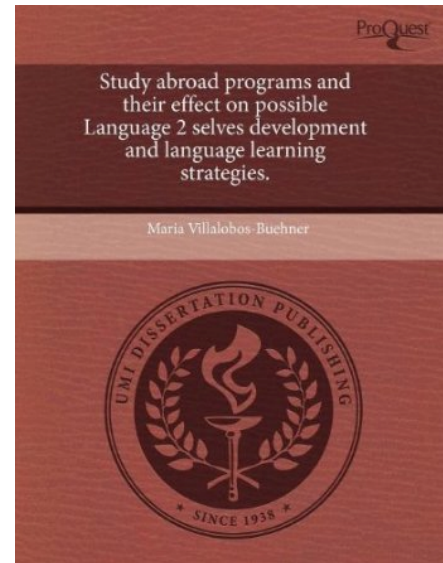Book Review

Study abroad programs and their effect on possible Language 2 selves development and language learning strategies
by Maria Villalobos-Buehner
Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (2009)

At the heart of this research is Dörnyei's (1990) theory of possible selves and temporal model of motivation. From that framework, L2 motivation is conceptualized as "the desire to achieve one's ideal language self by reducing the discrepancy between one's actual and ideal L2 selves" (p. 21). The author draws heavily upon Dörnyei's principles throughout this text, seeking to explore how study abroad programs might influence the development of L2 selves. Borrowing from Gardner's (1973, 2007) models of integrative motivation, Villalobos-Buehner also introduces the notion of an "integrative self," describing it as "that self that is and feels part of the target language community" (p. 76). She suggests study abroad (SA) can provide opportunities to integrate L1 and L2 selves, but cautions that the results might be short-lived if participants do not take steps to continue developing their L2 selves. Other variables considered in this 143-page text are "student involvement" – the extent that SA participants actively interact with L2 community members – and "L2 attrition" – which can be interpreted as an erosion of L2 identity.

Before evaluating this study's findings, first we should consider its procedures.

Method

Sampling

The informants in this study were twenty undergraduate students from one state university in the United States who studied in a non-English speaking country for an average of six weeks (*Min* = 4 weeks, *Max* = 14 weeks) in 2008.

Five limitations about this sample need to be acknowledged. First, the fact that 19 out of the 20 informants were female makes discerning the effects of gender on L2 experiences difficult. Second, it is unclear how many informants in this study were *heritage language learners*: those studying a tongue of their forebears. As Wen (2011, p. 41) notes, heritage language learners tend to conceptualize their language learning experiences differently than non-heritage language learners. Thirdly, it was not stated which (if any) of the informants were also taking classes taught by the author. Since over two-thirds of the sample informants were learning Spanish and the author was teaching that language, some her students were likely in the sample. Although I do not concur with Grant and Sugarman's (2004, p. 723) suggestion that teachers avoid using their own students as research subjects, this issue should be made explicit because it can influence what informants choose to disclose. Fourthly, there were no *long-term* SA participants in this sample: all informants were abroad merely one semester at most. Finally, the target languages / SA destinations need to be considered. 19 of the informants were Spanish or French students at venues in Mexico, South America, or Europe. One studied Italian in Florence, and none had studied an Asian language or were at an Asian SA destination.

Instruments

This qualitative study employed two instruments. First, *semi-structured interviews* were conducted soon after informants returned from their SA. The interview protocols and core questions are lucid and detailed. However, this study relies entirely on *self-reports*, which might or might not reflect actual behaviors.

Second, two months after the initial interviews a *focus group* session was held. To the author's credit, the protocol for this was clearly described. Discussions centered on ways the participant's L2 self-image changed during SA, their motivations for SA, and how they planned to retain the L2 gains they had made overseas. One limitation of focus groups - which the author duly acknowledges - is that shy or quiet persons can be overwhelmed by gregarious ones. Another limitation concerns *projectability* – the extent that the data from a group pertains to a population as a whole. The reason is that group dynamics influence what participants say (and choose not to say).

Focus groups generally consist of 8-10 participants (Smith, 1977, cited in Fern, 1983, par. 6). Villalobos-Buehner had 3-8 in her groups. Moreover, four informants were unable to attend any focus group, doing individual interviews instead. The practical need for this should not be questioned. What we do need to remember is how group size can sometimes influence reported data: a small group may interact quite differently from a large one.

Data Analyses

According to Seidel (1998), qualitative coding procedures can be classified along a heuristic-objectivist continuum. Heuristic coding tends to rely on broad, abstract categories that denote general trends. Objectivist coding tends to be more precise, linking the data closely to identifiable elements. In this work, the author demonstrates a preference for heuristic coding.

Villalobos-Buehner coded the data thematically into four general categories: (1) L2 Self-Availability and Goal Setting, (2) L2 Self-Accessibility, (3) L2 Self and Academic Self, and (4) L2 Self and Other Selves. It is no coincidence that these categories dovetail perfectly with Dörnyei's theories. Personally, I find the tendency to delineate so many different selves a likely research design artifact and something of a confabulatory Gordian knot: it seems easy to construe an almost infinite number of possible selves.

One data analysis concern is that the author alone coded all the data, making *expectancy bias* (Sheldrake, 2008) a possibility. A better practice might have been to use at least two independent coders, but whether this would be practically feasible is questionable. To her credit, a *peer debriefer* – someone who reviewed the transcripts "to check for significance and inconsistencies" (p. 49) – was employed. Since this was part of her doctoral thesis, the data was also presented to an *external auditor* "to help generate questions that other researchers might ask" (p. 49).

A more subtle concern is that only lexical data was preserved in the data transcriptions. Although videotaping was employed, this study did not analyze pause length, voice volume, or any non-verbal behaviors. Hence important clues as to how respondents may have felt about various issues may be missing this study.

Now let us consider to the results.

Results

In this study the author has a tendency to focus on commonalities rather than differences or idiosyncrasies when reporting results. At times she seems to clump together participants into broad, monolithic categories. These quotations illustrate that tendency:

Once the subjects were at their destination, their L2self was more available. That is, there were more

opportunities for them to move towards becoming more fluent L2 speakers. Students started to take an active role in their learning process in order to achieve the goal of becoming more fluent in the target language. (p. 55)

Immediately after the subjects came back from their experience abroad, they faced a period of adjustment between their identities as L1 and L2 speakers. They also looked for opportunities for their L2 selves to emerge in order to keep their language gains and continue improving their language skills during the semester. (p. 59).

The students perceived their L2 self as a tool to achieve other selves; and they faced some challenges such as others stronger selves, lack of time and lack of resources in their path to achieve their L2 goals. (p. 75)

Study abroad makes it easier for people to situate their possible self in a target language speaking environment. (p. 113)

Those looking for contrasting examples of how varied the SA experience can be may find the results of this study summarized too broadly. However, this vagueness is in fact simply the recommended way to report focus group data (Creswell, 1998, as cited by Iowa State University Extension Office, 2004, p. 4)

In my view, the main value of this text is not in the data it generates, but rather the theoretical questions it raises. For example, does a lack of balance between various possible selves correlate with a lack of self-control (p. 25)? Villalobos-Buehner cites one study suggesting that if there is a mismatch between one's possible self and feared self, delinquency is more apt to occur. "Motivation to attain" and "motivation to avoid" are both suggested as strong predictors of behavior.

Another interesting conjecture concerns the relations between academic achievement and self-image. Villalobos-Buehner avers persons with "well-elaborated, vivid pictures of future selves." (p. 25) perform better academically than others. She echoes Ruvolo and Markus (1992) in stating that success-minded learners tend to have self-images "dominated by positive possibility" and failure-minded persons tend to be "consumed by conceptions or images of negative possible selves" (p. 24). Villalobos-Buehner states that one of the important roles of educators is to help students see future possible selves. By helping students envision desired end-states, they can become more motivated to develop strategies to reach their goals. "The positive and practical feedback from a teacher or trusted mentor is a potent force in strengthening that sense of efficacy for an adult learner" (p. 27).

The Bottom Line

Much of this research also sheds light on the notion of L2 motivation in general and some of the findings are relevant to non-study abroad contexts. The author remarks that, "future time perspective can be a powerful motivator of current behavior" (p. 3). Moreover, in Chapter 4 she mentions some classroom activities that informants found exciting as well as others that were not. Language teachers in general may find those activities interesting to consider.

I have three qualms about this text. First, many parts of it are Americentric: it was written for audiences in the USA and all the informants were American.

Second, as this study is based on narrative analysis of casual explanations about L2 learning outcomes, I was surprised that Weiner's (1985) *attribution theory* was not mentioned since that has had a major impact in the social science for many years. At the very least, I feel that Villalobos-Buehner should have explained *why* she preferred not to use that theory.

Third, the lack of an index made it difficult to selectively browse through this text.

In light of these criticisms, is this ¥7,278 / USD $62.10 / € 54.39 text worth the price? For most SA teacher-researchers outside of North America, the answer is "probably not." SA researchers interested in applying Dörnyei's theory of possible selves and temporal model of motivation to future research might find this book a useful resource. However, SA teachers in Asia will probably find other works such as Xie's *Representations of L2 motivational self system with beginning Chinese language learners at college level in the United States* (2011) of more relevance, since this study explores how heritage and non-heritage language learners tend to differ when studying another Asian language. Also worth reading (and briefly cited by Villalobos-Buehner) is Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's 2009 *The L2 motivational self system amongst Chinese, Japanese, and Iranian learners of English*.

Hopefully, Villalobos-Buehner's text will inspire more long-term studies of the effects of SA at universities in Asia and elsewhere around the world.

- reviewed by Tim Newfields

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