that while there are young men everywhere just relaxing, girls are often out for a purpose and don't have time to chat". None of the men on the programme made similar comments about the lack of availability of men to talk with, though they did complain about the quality of the conversations. Because the female participants were advised not to talk with unfamiliar men, their options for speaking were thus somewhat limited. Though it is true that the male participants were also instructed not to strike up conversations with Arab women, the men seemed to have less difficulty in finding potential speaking partners due to the fact that Arab men tend to spend their leisure time outside of the home.

Another challenge posed by limiting interactions to women is that choice of topics was occasionally limited. Ten of the women reported that their conversation partners were not interested in discussing politics or current events, preferring, as Amy stated (Week 9 WSJ), to talk about "girly, fluffy stuff". Sophie (PI) reported, that she had a hard time discussing more abstract topics "'cause a lot of women, again, are apathetic. They don't care. They're like "whatever."… The men are the ones that are involved". Similar frustrations were reported by Abbie, who recounted that: "I sometimes get frustrated with the girls when all we talk about is weddings and makeup" (Week 7 WSJ). In fact, weddings and makeup were reported as regular topics of discussion for women (weddings by eleven women and makeup by five women). In contrast, only one man mentioned weddings and no men mentioned grooming items (razors, nail clippers, etc.). Moreover, several of the men noted that their conversations on politics and more abstract topics took place with cab drivers (eighteen men in weekly speaking reports and six in in-depth interviews). The women in the programme were advised, however, not to talk with cab drivers beyond the necessities of the service transaction, and thus had more limited access to this source of interaction (though seven women, including Jenni [Week 2 WSJ], ignored the admonition: "I had a really good conversation with a taxi driver about beggars in Jordan").

Though all of the female students engaged at some point in discussions of politics, particularly with their trained speaking partners, in thirty instances (by ten of the female participants), the women lamented the unwillingness of their interlocutors to discuss such topics. This concern was not expressed by male participants in their narratives, with one exception; Jerome reported frustration with younger males' choice of topics, including a tendency to talk about "girls and sex" (Week 2 WSJ). Moreover, three women reported in their WSJs fears that they had offended or put off their interlocutors by discussing politics, whereas no men reported such problems. However, it should be noted that the absence of evidence in the men's narrative reports does not mean that they were entirely free from such experiences. Programme directors anecdotally reported that several men were frustrated by the tendency of young Arab males to discuss "shallow" topics.

Research on females studying in the Arab world indicate that American women often feel uncomfortable conversing with Arab men and have fewer opportunities for risk-free social encounters in public spaces than their male counterparts (Kuntz & Belnap, 2001; Hillman, 2008; Trentman, 2012). Moreover, women are often subjected to various forms of sexual harassment, which tend to "silence" women (Polanyi, 1995; Twombly, 1995) or, at the very least, negatively affect their motivation to interact with members of the target culture. Although they are not traumatized, men are nevertheless negatively affected by the current situation in the Arab world. Without intervention, most male students are not likely to have the opportunity to converse freely with women and benefit from their views.

Though the particular social norms of the Middle East may have limited some of the women's access to interlocutors and topics, studies in conversation and discourse analysis have long noted gender differences in topic choice among native speakers of English (Bischoping, 1993; Haas & Sherman, 1982; Moore, 1922; Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008). As part of pre-programme training for SA, the findings from this study suggest that learners should be informed of the discourse norms of the speech community they will be visiting, with a special focus on gender differences.

The importance of programme interventions in helping female and male students is also worthy of note. For example, Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1995), in a study of students studying abroad in Russia, noted that women made fewer gains than men. By 2010, however, Davidson reported that gender had receded as a predictor of proficiency. Davidson attributes this change not only to changing gender norms in Russia, but also to dedicated training in self-management, with a particular focus on the female learners. The Jordan programme hired speaking partners for the students, allowing both male and female students opportunities to interact with native speakers of the opposite sex (for a full description of interventions, see Belnap & Abuamsha, 2015). In addition, the programme has given particular attention to its female learners by hiring a female TA to serve as a peer role

model and by publishing profiles of women who have successfully navigated study abroad (see, for example http://nmelrc.org/pp/arabic-success-stories/kylie and http://nmelrc.org/pp/arabic-success-stories/heidi).

Ability to engage the interlocutor: Analysis of weekly speaking reports brought to light learners' struggles to engage interlocutors and highlighted the effects of those difficulties on the kinds of conversations in which learners participated. A number of factors influenced learners' ability to hold their interlocutors' attention, including proficiency in Arabic and the learners' own personality.

Early in the programme, learners reported that their linguistic deficits were the biggest impediment to meaningful interactions with NSs of Arabic. In particular, the learners believed that their linguistic deficits made it difficult to engage their interlocutors and keep their attention. *Deficits in speaking* was coded 152 times and was mentioned at least once by all 82 participants. As Anne reported in week two (WSJ) of the programme: "The people I talk to are polite enough to engage in conversation, yet show no desire to ever speak again. In my opinion this is because I do not speak well enough to make the conversation interesting". However, as learners' skills improved and confidence increased, they reported that they were increasingly able to engage their interlocutors and participate in deeper conversations. After ten weeks in country, Ellen reported in her WSJ: "Now, I feel comfortable in conversations. I'm not nearly (or even half) as fluent/speedy as native speakers, but at least I don't kill the conversation with my pauses". Janelle also wrote during the tenth week of the programme in her daily speaking report: "I have loved my growth in (…) speaking. Things have really progressed from talking about studying Arabic to discussing women's role in Islam".

Personality emerged as another factor influencing the ability to engage interlocutors; it was coded 22 times by 16 individual learners as an obstacle to engagement, while only three learners (in eight instances) reported personality as facilitating interaction. Caroline, for instance, stated (Week 2 WSJ): "My biggest problem is that I'm simply not a 'talker.' I'm being asked to do something in Arabic that I would never do in English", and David echoed this (Week 1 WSJ): "I'm not a fan of talking to people, which makes this difficult". On the other hand, Sally reported in week 5 that her open personality facilitated interaction: "My personality actually seems to work here…I am…a rather open, friendly, and loyal person who wants to care about people and invite confidences" (WSJ).

These findings confirm those of previous research studies which have found that preprogramme language proficiency and personality affect language use. As regards preprogramme proficiency, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) conclude that learners' initial proficiency influenced both the amount and type of L2 extracurricular activities in which they participated. Similarly, Brecht et al. (1995) found that learners with higher initial proficiency were more likely to speak the L2. In a study of personality variables, Ożańska-Ponikwia and Dewaele (2012) found that open-

ness, as well as self-esteem, were the best predictors of language use for Polish immigrants in Ireland. This study confirms previous research and offers insights into the ways in which learners used strategies to mitigate the effects of both linguistic deficits and personality issues, as detailed below.

Interlocutors: Learners' communication difficulties require sympathetic interlocutors, and the role of the interlocutor emerged as one of the primary factors affecting both the quality and quantity of students' interactions. In 242 instances, the interlocutor emerged as the primary obstacle to communication, while in 243 reports the interlocutor was seen to facilitate engagement. Savannah, for instance, tellingly reported in her very first WSJ: "Before this week, I didn't realize how dependent speaking experiences are on the person I'm talking to".

Unsympathetic interlocutors who spoke English complicated the situation even further. When the learners struggled to speak or understand in Arabic, their interlocutors often switched to English, as reported in 48 of the WSJ entries. In the first week of the programme, Colton described attempts to get beyond pleasantries that ended badly: "The only times that I was able to move beyond pleasantries, the intensity of the conversation died way down as I took time to process what I wanted to say and how I would go about saying it, or broke down into the Jordanian speaking in English as I struggled on in Arabic" (WSJ). He noted that he hoped eventually to find his ideal interlocutor, a NS of Arabic who "doesn't speak good English, is patient, and has time to talk to me".

Like Colton, Bert reported initial difficulties getting "past the general pleasantries" (Week 1 WSJ). He noted the inherent contradiction in his attempts to learn the language, namely: "I really want to improve my speaking abilities to the point that an Arab would willingly want to speak with me, but I can't get to that point until I practice more with a native who would be willing to speak to me".

Interlocutors' impatience often led not only to curtailed conversations, but also increased anxiety about speaking, which, in turn, further complicated interactions. On the other hand, learners reported higher quality interactions when their interlocutors were patient, accepting, and willing to speak Arabic (even if they spoke English well). In week 3 Devon reported:

> So in terms of speaking I feel like I'm moving on to a better place!...[I've] been talking with the same guy. He knows the programme we're doing, he's very familiar with Americans and is quite fluent in English, but he is very enthusiastic about helping us learn Arabic. So it was nice to sit and talk with him. I'd often venture outside of what I knew how to say in Arabic.

These patterns match those found by Dewey et al. (2013), who also found that interlocutor personalities, attributes, and English language proficiency affected formation of social networks with NSs of Arabic. Interestingly, they found that the

greater the English proficiency of the learners' Arab friends, the more gains students were likely to make in their Arabic speaking proficiency. They posit that Arab interlocutors who are highly proficient in English are more likely to be sympathetic to language learners and perhaps better able to tailor their speech to the needs of the students, like the trained tutors.

In her discussion of self-presentation in the L2, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) posits that learners want "to feel validated as an intelligent, mature, individual, worthy of friendship" (p 37). Interlocutors whose behaviors did not validate the learners' sense of self made learners uncomfortable and anxious, and, in some cases, simply shut down the conversations. On the other hand, sympathetic interlocutors, who were patient and interested in the learners, facilitated not only L2 use, but also deeper conversations.

For the most part (79 mentions by 46 students), learners reported that their best speaking partners were instructors and speaking partners assigned by the institute for one-on-one practice. Paul recounted: "At this point I still feel like the most positive speaking experiences I have, by a wide margin, are my [one-on-one] speaking appointments…. My teachers do a fantastic job of probing for opinion, feelings, supporting arguments, and analysis" (Week 3 WSJ). These findings are encouraging, given that language teachers are accustomed to interacting with non-native speakers, and, more importantly, are trained to "push" learners and to scaffold their utterances. Moreover, these findings are heartening in that they suggest that study abroad programmes can actively promote learners' language acquisition by arranging for one-on-one conversations with competent instructors. This is particularly important in light of current research indicating that, left to their own devices, many learners may not find the kinds of quality interactions with native speakers that lead to development of proficiency (Isabelli-García, 2006; Polanyi, 1995; Rivers, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998).

Although trained speaking partners are likely to provide the kinds of speaking practice most likely to lead to proficiency development, these conversations are not likely to lead to development of real friendships, of the type to promote cultural understanding. Though the learners were uniformly positive in their assessment of their speaking appointments, one participant noted that "At this point I still feel like the best most positive speaking experiences I have by a wide margin are my speaking appointments. This concerns me because speaking appointments are so sanitary" (Paul, Week 3 WSJ). Though learners primarily reported developing a good rapport with their professional speaking partners, these conversations did not generally lead to friendships or to any kind of entrée into the culture.

Another factor related to the interlocutor was the closeness of the interlocutor's relationship with the learner. According to the WSJs of 47 students (reported 189 times), learners who made one or two close Arab friends were

generally able to have higher quality speaking experiences. Samuel (Week 3 WSJ) indicated that familiarity with interlocutors led to improved speaking experiences: "I don't consciously try to find [new] speaking partners anymore. Which is good because now it is impossible to stay on pleasantries because my speaking partners know me so well, and they want to talk about more complex things".

After Kimberly found a regular speaking partner in week 3, she noted her relief, stating "I am not feeling like I have the same conversation over and over every day with somebody new, but not making any progress". Thus as learners became more familiar with their interlocutors and established friendships, they were able to move beyond mere pleasantries and push themselves to speak on a wider variety of less familiar, and possibly more complex, topics.

These findings accord well with research on social networks. Dewey et al. (2013) found that intensity, a measure of the closeness of learners' relationships, was a positive predictor of L2 gain during SA in Jordan and Morocco. Hillstrom (2011) posits that closer relationships facilitate deeper, more meaningful conversations. The data here offer support for this assertion: Learners perceive that the quality of their conversations improve as they develop closer relationships among the members of their social networks. The data in this study are of limited reliability, given that they rely on self-report. This is particularly true of the journals, where some students provide a good deal of information and others very little. Future research could utilize other methods of data collection, including participant observation and recordings of conversations to test the validity of learners' perceptions. Interviews with learners' friends and acquaintances would also yield additional insights.

3.3. Research Question 3: What strategies did learners use to improve the quality of their interactions?

The strategies that learners reported depended upon their communication goals. Pellegrino Aveni (2005), in her study on L2 use during SA, posits three distinct communication goals that influence learners' language choices, two of which emerged as relevant for the current study: social networking and L2 practice. Social networking is defined as "communication performed for the establishment and development of relationships between the learner and interlocutors and for the maintenance of etiquette and social propriety during interaction with others" (p. 28). L2 practice, on the other hand, refers to communication initiated or sustained for the purpose of developing L2 skills. Trentman (2012) notes that these goals can be mutually exclusive. In her study, learners often found English preferable for social networking. In the present study, the goals were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In most cases, learners tried to

establish friendships not only for their own sakes, but also in order to further their language skills. However, some of the strategies that learners used reflected one goal more than the other.

Because many learners in this study were serious about developing their proficiency, most were deliberate in their speaking experiences, typically pushing to go beyond pleasantries and to find opportunities to practise skills such as narration and description. Their journals describe their attempts to "deepen" conversations and to provide themselves with the practice they deemed so necessary. Many of these strategies were suggested to the learners in consultation with the programme director and TAs. Learners frequently posed questions in their weekly journals, and then reported trying techniques that their "coaches" had suggested to them.

Among the strategies learners used were those to keep their interlocutors engaged and to build rapport. Strategies for demonstrating interest in the interlocutor and for engaging their attention were reported 48 times by 15 learners. For instance, Lily reported: "I've found…the best way to get the time to go faster is to ask questions until you find a subject that they love talking about" (Lily, Week 2 WSJ). Similarly, Atticus reported: "I've gotten past the basics by being interested in the person you [*sic*] are talking to. Asking them about their family or education and trying to dive into that subject by asking more questions about that. It is so much better to stay on one subject and dive deeper in a specific area rather than jumping around or skimming the surface for information" (Week 2 WSJ). Heidi, too, found that quality questions were the key to better conversations:

> I was conversing with a 37 year old first year college student and I kept asking the normal questions about major and family, and then I stopped myself and asked better questions. Questions like, why starting an education so late? What are you doing to do with that? What's your dream regarding the impact you want to make in the world? etc… Bottom line, the better the questions, the better the conversation. (Week 3 WSJ)

In addition to asking questions, learners reportedly tried to increase the engagement of their interlocutors by finding topics that were of interest to them. Marshal, for example, reported: "I'm learning what's interesting to Arabs, and I try to focus on these things" (Week 1 WSJ). Gus, who over the course of the semester reported making several close friendships with Arabs, commented: "I've found that taking an interest in their lives and opinions has made quite the difference in making meaningful relationships" (Week 3 WSJ). Strategies meant to engage the interlocutor and build rapport tended to improve the quality of interactions, as well as strengthening relationships. As Atticus noted in week 9, "I find

as I show genuine interest in what others have to say and what they are doing, they are more prone to talk to you [*sic*]."

At times, however, some learners privileged language practice over authentic interactions. Wilbur, in his second weekly journal noted the conflict between real communication and the need for conversation practice in the following terms: "I am torn between wanting to develop true friendships for the right reasons and buttering up someone that I can continue speaking Arabic with." Some learners felt that they were "using" their interlocutors for strategic purposes. Such strategic use of interlocutors was coded 98 times in the weekly journals of 45 students. Among other strategies, four participants reported "monologuing," that is, delivering long monologues as a means of practicing particular functions. Learners were aware that this strategy often lost the interest of their interlocutors. For example, Emma

> tried to move all of my speaking opportunities in a direction that would help me prepare [for the OPI]. Any time I got the chance to describe a place or person, explain a process, or give an opinion, I went all out! I don't think my excessive rambling particularly endeared me to anyone, but with so little time left, I am willing to appear social [sic] incompetent for a little extra practice! (Week 13 WSJ)

Seven other learners forged ahead with Arabic, even when their interlocutors had switched to English, as Pam did: "When the girl I was talking to just refused to speak Arabic, I decided to work on speaking and not worry about not getting listening in and started narrating some of the presentation topics we've already practiced" (Week 5 daily speaking journal). Another tactic reported by nine students to keep Arabic going was to feign comprehension so as not to prematurely end the conversation. In the absence of appropriate pragmatic skills for continuing conversations, learners reported using body language as a means of showing their interlocutors they were interested. Patricia, for instance, reported: "If I don't understand words I usually smile and nod because I've noticed people tend to elaborate then, and I can usually pick up on the subject after a few seconds of confusion. I don't like to stop people every time I get confused because it gets frustrating and tends to hamstring the conversation" (PI).

Students occasionally told falsehoods to get in practice; four students reported using this tactic. Alan, for instance, reported in his daily speaking report from week 5: "I made up many lies to tell people in cabs. I practised narrating about my fake life." As it turns out, Alan created a false identity for himself after anti-American riots broke out near the U.S. embassies in Egypt and Yemen. He decided to tell people that he was Canadian, and "spent a significant amount of time creating a back story. I have told this tale to many cab drivers, and gotten fairly good at narrating the new life which I have created for myself." Two other students also

claimed to be from countries other than the US, but they did so in order to prevent natives from speaking English with them. One participant, Samuel told an Arab that he'd only been studying Arabic six months. This prompted not only a series of compliments, but also a number of questions about the learner's course of study. Samuel noted, "a lie to say I've only been studying six months, but it was worth the practice of describing the programme" (Week 8 WSJ).

In addition to strategies for prolonging the conversation or for ensuring an opportunity to speak, learners reported engaging in pre-speaking planning, particularly of vocabulary. Pre-speaking, of some form or another, was coded 144 times in the journals of 54 participants. Lance, in consultation with the programme director, decided to "come up with lists of generic adjectives, descriptions and expressions that can be widely applicable, in the hopes that this will help me manoeuvre with more ease in my speaking. Like if I find myself accidentally mentioning that I prefer the public transportation system in Boston as opposed to [my hometown], I have a set of 'facilities' adjectives that could generically describe any facilities of any kind" (Week 10 WSJ).

Others would choose topics about which they wanted to speak, read up on the topics, and then try to direct the conversation towards those topics. This tactic was coded 38 times, in the journals of 24 students. In particular, students used their current events class at the institute as fodder for conversations, as demonstrated in Jonah's journal: "What has really helped has been to use the topics we discuss in class… to help guide the conversation" (Week 6 WSJ).

In short, learners' interest in L2 practice was sometimes in conflict with their goals of social networking. Learners who privileged L2 practice over relationship building often sacrificed authenticity in their interactions in order to achieve their goals, particularly when authentic interactions failed to provide the conditions learners deemed necessary for learning. It is unclear what effect these tactics have on the development of relationships, and on learners' ability to become legitimate participants within a community of practice. To better understand the effects of such interactions on the interlocutors and how learners are received by these interlocutors and their communities, future research should take into account the perspectives of the individuals with whom students regularly interact.

What is apparent, however, is that an Arabic immersion experience is, as Trentman (2012) concludes, not a given. SA may not necessarily be the acquisition-rich environment that many posit it to be. Though programme interventions may go a long way toward improving the overall experience (see Trentman, 2012; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), the learners themselves must regulate their own learning and the learning environment, inasmuch as the sociohistorical context allows them to. As Bown (2009) notes, effective self-regulators actively shape the learning environment, creating experiences that produce the conditions deemed necessary for meeting their goals.

4. Conclusion

This study represents an attempt to document learner interactions during SA. The self-reported nature of the data limits the findings, as without direct observation it is impossible to access in detail the content of conversations. What one student perceives as a given language function, e.g. a description, may not match what other students, let alone OPI raters, consider to be description. Moreover, the findings document the experiences of learners in one particular programme in a specific geographic locale, and these experiences may not be generalizable to other programs. Nevertheless, the findings of this study offer preliminary insights into the nature of learner interactions, and provide a broader view of the totality of such interactions.

Data from this study further remind researchers that the "gender gap" in SA is alive and well, affecting access to native speakers and to certain kinds of discourse. While learners may attempt to transform the SA setting through use of strategies, certain aspects of the setting may prove impervious. In these cases, programme interventions and learner strategies are particularly necessary.

This study raises serious questions about a *laissez-faire* approach to students finding the practice they need, especially when it comes to more advanced level functions. Effective opportunities for practice and feedback require more of both the programme and the student. Many students do not have the benefit of enrolling in a programme that provides well-designed interventions and coaching. As a result, we underscore Dörnyei's call to "shift our focus…to the learner's self-regulating capacity, that is, the extent of the learner's proactiveness" (2009, p. 183).

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Appendix A
Weekly Speaking Journals

Edit form - [Weekly Speaking Report] - Google Docs   https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/gform?key=0At4CiQ2Z0e...

Weekly Speaking Report

Write a couple of paragraphs about this last week's speaking experiences, and plans for the next week. We are asking you to be honest, reflective and insightful. We want to know how you felt about this last week, but less in the emotional sense (I felt happy, I felt satisfied) and more in the analytical sense: how do you feel you performed, what did you do that went well, what could you have done better, in the areas of finding and getting through speaking situations.

Possible things to cover:
   (for finding speaking partners) What worked and what didn't work? What things did I do to encourage speaking, and what things did I do to shut off opportunities that may have presented themselves? How patient/antsy was I in these encounters? Did I make it easy or difficult to speak to these same partners again?
   (for the speaking encounter itself) What did I do to encourage getting beyond pleasantries? Did I find ways to separate from my American colleagues and have one-on-one conversations with Jordanians? Did I find ways to elicit and deliver narration, description, opinion, hypotheticals, etc., in the past, present and future time? Was I able to express and ask for opinion without getting emotionally involved, and making my partner feel I was sincerely interested in what he had to say? Was I aware of tense? verb agreement? noun/adjective agreement? pronunciation? Did I notice words that 'go together'? Did I pay attention to how my partners said things with the goal of eventually incorporating some of it into my own performance? Did I find a way to be interested in my partners and their lives? Did I find a way to start liking them?

We are interested in your honest reflections on your successes and failures this week, some self-reflection on
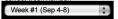
Name *
Choose your name from the list. Double check before submitting this form that you are doing it under your name.

Al-Jamal Sami   ⬦

Week *
This is the week you are reporting on, NOT the week during which you are writing the report. Week #1 begins on Sunday, Sept. 4th. Count from there. Check before submitting this form that you are submitting it under the correct week number.

Week #1 (Sep 4-8)   ⬦

Evaluation *
Type your paragraphs here.

Overall Experience *
Rate the overall success of this week's speaking experiences.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
pretty much a waste	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	very successful

Finding *
Rate your efforts to find partners and encourage high quality, one-on-one conversation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
didn't work very well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	really paid off

Comprehension *
Rate your understanding of what your partners said.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
didn't get much	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	understood everything

Communicating *
Rate your being able to say what you wanted to say, and it being understood by your partners.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
constantly frustrated	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	no trouble getting message across

Accuracy *
Rate your adherence this week to Arabic grammatical, word choice, and pronunciation norms.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
major tense, agreement, vocabulary, pronunciation (etc.) problems	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	I didn't make any errors at all

Fluency *
Rate your performance in terms of fluency

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
very halting, long pauses	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	words just came pouring out of my mouth