

Chapter 2

Social circles during residence abroad: What students do, and who with

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This chapter brings together some of the theoretical approaches which link residence abroad, social networks, and second language learning, and then confronts them with some of the data available on students' social activities and linguistic encounters during a sojourn abroad. In reviewing past and present trends in residence abroad research, the paper explores the applicability of a concentric circles model of socialisation while abroad (Coleman, 2013a) and of a complex dynamic systems approach in relation to different study abroad contexts.

Following the organisers of the conference at which the plenary on which the current paper is based, I use the term “residence abroad”, though alongside the equally current term “study abroad”. The British Government, in 1997, funded three major university projects to identify and disseminate best practices in this area. These projects (Coleman 2002) agreed on the generic term *residence abroad* as being more inclusive than, for example, *assistantship* or *year abroad*. *Residence abroad* implies living for an extended period in a foreign country, under many of the same conditions and constraints as local students and residents, and the term has since become standardised across U.K. academic contexts.

1. Folk linguistics, SLA research, and social networks

Student residence abroad for academic and language learning started long, long before the emergence of second language acquisition theory. Erasmus himself, with his peregrinations as student and scholar, exemplified the academic traditions of mediaeval Europe. The notion of learning languages through immersion, of residence abroad to enhance language learning, is equally deeply rooted, based on folk-linguistic notions of immersion, whose practices preceded theorisation by many decades.

In the English language, the folk representation of immersion is expressed through the phrase: “eat, drink and sleep” + noun. Examples from Google range from the predictable “eat, drink and sleep music”, or “eat, drink and sleep cricket”

to the less expected “eat, drink and sleep body-building” and the downright exotic “eat, drink and sleep moveable type”. As applied linguists, we are interested in those who, through residence abroad, eat, drink and sleep French or Spanish or Japanese or Arabic. Whether we accept a cognitive-interactional or sociocultural theoretical basis for second or foreign language acquisition, we agree on the crucial role played by intensive, frequent, meaningful interactions in the target language. Given this shared understanding, what is surprising is that it has taken so long for applied linguists who are researching study abroad to address the issue of social networks.

If students enhance their proficiency in the target language by eating, drinking and sleeping French (or Spanish, or Japanese, or Arabic), i.e. through the immersion which underpins the whole notion of residence abroad, then no literature review is required in order to identify the obvious research questions:

- Who do they eat *with*?
- Who do they drink *with*?
- Who do they sleep *with*?

Why did our discipline ignore such self-evident questions for so long, preferring instead to devise studies which produced inconsistent or even contradictory findings about the impact of “the study abroad context” on language learning? Perhaps our field of enquiry had the wrong starting point, since it emerged not from education but from SLA, not from real-life experience and practice but from the laboratory. (Deardorff, e.g. 2006, is not the only one to have observed and underlined the mutual ignorance and at times even mistrust which exists between those who administer student mobility programmes and those who research the outcomes.) At the time when study abroad emerged as a research topic for applied linguistic researchers, they were themselves immersed in a context which, if it sought at all to open the “black box” of what happened during a study abroad experience, often did so by looking at discrete parts in isolation, without considering that the whole could be more than the sum of the parts. Perhaps a further factor was the dominance of research into *classroom* practice, which led to a tendency to explore those aspects of language learning which can be most effectively taught in a classroom, and which easily fit a pretest, treatment, posttest research model. Classroom teaching, and hence classroom-based research, favours syntax, morphology, lexis, pronunciation, measurable fluency, reading, writing, speaking, listening, basic transactional functions (requests, apologies, etc.), or “tasks”, as opposed to those language skills which are typically acquired outside the classroom and over a long period of time, such as advanced pragmatics, sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of language use, prosody or languaging, let alone wider aspects of the real-world language learning process such as autonomy, identity, agency, and affect.

Sociolinguistic studies of residence abroad (e.g. Regan, Howard & Lemée, 2009) are immensely more labour-intensive than before-and-after independent-and-dependent-variables studies, but they unveil the real longer-term development away from classroom learning and towards the norms of native and expert speakers. They identify learning which cannot be achieved in the classroom, the very *raison d'être* of residence abroad. More generally, the research community needs to treat study abroad as a broader ethnographic domain, with language learning just one of many spin-offs, in order to recognise the significance of social networks.

2. The phenomenon under study

University study is growing fast, as is student mobility (though as shown in Chapter 1, the available statistics have to be treated with caution). There were claimed to be 4.3 million mobile students in 2011 (OECD, 2013), a five-fold increase since 1975. The European Union's Erasmus academic exchange programme, launched in 1987, has now helped 3 million participants to study or work abroad as part of their university study. Impressive as these figures are, they still represent a minority of university students. Fewer than one in 40 global students is mobile (OECD, 2013), while in Europe mobile students represent just 0.96% of the student population each year, or 4% during their entire programme of study. The number of U.K.-based students undertaking some form of outward mobility, after a decade of decline, has been increasing year on year since 2007 and is now higher than ever (Carbonell, 2013; http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/1011/countries/uk_en.pdf). Residence abroad is thus a significant phenomenon, with huge potential for further expansion (despite the cautionary note on the diminishing value of residence abroad struck by Teichler in his conclusion to Chapter 1). The importance of international experience for the subsequent employability of graduates (British Academy, 2012), within an increasingly globalised and marketised higher education industry, makes it even more important that we understand how the residence abroad process can work, both from linguistic and other perspectives.

If we take as the object of study the trajectory of the student during residence abroad from departure to return home and beyond, then each student brings an individual profile, comprising biographical variables, including personality, identities, motivations, willingness to communicate (WTC), agency, hopes, fears and goals, as well as direct linguistic variables (conventionally designated as L1, L2) and language learning variables such as styles and strategies. Additionally, the research subject may be conceived narrowly as a language learner or "learner-as-apprentice", or much more broadly as a language user and whole person (Coleman, 2013a; Kinginger, 2008; Kramsch, 2009; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). Similarly, the

impact of residence abroad may be researched narrowly, as a short-term “treatment”, or more fully across the subsequent life of which a semester or year abroad is so often a crucially formative part.

Labels, however necessary for identifying generalisable patterns, obscure the complex, multiple and dynamic nature of phenomena. The very widely used terms “L1” and “L2” are less precise than we would like to think. A much earlier review of study abroad research in Europe and North America (Coleman, 1998a) was prefaced by contrasting the European and U.S. contexts. I emphasised then – and it remains true today – that concepts of multilingualism and plurilingualism are deeply embedded in European legislation and the debate on language education policy in both the European Union and the Council of Europe. Yet the terms themselves rest on a particular historical conception of the nature of language, which prioritises viewing individual languages as discrete and normative entities (Spanish people live in Spain and speak Spanish, French people live in France and speak French). As linguists in our professional and private lives, each of us knows that each of the languages we use is not a clearly demarcated entity. My L1 English is composed of varieties, dialects, sociolects and idiolects which make it different not only from the L2 (or L3 or Ln) English of my international readers, but also different from the L1 English of my compatriots. My L2 French or German is not the normative French or German described in textbooks, grammars and dictionaries, but also a distinct, impermanent variety comprising imperfectly mastered conventions and paradigms, insights and inputs from the books I happen to have read and the people I happen to have met in successive social networks, but also elements and echoes of the other languages I have acquired and used over several decades of international encounters or heard in the current interaction, during which I am instinctively accommodating to the language of my interlocutor. My L2 is constructed afresh each time I use it. In preference to the terms “multilingual” (as in multilingual turn) or “bilingual”, which imply a count of discrete reified codes, I use the more messy “flexilingual” (Byrne, 2012).

The Dylan project (<http://www.dylan-project.org/>: see Berthoud, Grin & Lüdi, 2013), for example, has published accounts of the dynamics of contemporary multilingual practices in varied settings reflecting this perspective, and also discussed the policy and pedagogical implications, in a European setting.

I have repeatedly lamented the inconsistency of terminology related to study or residence abroad (e.g. Coleman, 2013a, p. 19). The different labels for different types of study/residence abroad embrace a continuum from long-term autonomy for advanced learners (a frequent British or European model) to short constrained group activities for less advanced learners (a frequent North American model). Contexts for study/residence abroad vary geographically and organisationally, in terms of location, accommodation, linguistic and social context, role (work place-

ment, volunteering, formal study, teaching as a language assistant), and host university study (language courses, content courses alongside local students, voluntary registration, no access to local universities). They also vary according to institutional preparation and support, such as those best practices concerning administration, support, assessment, debriefing on return, follow-up, etc. brought together by the Residence Abroad Matters projects (see Coleman & Parker, 2001), and still widely implemented by British institutions.

Residence abroad is also located in time, and during the decades in which it has become a serious research object, societies have evolved hugely, not least as regards domains such as travel and communications technology which impact upon the degree of immersion experienced (Coleman & Chafer, 2010). U.K. teenagers in December 2013 own an average of six digital devices: this “digital first” generation, for whom “always-on connectivity” is the norm (Logicalis, 2013), will shortly be considering study abroad.

It can therefore be argued that social and technological changes have impacted on residence abroad to such an extent that “abroad” today is not the “abroad” of even five or ten years ago, and that it is invalid to cite older studies as if they addressed the same residence abroad phenomenon. Documentation of this transformation can be found in more recent studies, such as those of Elola and Oskoz (2008), Hampton (this volume), Kinginger (2008), and Lee (2011). Future researchers need to analyse multimodal communication in Facebook, Skype or whatever online environments succeed them, both from a social networks and a pedagogical perspective – although no agreed methodology yet exists for recording, transcribing and analysing online multimodal language-learner interactions. A meta-analysis of research studies has recently shown convincingly that language learning supported by new technologies is typically never worse than, and likely to be better than, language learning without support from computer-assisted language learning (Grgurović, Chappelle & Shelley, 2013), while the recent European INTENT project (www.intent-project.eu/) has also illustrated some exciting new approaches to integrating telecollaboration with physical and virtual student mobility. In the social network context, therefore, researchers must embrace the full gamut of physical and virtual networks and their role in language learning.

Since all these divergent external factors interact with the individual’s changing identities, goals and motivations, the social encounters, language use, and physical and virtual networks which this book addresses, and the sheer serendipity of what happens during a foreign sojourn, referring to “the” study abroad context or “the” study abroad experience is a patent absurdity. It is a truism in statistics that aggregation conceals heterogeneity, and generalisations in the domain of study abroad are particularly likely to distort the diversity of the actual experience.

Given that the primary shared interest of readers of this volume is language learning, it is unsurprising that we frequently conceive of our student subjects as language learners, forgetting for the moment that language gain is just one objective or outcome. Those of us who have managed residence abroad programmes know that the students we send out are not the same students who return: the latter are taller, more confident, more flexible, more open to new experiences, as well as more linguistically proficient: the language learning is part of a much bigger picture. When they responded to a closed-item institutional questionnaire, it is true that mobile students ten years ago did see themselves principally as language learners (Coleman, 2003: *N* = 2325). Linguistic and cultural objectives were most important, with personal and professional objectives not far behind, and insights into the aesthetic/artistic culture of the target language community less important. But open questions in the same survey showed different emphases. The principal theme which emerged was a yearning for novelty: new countries, cultures, experiences, people and friends. Alongside this was a desire for personal development in terms of confidence and independence, and frequent reference to home, both as a fear of homesickness and isolation, and in seeking a different perspective on the familiar.

The more spontaneous responses focus often on identity ambitions, on an ideal L2 self which is more than merely linguistic (Coleman, 2003), for example:

- “The experience of living like a Russian, speaking Russian with many Russian friends and acquaintances from all walks of life”;
- “To feel like a French person, rather than an English person abroad”;
- “Putting myself into a French way of thinking, pretending to be French”;
- “Meeting Spanish people and becoming at one with them”.

Applied linguists who speak of “performing” identities will recognise what students are seeking to articulate. These findings receive striking support from a recent large scale survey of the priorities of college students of languages in the USA (Magnan, Murphy, & Sahakyan, 2014). This study showed students’ leading priority to be the social goal of participating in new “communities”, with “communication” second out of the five National Standards for Foreign Language Education.

A wholly different perspective on residence abroad comes from googling “Erasmus Orgasmus” (Ana Beaven introduced me to the term). Erasmus Orgasmus is, like nationality, an imagined community, though an online one, with a particular identity-linked characterisation: “When Erasmus began it was little-known, and promised nothing more than mobility and educational enrichment. Today it has become the infamous international social party network that allows European students to live a lavish lifestyle abroad under the pretext of studying” (cited in Coleman, 2013b, p.23).

It is important to bear in mind these different viewpoints when considering residence abroad, merely as a “sub-field of applied linguistics” (Kinging, 2009, p. 29) or a “major subfield of SLA research” (Ferguson, 1995, p. xi). Are we perhaps looking down the wrong end of the telescope, starting from our identity rather than that of the participants? For them, language learning is a sub-field of study abroad.

3. Identity, change and dynamic complexity

A U.K. government report (Government Office for Science, 2013) reiterates the now widely accepted notion that people can have many different overlapping and fluid identities which we perform according to contexts and in interaction. The report pinpoints three important ways in which internet technologies are driving changes in who we are: the blurring of private and public identities, increasing social plurality, and above all hyper-connectivity. If, previously, you were what you said, today you are what you tweet (Coleman, 2013b, p.24).

Curiosity has been found to be essential for successful study abroad. Curiosity is mentioned in various models of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), and linked to openness, flexibility, ambiguity tolerance, lack of ethnocentrism, interest, discovery of the new. It is developed in Houghton’s (2012) model of intercultural dialogue. A recent best-selling work of popular fiction brings together the themes of curiosity, of technology impacting the social context, and of performing identities:

It seemed to me that there was nothing new to be discovered ever again. [...] We were the first human beings who would never see anything for the first time. We stare at the wonders of the world, dull-eyed, underwhelmed. Mona Lisa, the Pyramids, the Empire State Building. Jungle animals on attack, ancient icebergs collapsing, volcanoes erupting. I can’t recall a single amazing thing I have seen first-hand that I didn’t immediately reference to a movie or a TV show. [...] I’ve literally seen it all, and the worst thing [...] is: The second-hand experience is always better. The image is crisper, the view is keener, the camera angle and the soundtrack manipulate my emotions in a way reality can’t anymore. (Flynn, 2012, pp. 80-81)

Committed travellers will acknowledge this recognition that the exotic is more familiar than in pre-internet days, that packaged online icons take precedence over genuine experience. Physical discovery of the new, at least in terms of monuments and locations, has become subordinate to virtual discovery. In taming the shock of the unfamiliar, the World-Wide Web is seconded by globalisation, and the

homogenisation of consumer products. On my first visit to France, I was confronted by vehicles such as I had never encountered before: Simcas, Peugeot 203s and 204s, Renault 3s. Visits to Eastern Europe even into the early 1990s produced Ladas, Wartburgs, Dacias, Trabants and Zils unknown in the West. When everyday objects such as cars are so different, there is inevitably a *dépaysement* which contributes to the sense of immersion in a new context, and which is far less sharp for today's sojourners, amidst global brands. In an internet-connected world, where you can see in advance from above and from street level the very buildings in which you will be studying, can the same level of curiosity (and the related definition of intercultural competence) be maintained?

Another example of the unstable (dynamic, complex) context of residence abroad can be found in evolving national social habits. The author's year abroad in Besançon coincided – and it was a genuine coincidence – with France's highest ever annual wine consumption, but since then, there has been an 80% fall in consumption, and 38% do not drink wine at all. For the older generation, wine is associated with national identity, *le patrimoine*; the middle-aged generation, aspiring to discrimination and quality, drink less but better, while for the internet generation wine is just another consumer product (Schofield, 2013). France, in reality, has changed.

Thus, our theoretical understandings are shifting, the focus of study abroad research is shifting, contexts are shifting through time and place. Theoretical approaches informing research methods have moved beyond narrow cognitive approaches concerning the individual brain. The interaction of participant and context, each with its own set of variables, has been theorised in nested ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), the learner-context interface (White, 1999), ecological and environmental approaches (van Lier, 2003), and in complex dynamic systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Complex dynamic systems have become widely accepted as a useful theoretical framework to embrace the rejection of essentialist notions of culture, identity, gender, nationality, motivation, attitude, language, and belief; and the recognition that all of these are fluid, dynamic, situated, and constantly reconstructed through interaction. Social network theories have a far longer history, and are addressed in other contributions to the current volume (see especially Chapters 8, 12 and 13). The first use of "network" in a metaphorical sense to refer to social relations dates back to Barnes (1954):

Each person is, as it were, in touch with a number of other people, some of whom are directly in touch with each other and some of whom are not. Similarly each person has a number of friends, and these friends have their own friends; some of any one person's friends know each other, others do not. I find it convenient to talk of a social field of this kind as a *network*. Earlier I used the term

web [...] However, it seems that many people think of a web a something like a spider's web, in two dimensions, whereas I am trying to form an image for a multi-dimensional concept. (Barnes, 1954, pp. 43-44)

The sociogram, invented by Moreno (1933), is a diagram of social networks, with the self (ego) and others shown as points and ties as lines. Tie strength is “a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361).

Definitions depend on your own social networks and disciplinary allegiances. Within sociology, group organisation and relations provide opportunities and normative limitations on individual psychological development, beliefs and actions. Mitchell (1969) described an ego-centred network characterised by degree of reciprocity, intensity and durability. Closed networks are characterised by strong, dense ties but these require effort to establish and maintain, and while allowing for sharing and co-building of complex knowledge, may not allow sufficient new inputs for learning. First-order ties may lead to second-order (friend-of-a-friend) ties. Ties may be uniplex or multiplex (e.g. a cousin is a workmate and friend).

Within sociolinguistics, social networks were first applied in dialectology to draw isoglosses based on shared lexical and phonological items. Subsequently, sociolinguists acknowledged inter-personal variation (class, gender, age) and intra-personal variation (situation or context, topic), leading to more complex portrayals of linguistic and social identity through group membership.

In applied linguistics, social networks were initially researched with reference to child L1 acquisition, and the development of bilinguals (e.g. Wiklund, 2002). More recently, social networks have been addressed in study abroad research (e.g. de Federico de la Rúa, 2003; Isabelli-García, 2006; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2008; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Ying, 2002), and this work is closely linked to identity studies (e.g. Dervin, 2008; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Papatsiba, 2003). Within some programmes, pre-departure social networks are deliberately constructed among outgoers in order to build a group dynamic (Haug, 1996). A quantitative measure related to social networks is the widely used Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz & Halter, 2004), which relies on self-report to quantify accommodation, the days and hours spent using L1 and L2, interlocutors, and use of the four language skills during foreign sojourns.

The density and multiplexity of sojourners' social networks reflect the extent of their social integration. Of particular interest to study abroad research is Granovetter's (1973, 1974) insight into the “strength of weak ties”. These are the links created with new acquaintances, and they contrast with established, durable links with friends and family: “Weak ties [...] indispensable to individuals' oppor-

tunities and to their integration into communities. Strong ties, breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1378).

The frequently observed difficulty for study abroad students of accessing locals is due not only to the latter’s uninterest in making contact with incomers who have come for a short, pre-determined stay and whose linguistic skills may make conversation difficult. In addition, both locals and the students themselves have already built close, stable bonds with family, friends and peers. Historically, before the Industrial Revolution, most human societies encountered few outsiders; it is unsurprising that humans are typically satisfied with existing social networks unless obliged by circumstances, or led by other concerns (e.g. sexual attraction or desire to practise English with a native speaker) to open them up.

Weak ties enable sojourners to develop as individuals. If no new ties are made, there will be less change in the individual. The “marginal, those less subject to social pressures” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1367) are more open to the reinvention of self and to new ideas. If you go abroad as an autonomous individual, then you are free of the constraints of the social identities which your previous social circle imposes upon you. Meeting new people can nurture new activities and new attitudes. This is the fundamental basis of learning through mobility. The new perspectives of new acquaintances allow and prompt you to re-invent yourself. The problem with research which adopts a pre-and-post design is that the person whom you greet on return from extended study abroad is not the same person to whom you said good-bye several months earlier.

The relevance of social network theories for study abroad objectives is thus self-evident, though only recently have they come to the fore in empirical studies (e.g. Dewey, Ring, Gardner & Belnap, 2013). Study abroad can offer huge opportunities for social interaction, often allied to an active need, born of isolation in an unfamiliar environment, to link up with people. The “Who?” “How many?” and “How deeply?” of new social networks will determine many of the outcomes. The identity of the new contacts has implications for the vehicular language(s) and thus for linguistic development. The extent of new contacts has implications for the extent of target language input, and can be linked to quantitative data elicited by, for example, the Language Contact Profile. How deeply the student gets to know new friends has implications for input, output, feedback and the range of language functions practised, hence pragmatic competence. And of course, greater contact with locals may impact other objectives (academic, cultural, intercultural, personal, professional), not to mention fun and tourism.

Social networks are thus crucial to the learning outcomes of study abroad. They tend to be formed early (from fear of isolation), and may subsequently either fossilise or develop. They represent a major influence on the variability of study abroad experience: Greater contact with the local community leads to greater gains. Interacting with host nationals has been shown to be a key to successful adjustment

(Chirkov, Safdar, de Guzman & Playford, 2008), while interacting with co-nationals reduces contact with locals (Chapdelaine & Alexich, 2004; Teichler, 1991).

Those administering study abroad programmes have long recognised the importance of social networks. Host institutions commonly organise ‘language buddies’ or paired tasks, parties, excursions, or accommodation which mix local and international students. Preparation, at least in a U.K. context, normally involves providing outgoing students with strategies for getting to know local people. Outgoers are encouraged to use the Resto U or Mensa for lunch, and to join a local church, sports clubs, choir or hobby group, while avoiding Irish bars and other co-nationals. They are urged to make an effort to get to know locals, for example, within the constraints of security, by advertising English lessons. Pre-sojourn activities to alert students to the significance of social networks (such as the sociogram described in Coleman, 1998b) can underpin strategies to achieve social insertion. The Residence Abroad Matters projects, building on existing practices, developed guidelines for ethnographic, out-of-classroom tasks and research projects which obliged students to engage with the local communities, and were highly effective (e.g. Roberts, 2001). The usefulness of Community Service Learning for social integration has been acknowledged in a number of U.S. projects: e.g. Abbot and Lear (2010). Homesickness, visits home and from home, frequent online contact, anxiety, and fatigue may reinforce existing strong (probably L1) networks, and risk limiting new, initially weak ties.

Perhaps the most significant route into new social circles is sex. Published research hardly mentions sexual attraction and relationships, yet there is overwhelming first-hand evidence that taking millions of fun-loving, novelty-seeking, outward-looking, bright, adventurous young people out of the constraints of home, family and old friends and releasing them into exciting and unfamiliar environments with the instruction to get to know the locals frequently leads to intense personal relationships, i.e. strong, multiplex ties. The student-generated website [thirdyearabroad.com](http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-you-arrive/long-distance-love/item/371-love-in-a-foreign-climate.html) has a popular thread on making and breaking intimate relationships: <http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/when-you-arrive/long-distance-love/item/371-love-in-a-foreign-climate.html>. The British Council’s (2005) booklet celebrating the centenary of the British teaching assistantship noted the number of marriages which the scheme had inadvertently sponsored. Any reader with study-abroad experience, whether as administrator or sojourner, will no doubt recognise the picture.

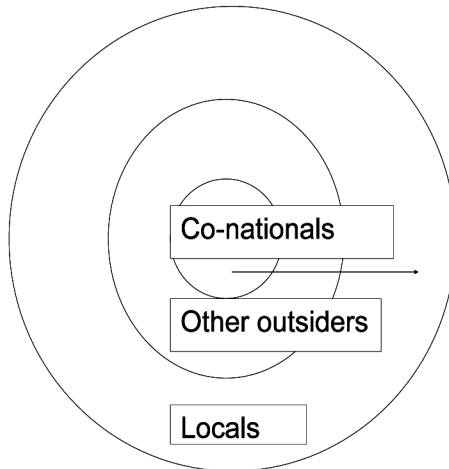
One poignant example from a diary entry of an Italian student studying abroad in England is cited by Beaven: “This week has been particular, with a happy side and a sad side. My English friend and I are not friends anymore, but a couple! We found out to be in love with each other and now we are always together. Obviously, when you feel extremely happy something bad has to happen and my beloved dog died three days ago...” (Beaven, 2012, p. 82).

Studies are clearly needed to identify the link between intimate relationship patterns and enhanced linguistic and intercultural competences, though ethical problems need to be acknowledged for both research and good practices.

4. Social circles

One way of representing typical social networks of study abroad is as concentric circles (see Figure 1, reproduced from Coleman, 2013a, p.31). This model, resulting from 25 years of researching and administering study abroad, visiting students abroad in Europe, and the Residence Abroad Matters project, may help us better understand the socialisation patterns of students during study abroad.

Figure 1. Coleman's concentric circles representation of study abroad social networks



Students begin by socialising with co-nationals. With time and motivation they add other non-locals to their social circles. If circumstances (including sojourn duration) permit and their own motivations, attitudes, actions and initiatives allow, they can additionally include locals. One circle does not replace another; rather, the process is additive, with the circle broadening during the sojourn. The circles represent progression of friendships rather than intensity as in Dunbar's (2010) "circles of acquaintanceship", and are not mutually exclusive. They reflect earlier work by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) and de Federico de la Rúa (2003, 2008). Co-nationals may or may not share a mother tongue (one in six British residents has a first language other than English).

Individual and institutional strategies can support the process. British universities will seek to avoid sending large groups of students to the same destination, and for this reason may prefer language teaching assistantships and other work placements to Erasmus exchanges. Assistantships and work placements each provide the outgoing student with a ready-made group of locals with whom they are obliged to talk (and, additionally, a professional social identity to start from), although of course work contexts introduce issues of hierarchy and may involve the use of a *lingua franca*. Many host universities arrange language partnerships, with set tasks for pairs to complete together, and this may lead to extramural social relationships. A local and already acculturated co-national community can also provide a shortcut to meeting the target-language community.

How do the concentric circles inform linguistic interactions and input? Much study abroad research concerns students who come from or travel to a majority English-speaking country. Other studies acknowledge the international role of English or English as a lingua franca (ELF), especially in higher education contexts (e.g. Coleman, 2006; Jenkins, 2013; Kalocsai, 2011). But for a majority, we might expect interactions within the inner circle to be in a shared L1, although some groups, especially from North America, formally agree to use the target language even amongst themselves while abroad. Interaction in the middle circle might be in the L2 or a lingua franca (often English), while interaction with the outer circle might range between L1, L2 and lingua franca (French in the case of the Senegal study described below, where English-speaking students interact with mainly Wolof-speaking locals). As already mentioned, however, reifying and numbering languages sequentially in this way, as if they were entirely separate entities, is as *passé* as uncritical acceptance of Hofstede's cultures, or pre-Davies definitions of the native speaker (Davies, 2003; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). Each of us, in an age of global migrations and internationalised campuses, possesses a linguistic repertoire embracing more or less complete but overlapping systems, and in any given interaction we will draw flexilingually on whichever resources best meet the immediate need.

All interactions, whether with co-nationals, other outsiders or locals, may of course impact the non-linguistic objectives of study abroad, in particular the development of cultural knowledge and intercultural skills, even if there is no linguistic gain and even if the home and host countries speak the same language. (Even within Erasmus, 44% of U.K. outgoers have no language component in their degree, and for every ten Erasmus outgoers there are three more heading for the USA, Canada or Australia: Carbonell, 2013). In social network terms, uniplex ties become multiplex, first order become second-order, dense networks in the inner or middle circles become spare networks (with thinner links) in the middle or outer networks, which themselves become denser.

It remains to be seen how useful the concentric circles model is in practice, either for research or the day-to-day running of student mobility programmes. It can be applied to the Senegal study (Coleman & Chafer, 2011), which comprised 47 completed questionnaires and 5 interviews with graduate participants who had completed a work placement in Dakar over the previous 25 years. Each former student evidenced an individual trajectory, with more or less stable networks. The patterns during the West African sojourn broadly confirm the model in moving from initial reliance on co-nationals to a greater social mix. Close friends and new partners were proportionately more likely to come from the middle than the outer (local) circle, but a majority made both non-local friends (85.7%) and close friends (69.4%), and Senegalese friends (91.7%) and close friends (52.1%). Networks formed during residence abroad often led to enduring relationships: Seventy-four percent had visited subsequently, a majority of participants (89.6%) had kept in touch, and 58.3% were still in touch years or decades later. The same is true of Erasmus students: 91.0% stay in touch with foreign friends met abroad, 57.0% with five or more of them, and 34.5% visit them subsequently (Boomans, Krupnik, Krzaklewska & Lanzilotta, 2008, p. 39). Having foreign friends is a predictor for international career mobility (Parey & Waldinger, 2008). We are reminded that study abroad research which focuses only on the sojourn itself, or at best a short period before departure and after return, may fail to capture its most significant impacts which are often lifelong.

The qualitative Senegal study data (about 30,000 words of open questionnaire responses, and the five interviews) show that networks are linked (albeit unpredictably) to accommodation, with a trend to move from arranged accommodation to individual choices, and to proficiency in French and Wolof: The latter helped to moderate outsider status. But networks are linked more closely with attitude or *savoir être*, such as using the same minibuses as locals for transport within the city, or even adopting local styles of dress. While most participants reported making progress in French, there was no formal measurement of L2 gains, so it was not possible to make any causal link between social networks and L2 acquisition.

The concentric circles might, it is hoped, help to design future research into student residence abroad. It would require a good deal more work to properly explore the fit of the model to other published studies, but a few examples of well-cited reports can be related to aspects of the model. Magnan and Back (2007) analysed a U.S. model of study abroad, considering English L1 and French L2. They found progress in French, but it was determined neither by accommodation arrangements nor by extent of self-reported language contact. However, spending time with co-nationals (even if speaking French) was acknowledged by participants as negative: "I lived and socialized with Americans. I think this hurt my French" (Magnan & Back 2007, p. 52).

Stewart's (2010) study of e-journals provides four case studies of U.S. students in Mexico which can be related more clearly to the model. There are frequent changes in accommodation, but daily skyping in English is found not to be significant in predicting linguistic gains. Individuals plateau at different stages. Molly socialises mostly with her inner circle (no middle-circle contact); Jennifer and Doug with both inner and outer circles; and Elise with inner and middle circles (notably one French student). The findings could be said to fit the model, in that the further they socialise from the centre, the closer these participants move to a target community identity.

Among mixed-method studies, Dewey, Bown and Eggett (2012) researched 204 US students in Japan, using the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire. The particular study abroad context comprised L1 English and L2 Japanese, with no middle circle. Nonetheless, social network structures emerged as a key variable, with results which "indicate connections between social networks, language use, and language gains", though the authors comment also that "a more comprehensive picture can only be gained through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods" (Dewey, Bown & Eggett 2012, p.130).

Finally, Beaven's (2012) thesis describes a longitudinal multimethod study of 21 Italian outgoers (teaching assistants, Business School, Erasmus students), and analyses the role of their physical and virtual networks in cross-cultural adjustment and the overcoming of obstacles, e.g. replicating Pitts (2009) in identifying how participants use co-nationals as a coping mechanism. It may be that studies of European and/or Erasmus contexts which Beaven memorably labels "international Erasmusland" (Beaven 2012, p. 221) are better matched to the concentric circles model than research in non-Erasmus contexts, but more research is required, especially with the kind of qualitative and longitudinal case studies which Jackson (2008, 2010) and Kinginger (2008, this volume) have recently conducted. The model may help to make explicit contextual factors which remain unexplored or unstated in many studies. We cannot ethically tell our outgoing students who they should eat, drink and sleep with, but we may certainly ask them when they get back.

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