The Role of Language Awareness in a Study Abroad Context

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This chapter reviews research into language awareness in a study abroad (SA) context and tries to answer the following questions: What do we know so far about it? What is the theoretical and/or practical impact of the research carried out on the topic? What further theoretical and/or practical developments can be envisaged?

How Does SA Compare with Other Learning Contexts?

Second language acquisition (SLA) occurs mainly in four primary contexts (Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey, 2004; Muñoz, 2008). The first context is a naturalistic setting, and this occurs when a learner immigrates to the host country for an indefinite period of time; in this context, participants are theoretically exposed to unlimited input, which is authentic and varied, and have multiple opportunities to practise the second or foreign language (L2). The second context is study abroad, which also occurs in the host country, but for a definite period of time that usually ranges from two weeks to one academic year. The characteristics of this context are the same as the naturalistic setting, in that typically participants are unlimitedly exposed to the L2, input is mostly authentic and varied, and they have numerous opportunities to practise the L2. The third learning context is the foreign language (FL) instructed setting, which takes place in the participants’ home country, namely in the students’ institution (school, high-school, university or language school). This context is usually characterized because it typically offers limited exposure to the L2 (it is usually restricted to the classroom setting, which in most cases takes place from 3 to 4 hours per week), the input students receive usually comes from the same source (mostly their L2 teacher who usually is not a native speaker (NS) of the L2), input is often neither authentic nor varied, and students usually have very few opportunities to practise the L2. The last learning context is the immersion setting, in which the learning occurs in the students’ home country, specifically in the students’ institution, but the L2 is used as the vehicular language. Thus, in terms of input, this context is in between the naturalistic and SA setting on the one hand, and the FL instructed setting on the other. As for type of input, it usually comes from the
students’ teachers, who are not always NSs of the L2, and opportunities to practise the L2 are usually restricted to the classes.

The increased need imposed by globalization to function in multilingual environments has boosted the popularity of SA programmes because going abroad is supposedly one of the most effective ways to improve an L2. The Erasmus programme, for example, has grown exponentially, from 3,244 students in 1987 to 272,497 in 2013 (EC, 2015). This boom in SA programmes has triggered a number of studies that try to document the effects of SA on several L2 domains: oral fluency, vocabulary, sociolinguistics, writing, grammar and pronunciation. Whereas it has been proved that an SA has a positive impact on the first three areas (oral fluency, vocabulary and sociolinguistic skills), its effects are not so clear regarding the remaining areas, since some studies have found evidence in favor of the SA context and some others have found that SA participants either do not experience any (significant) gains, or that at home (AH) participants do better than their SA counterparts. This lack of clarity on certain L2 areas is probably due to the complex nature of learning an L2 in an SA context, as previous research has highlighted (Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2008). Proof of that is that after years of investigation, there are still areas that remain controversial and there are still several gaps to be filled. One such gap is the role that awareness plays when learning an L2 in an SA setting.

Preliminary Considerations on Language Awareness

Explaining L2 development in an SA setting is a complex issue (Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2008), but trying to relate that with type of knowledge is even more complicated for several reasons. First, there are several types of knowledge and several definitions for each of them, and as DeKeyser (2009: 130) claims, “Given the difficulty of defining, and especially of operationalizing implicit and explicit knowledge […], the issue of the relationship between implicit and explicit learning is likely to remain controversial for some time to come”. Second, explicit knowledge has been characterized as knowledge that can be verbalized. However, as DeKeyser (2009: 121) points out, “not everybody has the cognitive and linguistic wherewithal to articulate that knowledge clearly and completely” and he goes on to claim that “it is virtually impossible to design ‘pure’ measures of implicit or explicit knowledge of L2” (DeKeyser, 2009: 122) given the problems with operationalizing these concepts. This problem questions previous research where participants were administered a grammaticality judgement test (GJT) and were asked to identify the ungrammatical sentences and explain the violated rule, because it was assumed that participants drew on explicit knowledge if they were able to explain the rule, and that they drew on implicit knowledge if they were not. The verbalization problem gets worse with child participants, because they clearly lack (meta)language, but this does not necessarily mean that they do not have explicit knowledge. Another added problem is related to the term ‘metalinguistic knowledge’. This term has typically been operationalized as “the learners’ ability to correct, describe, and explain errors” (Roehr, 2007: 175) or “the ability to focus on linguistic form and to switch focus between form and meaning” (Jessner, 2008: 277). The problem with metalinguistic knowledge is that this expression has been used with different meanings in the SLA field (DeKeyser, 2009, and see also the chapter by Simard and Gutiérrez in this volume).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in detail each type of knowledge and their relationship. For this reason, and in order to simplify concepts, in the present
chapter implicit learning has been operationalized as “essentially learning without awareness. Knowledge that has been acquired implicitly is knowledge that has been acquired and held largely without conscious effort” (Reber, 2003: 486), whereas explicit knowledge has been operationalized as the “conscious knowledge of and sensitivity to how language works” and it involves “noticing and reflecting on language form, meaning, and use” (Svalberg, 2013: 4). Explicit learning is considered to be “selective, effortful and reportable” (Mathews et al., 1989: 1099), whereas “implicit language learning takes place without either intentionality or awareness” (Ellis, 2009: 7). Hence, the main distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge is that explicit knowledge is conscious, procedural, effortful, slower and (to a certain extent) verbalizable, whereas implicit knowledge is unconscious, effortless, long-lasting, faster and not verbalizable (DeKeyser, 2009; Ellis, 2009). Moreover, with respect to metalinguistic awareness, the construct referring to noticing and reflecting on language form, meaning, and use (Svalberg, 2013: 4) has been adopted here.

Types of knowledge (i.e. declarative-procedural) and learning (i.e. intentional-incidental) have often been equated with explicit-implicit knowledge and these pairs also overlap a great deal (DeKeyser, 2009). For this reason, explicit and implicit knowledge have been used in this chapter as a proxy for awareness or lack of awareness, respectively (for a thorough explanation of the core concepts in the cognitive psychology of L2 learning see DeKeyser, 2009).

Rationale for this Chapter: The Relationship between Learning Context and Type of Knowledge

The relationship between learning context and type of knowledge is complex. On the one hand, it has been claimed that learning context mediates the type of knowledge being developed by students, and that settings that offer intensive language experiences tend to foster the development of implicit knowledge to a greater extent, whereas settings where exposure to the L2 is more limited and is usually limited to the L2 classroom foster the development of explicit knowledge to a greater extent (DeKeyser, 2003, 2007; Muñoz, 2012a; Sanz, 2014). However, this relationship between type of knowledge and learning context is not so clear-cut, because immersion contexts have also been shown to promote explicit knowledge and FL instructed settings have been found to foster implicit knowledge to a certain extent (Izumi and Iwasaki, 2004). On the other hand, previous studies have found that grammar knowledge predicts L2 gains when learning occurs in an SA setting (Brecht et al., 1993). As Kinginger (2011) suggests, insufficient pre-departure preparation could explain the lack of or poor L2 gains experienced by some SA participants (in line with DeKeyser, 2003, 2010). Hence, knowing the role that explicit knowledge plays in an SA setting is important, because research that examines relationships between L2 gains and (meta)linguistic knowledge can have an impact on classroom instruction, curriculum development, and programme design.

Therefore, the goal in this chapter is to examine previous studies that directly or indirectly examine the role of awareness when L2 learning occurs in an SA setting, in order to shed some light on the under-researched and inconclusive relationship between SA and awareness. In what follows, research has been classified regarding the type of awareness being considered: language awareness (studies that are not based on the participants’ perception of learning), cognitive individual differences concerning awareness, and language learning awareness (self-perception of the L2 learning process).
Previous Research on SA and Language Awareness

Very few studies have explicitly examined what type of knowledge learners develop under SA conditions. One of those that have is that by Izumi and Iwasaki (2004), who investigated the type of knowledge developed in 37 Japanese college learners of L2 English, who were studying English under three different conditions that would correspond to the following three learning contexts: instructed FL setting (n=12), SA (n=11), and naturalistic setting (n=14). Participants were administered a GJT and were asked to judge whether the sentences were right or wrong, and to specify what was wrong. The authors found that learners in the instructed FL setting gave a similar number of responses falling into intuitive, analysed, and metalinguistic knowledge. However, the SA and the naturalistic groups relied more on intuitive knowledge than on analysed and metalinguistic knowledge respectively, and that reliance on intuitive knowledge was even more evident with learners in the naturalistic setting. The authors found that participants in the instructed setting had developed explicit knowledge the most and implicit knowledge the least, whereas participants in the SA and naturalistic settings used implicit knowledge the most. However, participants in the instructed setting also developed some implicit knowledge and those in the SA and naturalistic setting also developed some explicit knowledge. Thus, results from this study show that learning context influences type of knowledge used.

In a different yet still related vein, Kinginger (2008) examined the role that awareness plays when learning the L2 in an SA setting. The author reports on a case study of 24 North-American college students (L2 French) engaging in a semester-long SA experience in France. Participants were submitted to several language tests, one being a language awareness interview designed to determine how SA influences participants’ knowledge of sociolinguistic variation in French. Kinginger found that participants did significantly better in the post-test, and some of them were even able to explain why they would use a specific form in a given situation. The author thus claims that exposure to everyday usage leads to significantly increased awareness of these target expressions of the L2. Although there is no clear evidence of whether these students learned these sociolinguistic or pragmatic rules implicitly or explicitly, it can be inferred from the students’ comments that they figured out the rules by themselves by just being exposed to the L2 and encountering several situations where the target form was used. Although it is possible that some students learned those implicitly, it is also possible that some students were attentive to working out the rule and thus it would indicate that they learned it somehow explicitly. As Kinginger (2008: 42) states, “through observation and/or direct participation, many of the students developed understanding in this domain”.

Similarly, Golonka (2006) examined the role of linguistic knowledge and L2 gains in an SA context. Golonka’s participants (22 North-American college student learners of Russian as an L2) were submitted to an oral interview prior to and after their semester-long SA experience and were classified as gainers (if they had improved their level between the pre- and the post-test) or nullgainers (if no improvement was perceived). Next, the author explored the possible relationship between gainers and null gainers and a number of variables that were believed to affect L2 learning while abroad. It was found that level of L2 grammar knowledge in the pre-test as well as number of self-corrected errors and sentence repair (both in the pre-test) predicted L2 gains while abroad. The author also found that gainers significantly self-corrected themselves more than nullgainers, indicating that they were monitoring and therefore were more
attentive to form than nullgainers. The influence of monitoring in an SA experience was also explored by DeKeyser (2010). Specifically, he examined (among other things) the influence of monitoring (that is to say, using explicit conscious knowledge of grammar and vocabulary while communicating) on the development of accuracy while learning in an SA setting. DeKeyser’s participants were 16 English-L1 Spanish-L2 college students who engaged in a six-week SA programme in South America. After submitting participants to several interviews and observations and administering them a set of questionnaires, the author found that the best predictor of post-test performance was initial L2 proficiency level. The author also found that students monitored extensively (although not always accurately), and that students with a higher L2 level seemed to be happier with their learning than students with a poorer L2 level. Therefore, these findings also seem to highlight the importance of explicit knowledge in relation to improving the L2 when learning occurs in an SA context.

More positive evidence on the role of grammar knowledge when learning in an SA setting comes from D’Amico’s (2012) study. D’Amico (2012) compared the impact of learning context (a short-term SA experience vs. an AH course) on L2 fluency and willingness to communicate. D’Amico’s participants were 23 North-American college students learning Spanish as an L2. Nine engaged in a six-week long experience in Spain, whereas the remaining 14 learned Spanish in their AH college. The author found that SA participants did significantly better than AH participants in five out of the eight measures of fluency, namely speech rate, unfilled pauses, average length of fluent run, clusters of dysfluencies, and repairs. Regarding the latter, D’Amico found that after SA, participants were able to make more repairs and do so more accurately (73% in the pre-test and 93% in the post-test), suggesting that participants monitored more and were more aware of their grammar production after the overseas experience. Again, these findings suggest that explicit knowledge increases in an SA setting.

Three other studies that indirectly shed further light on the relationship between learning context and awareness are Llanes and Muñoz (2013), Llanes and Serrano (2014) and Muñoz and Llanes (2014). Llanes and Muñoz (2013) examined the relationship between learning context (SA vs. AH) and age (children vs. adults) when learning an L2. The authors compared the oral and written gains in fluency, vocabulary, complexity and accuracy of four groups of Catalan/Spanish students, learners of English as an L2 (n=39 SA children, n=34 AH children, n=46 SA adults, n=20 AH adults). SA participants engaged in a 2–3 month overseas experience in Ireland or the UK, while AH participants remained in their home country. The authors found that SA participants outscored their AH counterparts, but this difference was more evident for children than for adults. Moreover, SA participants tended to improve oral skills more than written skills, whereas AH participants, namely adults, improved more writing skills than oral ones. The authors speculate that given that SA children were the group to make the most of the SA context, it could be due to the fact that they used implicit knowledge more than explicit knowledge, especially in a context where intensity to L2 exposure is granted. According to the authors, the role that implicit and explicit knowledge plays would also explain that (AH) adults improved more their writing skills given their age, that the AH context fosters more explicit learning than implicit learning, and the type of skills improved (writing as opposed to oral ones, since the latter are known to tap into implicit knowledge, whereas the former tend to tap into explicit knowledge). In a later study, Llanes and Serrano (2014) replicated Llanes and Muñoz’s (2013) study but included a sample of adolescents. The authors confirmed their previous results in that
younger participants did generally better than older participants in the SA context, and the reverse was true in the AH context. The authors found that adolescents usually fell between child and adult participants in terms of L2 development both abroad and AH.

Finally, Muñoz and Llanes (2014) also explored the effects of learning context and age, but this time on degree of foreign accent (FA). For this study, a subsample of participants from the Llanes and Muñoz (2013) study was randomly selected and again, participants were classified according to their age and learning context (n=13 SA children, n=15 AH children, n=15 SA adults, n=12 AH adults). Both in the pre- and post-test, participants were asked to explain a story in English, and these stimuli were presented to a group of NSs of English, who then rated the degree of FA of the excerpts obtained. The authors found that SA participants, regardless of their age, were perceived to have a significantly milder FA in the post-test. Although age was not found to be statistically significant, child participants abroad experienced the greatest improvement, coinciding with what previous research speculates: that learning context tends to foster implicit learning more than the FL instructed setting (especially when oral skills are involved), and that children (in this case SA children) tend to make use of their implicit learning mechanisms more than adults. As mentioned above, these three studies were not designed to examine the relationship between learning context and awareness, but their findings coincide with, or at least do not contradict, what previous research on implicit and explicit learning claims.

One of the main differences between explicit and implicit knowledge is that of awareness, and most of the studies reported so far have shown that awareness is of paramount importance when learning an L2 in an overseas setting, at least for adult participants. However, another important difference between these two types of knowledge is the durability of acquired knowledge. It has been claimed that whatever is learned implicitly is more durable than what has been learned explicitly (Lado et al., 2014), unless the latter has been automatized. Automatization is only possible after a large amount of practice, and therefore it is usually achievable in contexts that offer intensive exposure to the L2 and plenty of opportunities to practise the L2.

There are very few studies that have examined the long-term effects of SA experiences. One of the first studies to document the long-term effects of the L2 gains obtained in an SA experience was Llanes (2012), who compared L2 development in two groups of Catalan/Spanish children aged 11, who were learners of English (L2). One of the groups enrolled in a 2-month overseas programme (n=9), whereas the other remained in their AH institution in Spain (n=7). After measuring the participants’ oral and written fluency, vocabulary, complexity and accuracy before, immediately after and one year after the SA experience, Llanes found that one year after their return from the L2 country (during which they had received little exposure to English – just 3 hours per week in their English classes), SA participants registered higher values than in the post-test for all the measures but one (albeit not significantly so). These results indicate that gains obtained in an SA experience are quite durable. This suggests also that participants probably experienced some implicit learning (i.e. learning without awareness) or that they automatized certain aspects of the L2.

These findings were more or less corroborated by Llanes (2016), who explored the short- and long-term effects of an SA experience on pronunciation (namely FA) by two groups of Catalan/Spanish bilingual children, learners of English (L2). Both groups were aged 11 but one studied abroad for 2 months (n= 8) and the other (n= 6) remained in their AH school in Barcelona. A panel of NSs of English rated the
participants’ production on degree of perceived FA in the pre- and post-test, and in
the delayed post-test (one year after the participants’ return from the host country).
The results indicated that for the SA group, the difference between the pre- and post-
test was significant, whereas for the AH group it was not. Regarding the durability
of these gains attained, it was found that in the delayed post-test the SA participants
were perceived to have a slightly stronger accent than in the post-test, but the differ-
ence was minimal (the SA group scored 4.04 in the post-test and 3.96 in the delayed
post-test), whereas the AH group was perceived to have improved their L2 accent, but
again the difference was small (the AH group scored 3.57 in the post-test and 3.76 in
the delayed post-test). These results also show that although the SA participants’ FA
had worsened a bit, their FA one year after their SA experience was still better than
their AH counterparts. Hence, these results reveal that in terms of pronunciation, L2
gains are also quite durable (one year) and that, again, it took AH participants one
academic year to show minimal improvement in this aspect of the language.

More evidence on the lasting effects of short SA experiences comes from three stud-
ies included in Pérez-Vidal’s (2014) volume, where several scholars report on the effects
of learning context (AH vs. SA) on different L2 domains; however, instead of having
two groups of participants to compare the effects of learning context, the same par-
ticipants were followed over a 2.5-year period during which they learned the L2 in two
different contexts. The first data collection time was conducted upon participants’ entry
at university; the second data collection was gathered 6 months later (FL instructed
setting), previous to the participants’ departure to the L2 country. The third data collec-
tion was conducted immediately after the participants’ SA experience (SA), and the last
data collection time was conducted 15 months after their SA experience, during which
participants again received formal instruction in their home university. The participants
were Catalan/Spanish advanced learners of English (L2) majoring in Translation and
Interpreting. One of these studies is by Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014), who documented
the progress in several measures of oral fluency such as speech rate, articulation rate
and pause frequency among others, by a group of 27 students. The authors found that
most of the significant gains were obtained during the SA period, and that most of
these gains were kept and even improved 15 months after the participants’ return from
abroad. Likewise, the 73 learners in Pérez-Vidal and Barquin’s (2014) study were found
to improve their writing skills significantly after their sojourn, and these gains were also
maintained 15 months after their return from the host country. Studies documenting
the gains on listening comprehension as a result of an SA experience also yield positive
results regarding duration of gains. The study by Beattie, Valls-Ferrer, and Pérez-Vidal
(2014) examined the listening comprehension development of a group of 75 students.
A subsample of 33 participants was further tracked to report on the long-term effects
of gains obtained in the overseas program. The authors found that 15 months after, the
SA participants scored even higher than immediately after the SA, and although this
difference between the post- and the delayed post-test was not significant, it reveals that
these gains in listening comprehension were maintained. However, the lasting effects
of SA are not so clear in Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau’s (2009) study, who examined
the development of written skills by a group of L1 Catalan/Spanish advanced learners
of English (L2). Following the same design mentioned regarding Pérez-Vidal’s (2014)
volume, the researchers found that whereas their participants showed improvement in
several measures after the SA experience, they seemed to score lower in the delayed
post-test in most of the measures but two.
Thus, the studies mentioned so far about the lasting effects of the L2 gains obtained in an SA experience seem to indicate that said gains are indeed quite long lasting. In all of these studies but one, most of the gains were maintained or even improved one year or 15 months after the SA experience. However, it must be pointed out that evidence coming from adults is special, in that it comes from a very specific group of learners: learners who were majoring in FLs with an advanced level of the L2 and probably a high motivation to learn it. Moreover, because they were majoring in a degree involving FLs, they were largely exposed to the L2 even in their home institution, at least much more than the child participants in Llanes’ studies. Therefore, regarding the durability of SA gains, findings coming from Pérez-Vidal’s (2014) volume could be due to a combination of several factors, rather than the SA per se.

A word of caution is in order here. First, the studies included in this section involve small samples of participants. Second, although previous research seems to confirm that the role of pre-departure L2 knowledge is determinant when learning an L2 in an SA setting, future studies that aim to explore the relationship between learning context and type of knowledge should first try to examine this relationship explicitly (and not indirectly as is the case of several studies mentioned in this section). Third, it is necessary that further research investigates the long-term effects of SA experiences. And fourth, future research should be conducted with participants of different ages, as age is indeed a crucial factor when it comes to exploring type of knowledge.

**Previous Research on SA and Attention-Related Cognitive Capacities**

Distinguished scholars such as Long, Swain and Schmidt have long pointed out the importance of the role of cognitive individual differences such as awareness or attention when it comes to learning an L2. According to Sanz (2014: 6), “individual differences have the potential to affect not only the amount of input, interaction and output the learner is going to seek, but equally important, the way the input is going to be processed, given the roles that working memory and attentional control have in explicit processing of the language”.

However, few studies have examined the role of cognitive individual differences when learning in an SA context. One of the first studies to do so is that by Tokowicz et al. (2004), who investigated the effects of SA experiences and the role that working memory (WM) played on the type of errors made during a translation task. Tokowicz et al.’s study included 37 participants who were proficient in English and Spanish (n=15 Spanish-L1 English-L2 and n=22 English-L1 Spanish-L2) and who were administered a set of WM and translation tests. Participants were distributed into groups according to amount of previous SA experience and to amount of WM capacity. The authors found that SA fosters the use of approximate translations to communicate, but only students with high WM can do so because of the multiplicity of items to be held in memory simultaneously. The role of WM in an SA setting was also examined by Sunderman and Kroll (2009), who explored whether a certain level of cognitive resources played a role when learning an L2 in an overseas experience. More specifically, the authors examined the role that WM played in lexical comprehension and production in participants with and without previous SA experiences. The 48 English-L1 Spanish-L2 college students in Sunderman and Kroll’s study were submitted to several WM tests and to several language comprehension and production ones. The authors found that learners with previous experience abroad were faster and more accurate in terms of L2 production.
than learners with no previous SA experience, and the difference in the production tests was even more striking than for the comprehension one. The authors found that without a minimum level of WM participants were unable to take advantage of the SA context in terms of L2 accurate production. Sunderman and Kroll speculate that having a higher WM capacity may allow learners to focus on a greater number of factors simultaneously. In other words, participants with a higher WM knowledge may pay attention to several aspects of the L2 at the same time. In a more recent study, Grey et al. (2015) also investigated the role of cognitive capacity and L2 grammar and lexical development during a short-term intensive language exposure. Twenty-six English-L1 Spanish-L2 advanced students who engaged in a five-week SA experience in Spain were administered a GJT, several lexical decision tasks (LDT) and several memory tasks before and after their SA experience. The authors found that, overall, after the SA participants improved their accuracy in judging the items and that they did so faster as their reaction times decreased in the post-test both for the GJT and the LDT. As for the possible relationship between memory and GJT or LDT, no significant correlations were found between these variables. For this reason, the authors speculate that cognitive capacity may play a more important role with learners with a lower L2 level than with advanced learners (contrary to Tokowicz et al.’s, Sunderman and Kroll’s, and Segalowitz and Freed’s studies, who hypothesized that WM played a more important role with advanced learners).

More positive evidence on the role that cognitive capacities play when learning abroad comes from O’Brien et al. (2007). The authors examined the role of phonological memory (PM), understood as “the ability to recognize and remember phonological elements and their order of occurrence” (p. 558) and operationalized as “performance on a [serial nonword recognition] SNWR task—a task that involves recognizing whether two otherwise identical meaningless phonological sequences have their constituent elements in the same order” (p. 563) and L2 fluency gains in participants learning AH and SA. Forty-three English-L1 Spanish-L2 university students (n=18 studying AH, n=25 SA) performed a SNWR task and were submitted to an oral proficiency interview in Spanish at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The authors found that students with better initial PM made greater gains in L2 fluency than those with lower PM, irrespective of learning context. The authors posit that given that previous studies with child participants have observed a relationship between mean length of run and grammar complexity (Adams and Gathercole, 1995, 2000), the relationship between PM and L2 fluency observed in their study could also be related to grammar skills. Since O’Brien et al.’s participants are not L2 proficient learners, the authors speculate that PM plays an important role when the production of the L2 involves a controlled, effortful process rather than an automatized one, whereas that would not be the case with participants with a higher L2 knowledge who would probably have automatized certain aspects of the L2 (in line with Grey et al.’s 2015 study).

Another study examining the role of cognition on L2 development, namely pragmatic comprehension, is Taguchi (2008). The author explored whether there were gains in accurate and speedy comprehension of implied speakers’ intentions, and whether these gains, if any, were related to cognitive processing ability. The 44 Japanese-L1 English-L2 college students in Taguchi’s study were administered a pragmatic listening task, a lexical access test and a language contact survey at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of their 4-month SA experience. Taguchi found that participants significantly improved accuracy in implied meaning between the first and last data collection times.
(16 weeks apart) and that participants responded faster in the post-test. The author attributes this finding to the role that practice plays, in that at the beginning participants need to pay a great deal of attention to the L2, but after large amounts of practice these aspects of the L2 are automatized, which implies faster responses and there is no need for conscious attention to the L2. This allows learners to allocate their attention to other aspects of the L2. The author also speculates that much of the practice was incidental, without conscious attention, which suggests that implicit learning might play a role. Taguchi also found some significant correlations between L2 gains and amount of practice.

Finally, evidence on the role of cognitive measures on L2 gains while abroad also comes from Segalowitz and Freed (2004). The authors examined the role that speed of lexical access, efficiency of lexical access, and speed and efficiency of attention to control play on L2 oral fluency when learning in an overseas programme. Participants were 22 English-L1 Spanish-L2 college students engaged in a 4-month-SA experience in Spain, and 18 AH students learning in their home university in the USA. Participants were administered a lexical access, an attention control test, and an oral proficiency interview. The authors did not find any significant differences between the AH and the SA groups in terms of cognitive measures. However, when they explored whether initial levels of cognitive performance were related to L2 gains, they found that participants with higher levels of cognitive performance in the pre-test made higher gains in the Oral Proficiency Interview.

Thus, all the studies mentioned in this section highlight the importance of attention-related cognitive capacities when learning abroad. Moreover, findings from previous research reveal that the SA context is positive to improve aspects such as accuracy, lexical retrieval and reaction times, which suggests that learners either experience some implicit learning or that they are able to automatize certain aspects of the L2 while abroad (which would highlight the importance of explicit knowledge prior to the SA). The positive impact that attention-related cognitive capacities have on L2 learning is undeniable, because it is speculated that the level of cognitive capacity mediates amount of attention allocated to other aspects of the L2 and because it positively affects quality language performance. However, it would be interesting if further research clarified the reason for such findings, and if possible with a larger pool of participants (note that the number of participants in the studies included in this section is rather low) and with participants other than university students (all the studies mentioned here examine the impact of cognitive capacities in an SA with college students). Thus, it is of paramount importance that further research addresses the role of cognitive capacities and learning context with younger participants given that younger students such as adolescents are also usual participants in mobility programmes, and the effects of their cognitive capacities during a sojourn abroad are unknown. Finally, future research should also try to disambiguate the relationship between cognitive capacities and initial L2 level as results are unclear. Some scholars speculate that cognitive capacities play a greater role when the participants have a high L2 level, whereas others claim the opposite.

**Previous Research on Language Learning Awareness**

The Association for Language Awareness defines Language Awareness as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (ALA, n.d.). What participants consciously
perceive while learning and using an L2 abroad also offers an interesting perspective concerning awareness. Again, few studies document SA participants’ self-perceptions of L2 learning and use. One of the first studies to document SA participants’ perceptions in language learning was that by Lord (2009), who reports on a case study of a college student who spent a year in Spain to improve her Spanish (L2). Lord’s participant was asked to write weekly journal entries about her SA experience, focusing on several topics, with language learning awareness being one of them. Although comments on L2 learning were not the most common ones in her diary, she was aware of the difficulty of learning an L2 and the requirements it involves, and she was also aware that she was not meeting them. She reported to miss more language corrections from her Spanish-speaking friends and showed concern about her weak pronunciation. Lord concludes that although her participant wanted to improve the L2 and she was aware of what she needed to do to improve, she did not quite achieve her goal. The author attributes this finding to the “decreased motivation…in the later parts of her stay” (p. 138).

More evidence on SA participants’ self-perception of learning comes from Stewart (2010), who followed eight English-L1 Spanish-L2 participants spending a semester in Mexico. The author submitted them to several linguistic tests and asked them to write entries about their learning in e-journals. Results show that participants are aware of their progress, and reflections from the journal show that participants’ initial L2 explicit knowledge as well as attention to the L2 are crucial to improve the L2. In a similar fashion, Tragant (2012) explored what linguistic and non-linguistic development learners perceive as a result of their SA experience. Tragant found that most students perceived greater improvement in listening, speaking, reading, vocabulary and pronunciation than in areas such as writing, grammar and accent. Thus, most students were able to notice some linguistic improvement after one semester abroad, and they were even able to perceive in what areas this improvement took place.

Muñoz (2012b) asked 142 undergraduate students taking an English Studies degree in Spain whether there had been a turning point in their lives when they perceived they had improved their English. Most of the participants identified a turning point in their lives (n=129), and 108 students identified a turning point that involved an intensive experience, such as an SA (n=50), an AH intensive formal course (n=33) or an AH informal experience (n=25), and students highlighted the role of L2 practice.

Finally, Llanes et al. (2015) looked at the role of learning context and individual differences on L2 writing development. The participants of their study were 64 Catalan/Spanish adolescents, learners of English (L2) who engaged in a 3-week SA experience. Participants were grouped as successful or less successful learners depending on a mean score out of the five writing measures analysed. The authors found that successful learners had previously undergone intensive experiences of some type, whereas less successful learners had not. A surprising finding was that successful learners felt they had learned less than less successful learners, and the authors hypothesize that successful learners might be more self-demanding than less successful learners. Finally, the authors found that successful learners perceived the L2 to be easier than less successful learners, and that L2 contact and practice influenced L2 learning.

All the studies mentioned in this subsection are based on self-reported data by participants, which might undermine their validity. However, given that all the studies but Llanes et al. (2015) include adult participants and their self-reported data seem to coincide with their actual progress, it can be claimed that research on language learning awareness suggests that participants are mostly aware of their learning progress and of
the activities they need to do to improve the L2. However, there are other factors that come into play and that might foster or hinder L2 learning. Additionally, L2 learners seem to acknowledge the role of an SA context as a turning point in their lives when their L2 improved significantly. Further research is clearly needed here as there are few studies that address the role of perception of language learning. It would be valuable for such further research to address this issue from both a quantitative and a qualitative point of view since quantitative research results will be more generalizable and robust, and qualitative research will reveal a more in-depth explanation of what participants experience while learning an L2.

Concluding Remarks

All the studies mentioned in the present chapter address the role of awareness in an SA context, and they do so either referring to linguistic awareness, to the role that some attention-related cognitive capacities such as WM or PM play, or to language learning awareness. Studies focusing on linguistic awareness seem to agree that awareness (understood as explicit knowledge) plays a crucial role when learning an L2 in an overseas context, because it has mostly found that participants with a higher L2 pre-departure level experience the greatest gains, and because grammar knowledge has been found to correlate with several L2 skills. However, it must be pointed out that in most of these studies, the participants were all adults. This could bias the results in favour of explicit knowledge, because adults seem to make more use of their explicit learning mechanisms, while children tend to use their implicit learning mechanisms. Having said that, however, the very few studies considered in this chapter that involve children as well as adults do echo the findings of the studies with adult participants only.

As for the duration of gains attained in an SA context, the little existing research seems to indicate that gains are quite durable (participants keep the gains 12–15 months after their SA), which implies that SA participants, regardless of their age, either experienced some implicit learning, or that they had the opportunity to automatize their knowledge of the L2 in the SA setting after practising the L2 to a larger extent. However, a word of caution is needed here because most of these studies comprise a rather low number of participants (some of them are just exploratory studies) and they report the effects of short SA experiences. Hence, further research could explicitly address the relationship between learning context and awareness, and with larger numbers of participants, with more varied populations (participants of different ages), and including participants with longer SA experiences. Like studies focusing on language awareness, those centred on the role of cognitive capacities also highlight the crucial role that cognitive capacities play when learning in an SA context given that they seem to determine the amount of attention learners need to allocate on the L2. What remains to be clarified is whether cognitive abilities benefit more advanced L2 learners or learners with a lower L2 level. Further research on the role of cognitive capacities in an SA setting is clearly needed, especially research including younger participants as there is no study to document its effects on young learners.

Finally, research regarding language learning awareness shows that adult participants are mostly aware of their L2 learning and of the aspects that foster or hinder learning, and that many students consider an SA as a turning point in their lives when their L2 improved considerably. Again, results must be interpreted with caution because of
the scarcity of studies reporting on the language learning awareness in an SA setting and also because said studies are based on self-reported data, which might limit their validity.

SA is a growing but still relatively new research field, and it is notable that most of the studies in this chapter were not designed specifically to address the role of awareness. This, along with the problems mentioned in the section on preliminary considerations on language awareness, means that conclusions are more tentative than robust, and that findings need to be further substantiated in future research.

Related Topics
Study abroad; learning context; language awareness; explicit knowledge

Notes
1 A distinction between language learning and language knowledge is in order here. Whereas language learning refers to the ‘process’, language knowledge refers to the ‘product’ (Ellis, 2009: 6). In this chapter both concepts will be used.

2 Participants in Izumi and Iwasaki’s study did not study in a naturalistic setting in the sense that they immigrated to the L2 country, but they differ from the SA participants in their length of stay abroad, and this could be compared to learning the L2 in a naturalistic setting.

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