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Lasting Impact of Study Abroad Experiences: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract: Researchers in the field of study abroad have focused on language, identity construction, and motivation, yet few studies have shown its lasting impact on participants. This article contains the reflections of two individuals who took part in studies abroad and remain engaged in multicultural education and in the instruction and research of second language acquisition. We review the literature in the area of study abroad, then discuss the suitability of using a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach, defined as "the study of self collectively" (CHANG, WAMBURA NGUNJIRI & HERNANDEZ, 2013, p.11) for this project. We analyzed our data, which are in the form of reflective narratives and archived e-mails, through open coding, based on grounded theory methodology (see CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2015). Four major themes surfaced from our data analysis: language and culture; academics; identity; and lasting impact. Finally, we compare our experiences, identify some of the lasting effects of our time abroad, and consider both the practical and theoretical implications of the research. This research has been useful for us to understand CAE and the lasting effects of study abroad experiences on students who become language teachers.

Table of Contents

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1. Introduction

The idea of study abroad brings about feelings of adventure and exploration to many students. For language learners, study abroad is one avenue students can take to practice a foreign language through full immersion (ALLEN, 2010). While researchers have focused on students' language development during study abroad (e.g., FREED, 1998), we find little discussion on the lasting impact of study abroad on participants' lives. Our research, which adopted a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach, delves into the lasting impacts our respective study abroad experiences have had on our lives. [1]

Each of us experienced a yearlong study abroad in France while we were in the third year of our postsecondary education (about 21 years of age) at English universities in Canada. While we had different motivations to live and learn in France (e.g., language development, adventure), and we had learned French in Canadian schools in different ways (e.g., French immersion, French as a subject), we were both interested to study and travel abroad as young adults. [2]

Years after the study abroad, we pursued French language teaching and later, research in the areas of teaching and learning French as a second language in Ontario, Canada. While we met each other many years after our study abroad experiences (through an online graduate-level course), we have had very similar career trajectories. In this research, we reflect on our study abroad experiences to determine the indirect and direct impacts that these experiences have had on our professional journeys. What follows is a review of the literature, a description of the current study, the study's methods and data, the participants, findings, and discussion. [3]

2. Review of the Literature

Undeniably, one of the primary reasons students choose to participate in study abroad programs is to learn a new language. Studying abroad provides language learners with opportunities to immerse in the target language, to increase fluency in that language, and to learn about a new culture (ALLEN, 2010). That said, second language acquisition within the context of study abroad is complex (DeKEYSER, 1991) because of the demand on learners to communicate in both formal (e.g., academic) and informal (e.g., social) situations (COLLENTINE & FREED, 2004). FREED (1998) has suggested the following as linguistic benefits for language learners who study abroad: an increased ability to speak with ease and confidence; an increase in speed production and a decrease in dysfluency-sounding pauses; a display of a wider range of communicative strategies; a broader repertoire of styles; and the development of learners' linguistic identities. [4]

When immersed in a foreign language, students not only develop proficiency in that language, they also become more aware of the language in general. AMUZIE and WINKE (2009) note that it is not only students' language abilities that develop while studying abroad, but also their beliefs about language learning. Their study reveals that students who participate in longer study abroad programs

(over six months) experience greater changes in their beliefs about language learning, placing more of an emphasis on learner autonomy and less on the role of the teacher. As MILLER and GINSBERG (1995) as well as PELLIGRINO (1998) discuss, learners' perceptions of language acquisition will shape the way they learn the language and will guide the experiences they seek while abroad. In an ethnographic study examining language development as well as cultural and academic adjustment while living abroad, BACON (2002) states that these aspects are intertwined. Both formal and informal learning settings are equally important and growth in all areas is dynamic. BACON's study also shows the development and importance of self-esteem when students live abroad. She notes that as self-esteem develops, linguistic abilities improve because participants may be more likely to take risks as they become comfortable in the foreign setting. Furthermore, KINGINGER (2013, p.341) suggests that language learning, "whether it is defined in terms of general constructs such as proficiency or fluency, in terms of skills, or in terms of components of communicative competence, such as strategic or discourse abilities," can improve during one's study abroad. [5]

Research has also shown the impact of studying abroad on language learners' identity formation (e.g., BLOCK, 2007a, 2007b; KINGINGER, 2004). BLOCK (2007b) defines identity as "negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future" (p.27). In a study abroad context, participants revisit their worldviews as new perspectives are presented. Participants need to be able to negotiate the new perspectives with the old to find balance (KINGINGER, 2013). This perspective is demonstrated in KINGINGER's (2004) study of Alice, an American exchange student in France. Alice

> "imagined becoming a speaker of French as a way to reinvent herself as a cosmopolitan, multilingual person whom she could admire. Her working-class background influenced both her struggle to study in France in the first place, and then the nature of her experience" (KINGINGER, 2013, p.342). [6]

BENSON, BARKHUIZEN, BODYCOTT and BROWN (2012) suggest that while studying abroad, identity can develop on multiple levels: linguistic competency; self-esteem and confidence; and navigating challenging situations. ALLEN (2010) investigated student motivation during a short-term study abroad program and found that students who genuinely believed in the possibility of linguistic and cultural growth were more likely to benefit from their time abroad. [7]

Existing research indicates opportunities for both linguistic and personal growth by studying abroad. However, the studies reviewed here are limited in scope, as their focus is on the short-term, rather than the lasting impact of these experiences on learners. DeGRAAF, SLAGTER, LARSEN and DITTA (2013) address this gap by investigating the long-term personal and professional impact of study abroad experiences on 193 participants who had studied abroad. Through an online survey, these participants (referred to as “study abroad alumni”) were asked about their individual development and maturation, with a particular focus on their self-confidence and intercultural awareness resulting

from their study abroad. This study revealed global awareness, maturity, and self-confidence as areas of personal development; furthermore, studying abroad was found to have an impact on career choice. DeGRAAF et al. identify the need for further longitudinal research in this area to develop and promote effective study abroad programs. [8]

3. The Current Study

Through this research, we seek to answer this question: How have our respective study abroad experiences influenced our initial interest in, and continued involvement with, French as a second language (FSL) education? [9]

To answer this question, we adopted the CAE methodology (CHANG, WAMBURA NGUNJIRI & HERNANDEZ, 2013), which is an emerging pragmatic approach to autoethnographic research and which has, as far as we know, never been used in research in the areas of second language acquisition or study abroad. CHANG et al. define CAE as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (pp.23-24). Using the CAE approach, the researcher "is simultaneously the instrument and the data source" (p.22). Although the CAE methods have some variations, all involve researchers individually and collaboratively reflecting upon a particular phenomenon. An important aspect of CAE is for researchers to remain flexible and open-minded about the direction of the study and to document progress of ideas, thoughts, questions, and other factors throughout the research process. [10]

Of the many benefits, CAE research allows for a deeper learning about self and other, and fosters collaboration among researchers. In our case, the CAE approach allowed for a rich description of our recollections and highlighted similarities and differences between our study abroad experiences. In implementing this methodology, our study includes unique contributions to both the fields of CAE (i.e., by making advancements about our understanding of this relatively new methodology) and study abroad (i.e., by examining the lasting effects rather than short-term effects of the experience). [11]

4. Participants

Jordana took part in a yearlong study abroad program in Bordeaux, France in her third year (2000-2001) of undergraduate studies. Her Canadian university had an agreement with the university in Bordeaux, so the course credits received in France were considered for her Canadian degree. While the courses at the university in Bordeaux were in French, the students who enrolled were FSL learners. Jordana lived independently in an apartment in downtown Bordeaux. [12]

Nathalie took part in a yearlong study abroad program in Dijon, France in her third year (2004-2005) of undergraduate studies. Her Canadian university had an agreement with the university in Dijon, so the course credits received in France

were considered for her Canadian degree. While in Dijon, Nathalie attended a program for international students, specifically aimed at learning FSL. In her first semester in Dijon, Nathalie lived in an international residence with other foreign students. In the second semester, along with another Canadian student, she lived with a French host family. [13]

5. Methods and Data

Our data collection methods, commonly used in CAE research, involved an iterative approach as CAE scholars suggest (CHANG et al., 2013): preliminary data collection; subsequent data collection; data analysis and interpretation; and report writing. The emphasis is on the revisiting of the data throughout the research process as participants share and reflect on their personal contributions to the data set. [14]

5.1 Preliminary data collection

We met in an online course about second language teaching and learning in the winter of 2012. We were pursuing our PhD degrees at two institutions in Ontario. That course led to our first coauthored publication for a professional teaching publication. Through that collaborative writing experience, we learned more about one another and realized we shared a similar French language learning journey. In late 2012, through e-mail correspondence, we identified a shared interest in another collaboration. As we looked at our own experiences, our research and teaching interests, and the literature, we identified several avenues for research. These steps brought us to engage in this research. Prior to beginning this study, we had never met in person. [15]

In January 2013, we engaged in ongoing e-mail conversation about our research goals, suitable timeline, and division of workload. By February 2013, we each wrote an individual narrative (in English, mixed with a minimal amount of French words and phrases) about our study abroad experiences. Each narrative was approximately 5,000 words in length. Once we completed the narratives, we exchanged them, took notes, and listed shared themes among them. We also had one Skype phone call in March 2013 to discuss our narratives and plan the next steps. Reading one another's drafts was a critical process in the study, as doing so sparked new memories and offered new topics for narration. [16]

5.2 Subsequent data collection

After reflecting and commenting on each other's first drafts, we each wrote a second draft of our narratives, keeping track of new content. At this stage, we also gathered data from our respective French university websites as well as our class notes from the year of our study abroad. Jordana also transcribed relevant information from daily e-mails to her family during her time abroad, which provided authentic accounts of her actual experiences. These were compared with her present-day narratives. [17]

5.3 Data analysis and report writing

We shared our revised narratives with one another and individually coded them thematically. In April 2013, we met in person (for the first time in our lives) to discuss and compare our findings. This meeting was audio-recorded. We focused our discussion on our research question and on the common themes that emerged through the open coding of data (based on grounded theory methodology; see CORBIN & STRAUSS, 2015) using NVivo software. This coding process was done so that themes could emerge. In addition, we did not have a set of prescribed themes from previous research for which we were coding. Through ongoing e-mail discussion for several months, we were able to review and reflect on the coding process. [18]

Once we identified the common themes in our narratives, we reviewed the literature to identify research that reflected these themes. This work was conducted independently, but we divided the themes between the two of us so that we could learn more about the literature related to our assigned themes. During this time, ongoing e-mail communication was maintained. We set a timeline for our writing tasks and adjusted this as needed. During the fall of 2013 and winter of 2014, we met five times (both in person and over Skype) to write collaboratively. These meetings were critical to our research process, as they became an opportunity to share our ideas, to brief one another on the new literature we were reading, and to continue to question the meaning of our narratives. [19]

6. Findings

Our coding of the data uncovered four major themes: language and culture; academics; identity; and lasting impact. Together, these themes address our research question and offer insight into the role of study abroad in our personal and professional lives. [20]

6.1 Exposure to language and culture

6.1.1 Perceptions of French language development

Our narratives reveal our keen interest to study in France to improve our French proficiency. While we had each attained a certain level of proficiency in our K-12[1] and postsecondary education, we knew there was room for improvement. In addition, we valued the opportunity to be immersed in the French language and culture, as we had grown up and lived in English-dominant communities in Canada (i.e., rather than French-dominant or fully bilingual areas). [21]

We each reported a degree of self-doubt in our French language abilities, especially at the beginning of our programs. Nathalie noted she felt "relatively confident" when she first arrived in Dijon and, when describing an instance of

1 K-12 education refers to the elementary (Kindergarten to Grade 8) and secondary (Grades 9-12) schooling structure in Ontario, Canada.

meeting new people, she noted, "We were all speaking French, not worrying so much about grammar and correct vocabulary." Although Nathalie had various opportunities to develop her French skills prior to her arrival in Dijon (French immersion education, family trips to Montreal, etc.), she encountered some surprises while abroad. She wrote, "I thought I was using proper vocabulary or I thought I had understood something only to find out I was mistaken." For example, she used the term *la fin de semaine* to mean "weekend," while her professor meant it as "the end of the week." Because of this misunderstanding, Nathalie missed the deadline for one of her assignments as she thought it was due by Sunday rather than on Friday. She concluded, "It was both interesting and confusing for me to learn that the vocabulary I thought I already had, I didn't actually have after all!"[2] [22]

Jordana felt she had a good level of proficiency in certain areas of French. She stated, "My writing skills, in terms of grammar and sentence structure, were fairly strong when I began classes in September." At the same time, she noted she had "less-than-perfect French language skills," and she was relieved when someone spoke to her in English. That said, she was amazed by how much she managed to accomplish at the beginning of her stay in France even though, as she shared, "I was quite shy when I had to speak to a French person in French—especially at the beginning." Jordana felt that more effort was needed at the beginning of her stay to communicate effectively. She wrote, "I remember listening really carefully to the pronunciation of my landlord and of shopkeepers ... When I pronounced a word incorrectly or used the wrong intonation I felt bothered." Her confidence grew rather quickly. Further, she noted, "And with each person I talked to within that first week in my new city, I grew a bit more confident. ... When people understood me, wow, I felt great." Jordana relied on gestures to communicate at the beginning of her stay. "When I had to fling my arms around and gesture while I spoke, well, I felt exhausted," she said. [23]

Our perceptions of our French skills seemed to improve the longer we were in France, which is natural of a language immersion. Our classes had an impact as to the elements of language that we learned. Nathalie described most of her classes as being "really geared towards learning specific aspects of the French language," and that she "took intensive courses in grammar, and oral and written expression (which [she] loved) and comprehension (which [she] found very difficult)." When Nathalie began dreaming in French, about three months after her arrival, it made her feel like she “had truly become bilingual!" [24]

Jordana also made note of her development of informal language as a result of her time in France. In an e-mail sent mid-way through the exchange, she noted, "I know more slang now and speak more naturally and I speak French all the time except when I am on the phone with an English person." [25]

2 Direct quotes were retrieved from the present-day narratives of the authors, unless otherwise indicated.

6.1.2 Development of cultural knowledge

In terms of our exposure to culture, we each felt that we became residents, rather than temporary visitors, in our respective communities. Nathalie wrote, "I soon truly felt as though I was living in Dijon instead of visiting." Later, when she reflected on the change in her living arrangements, she explained, "I wanted to spend more time in downtown Dijon and be totally immersed in French." When she moved in with a French host family who did not speak English, Nathalie stated, "[I] truly felt as though [I] was getting a cultural experience." [26]

We were also exposed to French culture in and out of our university courses. Nathalie, for example, was exposed to the music of Serge GAINSBOURG[3] in one of her classes and the following year, back in Canada, she completed her undergraduate thesis (in French!) on GAINSBOURG's career and the role he played in French culture. Similarly, Jordana reminisced, "[I] watched several French films while I was in Bordeaux. This was a relatively new experience for me because outside of French courses at [my home institution], I never watched French movies." She also used French television and radio shows to develop her awareness of both language and culture. She further shared,

> "I had a small TV in my apartment so I often watched French game shows just to tune my ears ... I listened to French radio, too, and my Swiss and French friends taught me about French popular music. I didn't understand most of the music lyrics but I did my best to sing along regardless." [27]

6.1.3 Metalinguistic and metacultural awareness

Each of us developed a greater awareness of the language learning process through our friendships. Nathalie's closest friends were from Italy, and she reflected on her observations of their French and English language development in her narratives. She wrote,

> "What was amazing was the fluency and ease with which they spoke and their total lack of fear to make mistakes. I learned so much about learning languages from watching them learn both French and English. I remember when [my Italian friend] would hear a word in English that she didn't understand, she would write it down and ask me (or someone else) the meaning of the word later ... She was completely fearless when it came to using new vocabulary and she truly amazed me!" [28]

Later, Nathalie noted,

> "It was through them that I realized how different language learning is in Europe and how much more accessible other languages and cultural experiences are. Coming from Canada, I was incredibly proud to be bilingual, but my Italian friends and the other Europeans I met put me to shame." [29]

3 Serge GAINSBOURG was a French singer, songwriter, composer, writer, actor, and director.

Jordana was also impressed with her friends' multilingualism. In an e-mail, she wrote: "In one of my classes there is this Italian guy ... He speaks Italian, German, French, English and I think Spanish too!!" [30]

Mid-way through her stay in France, Jordana began a job as an English language teaching assistant at a French high school. In this position, Jordana listened to the English teacher instruct for part of the class and assisted where necessary. This gave her a perspective of language learning and teaching that she had not experienced previously. [31]

Coincidentally, both of us had experiences learning Italian while we were in France through our peer groups. As the year progressed, Jordana began to write e-mails to her parents in Italian as well as in English and sometimes French. We also both enrolled in Italian language courses when we were back at our Canadian universities. Our interest in language learning was only deepened by our experiences in France and clearly extended beyond the French language. [32]

6.2 The role of academics

The role of academics in our study abroad experiences was another theme that emerged from our narratives. Our study abroad experiences were greatly influenced by the academic contexts in which we were immersed. In our narratives, we each referred to the courses we took, the interactions we had with our professors, and our achievements in our French universities. [33]

6.2.1 Courses

Our narratives illustrate our engagement with and perceptions of the academic communities in our respective universities. We each wrote about our experiences with the initial language placement test[4] and these memories remain vivid for each of us. Our narratives demonstrate feelings of anxiety as we, and our home institutions, placed importance on our test scores. Nathalie stated:

> "Most of us arrived at the residence on the Sunday evening, with our French placement test scheduled for 8:30 the next morning! I remember being extremely concerned about the French placement test. The program I was in was split into 5 levels of French, and … to bring home third-year credits (which I needed), I absolutely had to be in Level 5 ... I remember being totally exhausted and stressed, wondering what would happen if I didn't make it to Level 5. Would this all be for nothing?" [34]

4 Initial language placement tests were administered in our respective French institutions upon arrival. The results of these tests determined which level of the French language program at our respective institutions we would be enrolled. These were considered high-stakes tests as the results had implications for our course work and academic progression in our home institutions in Canada.

Jordana shared a similar experience:

> "When we first arrived at the [university], our French proficiency was tested—oral and written. This testing, I remember, made me nervous because I knew that I had to be at a certain level … for [my home university] to give me the equivalent standing and so that all my courses would transfer over." [35]

In her e-mails, Jordana stated, "The test took a couple of hours. I'm just hoping that I got into the right level but I'm worried ... I hope I'll be able to get credit for whatever level I'm in. I'm worried." Regardless of our hesitation, we each achieved the appropriate levels, and our French course credits were transferred to our Canadian universities. This test served as an introduction to the French academic context for each of us. [36]

While the courses we took had similarities, our experiences with the course structure were quite different. We each took courses in French language (e.g., grammar and oral expression), as well as courses in culture and *stylistique* (a course that dealt with reading and writing strategies, and which both of us refer to in French throughout our narratives because we remain unaware of the English equivalent). Nathalie had two professors for all courses and the same group of students was enrolled in each of her classes. Jordana, on the other hand, had different course professors and different classmates in every class. Each of us remembered difficulties with our civilization courses (e.g., politics, history, literature). Nathalie's perspective was:

> "I found the civilization courses much harder because they were not taught by faculty from our program, but rather faculty from the university, and they were not necessarily trained as FSL teachers. These courses took place in large auditoriums, were more lecture-style, and the professors did not really know the students by name." [37]

Similarly, Jordana wrote, "The French civilization class intimidated me because it was in a bigger lecture hall and my professor, although funny, seemed very formal." She described her lack of interest in the civilization course in numerous e-mails throughout the academic year:

> "The [exam] that I am soooo worried about is civilization."
>
> "… My second [exam] ... civilization ... was the most horrible exam I have ever written."
>
> "I am more concerned with civilization ... [it's] hard to follow and so my notes aren't the greatest ... plus ... it is all about politics and the political system and it is quite boring for moi!!"
>
> "… Tomorrow I have [the] dreaded civilization [exam]. I don't know if I can manage to get a pass for this class." [38]

6.2.2 Grading scheme

Our narratives also show that we were each mindful of the grading scheme in France, and how the grades we received affected our perceptions of our achievement. Nathalie reflected,

> "I was not on a pass/fail system [in Dijon]—our specific grades mattered [for my home university]. And since French was my major, I required a B[5]—in every French course. I wasn't worried about this at all going into the courses, but I vividly remember the first assignment I got back. It was in Paulette's *stylistique*[6] class and I got 14/20. I quickly learned that assignments in France are graded out of 20, and they are not turned into percentages as they are in Canada. So while in my mind, my 14/20 was immediately equated to a 70% (a much lower grade than I was used to receiving in Canada!), in France, it was translated to a *mention assez bien* [fair]. This upset me as well, as in English this literally translates to 'good enough.' However, in France I believe it is considered a high average. At any rate, while I was horrified at the grade, it turns out it was the highest grade in the class." [39]

Jordana also reflected on the French grading system and how it compared to her experiences in Canada:

> "The grading scheme in France was something I had to get used to. While at [my home university] I was used to [getting marks in the] 80% range, in France, my average was *assez bien*. The professors told us that a *mention assez bien* was something to be proud of. I wasn't so sure. Then again, I wasn't entirely stressed about my grades/average I received in Bordeaux because [my home institution] translated all grades to pass/fail." [40]

Both of us were initially concerned about our *mention assez bien* achievement, but soon learned that we were making good progress and were not as unsuccessful as we may have originally thought. Neither of us seemed prepared for the French grading system prior to our arrival in France. [41]

6.2.3 Professors

Our narratives showed the ways in which our professors influenced our experiences. Nathalie made a strong connection to, and clearly recollected stories of, Paulette, a professor who "was tough, proud, loud, outgoing, and stubborn, but she was also compassionate, brilliant, and inspiring." Nathalie wrote

5 The grading schemes that we were exposed to in France followed this format. In Canada, it is common to receive a grade out of 100%. An "A" grade, a top grade, is noted as 80% or higher. A "B" grade is noted as between 70%-80%. Both of us were used to receiving A grades. Rather than receiving grades out of 100%, (common in our Canadian postsecondary experiences), we received grades out of 20 in our respective French institutions. This grading scheme was new to both of us.

6 Recall that *stylistique* refers to a course that dealt with reading and writing strategies. In each of our narratives, we used the French word because we did not know the English equivalent of this word. We feel it best to refer to this course using the French term.

about her (and her peers') connection to Paulette that extended beyond the classroom. She described:

> "Paulette was our professor, but she was also our advocate. She recommended doctors when we were ill, helped us figure out how to express ourselves in challenging situations, and took us out to lunch or dinner to ensure we experienced the finest of Dijon cuisine." [42]

Nathalie also reflected, "I think what inspired me the most about Paulette was the pride she had in being French and her desire to share this with us." [43]

Jordana's narratives revealed a slightly different impression of the university professors. While she clearly remembered learning from her professors, she did not necessarily recall interacting with them outside of the classroom. She noted:

> "My writing style definitely improved as a result of the instruction I received from my professors. ... [My literature professor was] kind, intelligent and welcoming ... [and] really encouraged us to engage with the texts, reflect on their importance, and to make connections with themes/ideas that we read about." [44]

In an early e-mail, Jordana explained: "The professors seem nice, they are all pretty funny which makes things more relaxed." At the same time, she noted, "The professors did not really do much to help us socialize." [45]

While the lack of personal interaction with professors did not take away from Jordana's overall experiences with academic life, Nathalie's experiences were greatly enriched as a result of Paulette's commitment to her students. We acknowledge the course systems we experienced in France were different for each of us, so our different experiences with our professors may have reflected this. [46]

6.3 Identity formation

A third theme to emerge from our data analysis was identity formation. We wrote often about how we perceived ourselves (academically, socially, etc.) at the beginning, throughout, and at the end of our year in France. Our narratives revealed growth in independence, development of courage, and demonstration of pride. [47]

When Nathalie thought about making the trip from Canada to Dijon, she realized that she wanted to do this independently: "I was so scared to go to Dijon on my own, but I knew it was something I had to do." She later noted that she often adopted a "'figure it out' mentality" in day-to-day life. Similarly, Jordana described how she gained independence from her time in France. She reflected positively about how she managed to navigate the French administrative system. In an e-mail, she mentioned,

> "I went to the *cité administrative* [government administration office] so that they could extend my temporary *carte de séjour* [residence permit] because it expires on Sunday. Then I went to the *prefecture* to ask to leave the country. I have to go back next week to get whatever it is I need." [48]

She also sent e-mails describing her experiences with the telephone company: "I went to the France Telecom place yesterday because there was a problem with my phone." Each of these experiences indicates the development of our independence as neither of us had many people to rely on while we were in France. [49]

Our narratives showed that we were ready for adventure. We became more courageous over the year. Nathalie reflected on her first night in Dijon: "There was a sense that we were all on a great adventure together." Later, when thinking about the academic work, she wrote, "I was very excited to get started." While Nathalie made note of her daily exhaustion, especially at the beginning, "just from spending the day speaking in French," she "felt so happy and productive." On one of her first evenings in Dijon, she "joined in a conversation right away." She shared further, "It was one of the first times in my life where I was not worried or nervous to join a conversation uninvited." Jordana shared similar stories. She was "more than eager to go on an adventure" as she mentioned at the beginning of her narrative. Later, in reference to her French speaking skills, she wrote:

> "As time progressed ... I hesitated less and took a 'just go for it' approach. I'm not sure why I had a small fear of speaking because most of the time the person I spoke with understood what I was saying and we had, what felt like, very regular, normal conversations." [50]

Our narratives show our willingness to take risks to get the most out of our time in France. Each of our narratives revealed moments of pride, which would have certainly had an effect on our identity. Nathalie, recalling visits from her Canadian family and friends, stated: "I remember how proud and important I felt explaining how transportation worked in France. I also remember my mother saying how proud she was of me when I navigated our way from Paris to Dijon to Zurich." [51]

When she discovered she was dreaming in French, Nathalie stated, "I was proud of being able to dream in my second language." Similarly, Jordana had several examples that demonstrated her sense of pride. When she earned the highest mark on an assignment in her *stylistique* class, she e-mailed: "I am really proud of myself for this one!" When friends and family members came to visit her, Jordana "was proud to show [them] around." In an almost identical text to Nathalie's, Jordana wrote:

> "My aunt was completely impressed that I could navigate the city while telling [my family] the history of certain landmarks. Since none of [my family members] spoke French, it was up to me to translate the guidebook from French to English for them. I felt really proud that I could take on this task and feel confident about it!" [52]

An additional impact of Jordana's experience was the connection she made to her heritage. In her narrative, she noted:

> "Embracing Italian during my year abroad has impacted me in ways that I feel like I can't even describe now. I felt—and feel—so happy and proud that I had the opportunity to practice, to learn from another student, and to communicate with my relatives in this language that was more foreign to me than French [at the time of my stay in Bordeaux]." [53]

While the individual details of our time abroad may be different, a great deal of evidence in our narratives shows we each developed new skills and personal characteristics by being in France. [54]

6.4 Lasting impact

Though the initial purpose of our narratives was to look back to our time in France, it is interesting to note we each commented on the lasting impact of our experiences. On a personal level, we have maintained the close relationships with other study abroad students rather than French peers we developed during our time in France. Nathalie continues to see her friends "nearly every summer, rotating between Canada and Europe," and she recently attended a friend's wedding in Italy. She noted, "I think that all of us who experienced Dijon together will forever be linked to one another." Jordana also made lasting friendships. She enthused, "[I remain] in touch with friends that I made while I was in Bordeaux and I reunited with a few of them during the summers I was [working and travelling in Europe]." For both of us, a continued interest in travel has been key to sustaining these friendships. [55]

On a professional level, our narratives reveal the impact of our studies abroad on our career paths. We both entered the workforce as FSL teachers in the public school system, and later returned to graduate school to pursue FSL-related research interests. While Jordana had decided to become a French teacher prior to the study abroad experience, Nathalie had not. For Jordana, the study abroad experience increased her confidence level and her ability to teach in French. In Nathalie's case, the study abroad experience reaffirmed her interest in the language, but it was a few years after the experience that she had decided to pursue the possibility of teaching in French. In these contexts, we have taught students at various levels, from children to adults, and we have drawn on our study abroad experiences to relate to them. In the reflections Nathalie made about her teaching experiences, she wrote: "I often shared stories of my time in France with my students, and they were always interested to hear about them, particularly the anecdotes about vocabulary differences and the fact that I handed in an assignment late!" Likewise, Jordana reflected on the connections she made with her international undergraduate students and noted: "I feel that I can relate to what they may be experiencing in Canada—both academically and socially—because I have 'been there.'" [56]

Each of us made similar statements in our narratives about the lasting impact of our years in France. Nathalie mentioned:

> "I guess I never really thought that French would play such a role in my life and if there hadn't been a study abroad program offered, I don't know that it would have. Declaring a major in French led me to other opportunities that have greatly shaped the person I am today, both personally and professionally." [57]

Likewise, Jordana shared, "Now, a researcher, and an instructor of Canadian and international students, I find that I still draw on what I learned during my year in Bordeaux." [58]

The impact of our studies abroad extends far beyond our years in France. Our narratives demonstrate the many ways in which our study abroad experiences have influenced our personal and professional lives. [59]

7. Discussion and Implications

Together, our narratives offer an in-depth perspective on the potential of study abroad to shape learners' lives. In keeping with the research on study abroad and language acquisition (e.g., ALLEN, 2010; COLLENTINE & FREED, 2004; DeKEYSER, 1991), we, too, have noted the impact of a full immersion program on the development of our French language proficiency skills. [60]

While earlier research indicates students' connections to career paths as a result of studying abroad (DeGRAAF et al., 2013), our research shows how our study abroad experiences have directly shaped our decisions about education and careers. Our respective experiences influenced our understanding of French language learning and teaching, increased our cultural awareness, and led to the development of our identities. These findings are similar to the quantitative results of DeGRAAF et al.'s study regarding the effect of study abroad on participants' maturity, self-confidence, and career choice. Depth of documentation such as ours is an important contribution to the field of study abroad research. Our narratives reflect consistent themes and even equivalent experiences, though our study abroad programs occurred in different cities, four years apart. Furthermore, our chosen career paths—while unusual—are almost identical in nature. In fact, we met as students in a graduate course relating to themes in French second language education. [61]

Our journeys reflect ALLEN's (2010) finding that students who genuinely believe in the possibility of personal growth while on exchange benefit the most from their experiences abroad. Our narratives reflect our enthusiasm to study in France, and perhaps this is the reason for the lasting impact of our experiences. [62]

Our study has implications for study abroad program planning. While our narratives highlight the positive aspects of our time abroad, they do not ignore some of the negative experiences we faced. We could have arrived in France with more knowledge or preparation about the initial language placement tests or

the grading system so that our stress and feelings of anxiety could have been reduced. Through our narratives, students who are interested in study abroad may gain insight into what they might experience, and programs/instructors might be better suited to prepare students before their departure so that they have a successful and positive experience outside of their home country. [63]

This study also has implications for CAE research. Considering that CAE is a relatively new methodology, our study is a successful demonstration of how it can be applied in the field of study abroad. On a personal level, with CAE, we were able to share and reflect on our experiences in novel and meaningful ways. With this methodology, we used tools to critically examine our own experiences and gain a better understanding of ourselves and our connection to and passion for our work. The use of technology in this research was of particular importance for us as we exchanged our reflections, narratives, and questions over e-mail; we used Skype for our first phone meeting, and even through the preparation for publication of this manuscript, we shared our ideas and answered one another's questions through the use of texts (both word and photo texts, in fact). We were careful to monitor, though, when the distance between us was delaying or negatively affecting our approach; at these times, we each had to put effort into meeting in person in one of our cities. Without a doubt, approaching this research with the CAE methodology has had a positive impact on our professional relationship. We acknowledge that the level of trust and respect that we have for one another (as people, as scholars, and as educators) has increased because of this research. Finally, while we needed to address some challenges throughout the research (e.g., personal life and work commitments, time availability), we ascertain we have had a successful CAE research experience because of our shared commitment to the approach and to the goals we set out for ourselves at the onset of this research journey. [64]

8. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Our stories reinforce the lasting impact of our study abroad experiences on our personal and professional lives. With CAE, we were able to critically examine the significance of our narratives, both individually and collectively. When we began this research, we were unsure where it would take us, or what this project would look like in the end. Reflecting on our time abroad has proven to be extremely rewarding. Having the opportunity to discuss and compare our stories has validated our experiences as we realize that while they are unique, they are also shared. [65]

Our findings could be strengthened with additional research in CAE and study abroad. Our experiences, for example, could be compared to the experiences of others who took part more recently in French study abroad programs. Given that we found CAE to be a productive and meaningful methodology, we encourage study abroad participants to engage in CAE both to contribute to the research and for their own personal growth. Further, we would encourage teachers who are sending their students on study abroad, or hosting study abroad students, to collaboratively write about—and share—their experiences. [66]

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