

# Motivational factors and cultural impact of language immersion programmes: Perspectives from the University of Ghana

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## Abstract

Language immersion programmes have been crucial to the curriculum of the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Ghana, allowing students to spend an academic year in countries where target languages are spoken. This research investigates the motivational factors driving student participation and the impact on cultural understanding. Through the use of a survey involving semi-structured questionnaires, it examines the experiences of students in the Spanish Section over the past nine years. Findings show

that language immersion programmes enhance cultural understanding and that students are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The study also reveals that language learners from the research setting encounter certain challenges such as financial constraints, adaptation difficulties, and culture shocks that need to be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of these programmes. These insights highlight the need to reassess and expand language immersion opportunities for students at the University of Ghana.

**Keywords:** study abroad, cultural understanding, globalisation, motivation, immersion.

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## Introduction

Language immersion and study abroad programmes have become essential components of tertiary education, most especially, in teaching foreign languages. These opportunities allow students to enhance their linguistic abilities and gain invaluable cultural experiences. Language immersion and study abroad programmes can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when European scholars travelled to foreign universities to expand their knowledge and linguistic skills. In this perspective, the establishment of organizations such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 1919 and the Fulbright Programme in 1946 marked significant milestones in promoting language and cultural exchange (Hoffa, 2007).

Research has shown that many institutions of higher education around the world offer their students of foreign languages the chance to learn the language and culture of the country where the foreign language is spoken as a native language. It is quite common for students studying Spanish at the University of Ghana (UG), for example, to travel to Spanish-speaking countries for an immersion experience. These immersion experiences include long-term or short-term language immersion programmes. Researchers often allude to the benefits of studying abroad, such as personal growth, intercultural skills, open-mindedness, and respect for other cultures and beliefs—qualities which are highly valued by employers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Deardorff, 2006;

Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Maharaja, 2018). Lambert (1994) also posits that studying abroad helps students develop empathy and positive attitudes towards others. Students are often motivated by these perceived benefits to engage in foreign language learning.

Like other institutions of higher education, the University of Ghana, through the Department of Modern Languages, offers students the opportunity to partake in study abroad programmes for a language immersion experience. The Department of Modern Languages has five sections: Arabic, Chinese, Kiswahili, Russian, and Spanish, and each section offers students the opportunity to study abroad for two semesters, usually after completing their third year. However, they must defer their programme for one year to participate in it, extending their undergraduate studies to five years. In the current BA programmes at the department, students are allowed to transfer their grades from the foreign institutions they visit to the University of Ghana, under a six-credit course named "Study Abroad."

For the Spanish Section, students travel to a Spanish-speaking country to take the six-credit Study Abroad course in Language, Literature and Culture to gain more insight into the language they have been studying. Over the past nine years, students have visited Spain and Cuba to immerse themselves in the language and culture of the host country. A scholarship scheme funded by the government of Ghana through the Scholarships Secretariat is available on a competitive basis. Additionally, there is the option of self-sponsorship for students who can afford the costs of tuition, accommodation, and flights. For the past four years, the number of students studying abroad on scholarship has been higher than that of those who financed it themselves, as depicted in Table 1. This trend is unsurprising given the substantial costs associated with studying abroad. However, year abroad programmes are crucial for successful foreign language learning. The existing literature has identified the benefits to include language proficiency and intercultural

competence. For example, Gaia (2015), in her study on the impact of studying abroad, showed that students enhance their cultural understanding, awareness and appreciation of their own culture and that of other cultures. Ife, Vives Boix, and Meara (2000) also found an increase in students' vocabulary acquisition. Within the research setting of the present study, the difference in performance is evident when comparing students who study abroad with those who do not. Yet, only a limited number of students get the opportunity to participate in the year abroad programme. The available scholarship slots (5 - 8) are fewer than the number of registered students (50-100). Lomotey (2021) posits that there is a need to open scholarship opportunities for students who, due to financial constraints, cannot self-finance their participation in the study abroad programme at the Spanish Section.

Whereas some studies have been conducted on foreign language learning motivation among learners at UG, a review of the literature shows that there is little research that investigates and documents students' experiences and motivations over an extended period despite the Department of Modern Languages' long history of study abroad programmes spanning more than three decades. As such, this paper focuses on the impact of study abroad on the cultural/linguistic understanding of past students of the Spanish Section over the last nine years. We employ qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the motivation and benefits of language immersion programmes from the perspectives of former students of the research setting. The quantitative methods offer measurable data while qualitative methods provide rich insights into the students' motivations and experiences. Together, they offer a comprehensive analysis from multiple perspectives. Our goal is to enrich the existing literature on study abroad not only at the University of Ghana but also, on a global scale.

## **Literature review**

Study abroad programmes are designed to enhance language proficiency by immersing students in environments where the target language is spoken by natives. These programmes vary widely in duration and nature, impacting their effectiveness and suitability for different learners. This literature review examines the varying lengths and types of language immersion programmes, highlighting their benefits and challenges. It also highlights the motivational factors that drive students' participation in these programmes and its impact on the success of both the programme and the students that partake in it.

### **Study abroad programmes in tertiary education**

As shown in previous research, study abroad programmes can be categorized based on their duration into short-term, medium-term, and long-term programmes (Coryell, 2011; Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012). Short-term immersion programmes typically last a few weeks, medium-term programmes usually span one semester or six months while long-term immersion programmes last from one academic year to multiple years. Short-term programmes are often intensive, with a focus on rapid language acquisition and cultural exposure. They are cheaper for students, intensive and concentrated and can be taken in between semesters or breaks, and they also have minimal job and family disruption (Harris, Belanger, Loch, Murray and Urbaczewski, 2011). Medium-term programmes offer a balance between intensive language practice and extended cultural immersion. Studies suggest that medium-term immersion can lead to substantial improvements in both language proficiency and intercultural competence (Engle and Engle, 2004). Long-term immersion programmes provide extensive language exposure and immersion. Long-term immersion is particularly effective for achieving near-native language abilities and a profound understanding of the host culture (Harris, et al., 2011).

There are mixed findings regarding the best option, and the question of an optimal duration remains unanswered as other

factors like programme content and students' engagement play a role in the outcome of a study abroad programme. Davidson (2010) argues that while short-term programmes can significantly boost language confidence and conversational skills, they may not provide sufficient time for deep linguistic competence and cultural integration. Contrary to this argument, Dwyer (2004) found short-term to be more beneficial. On the other hand, Hoffman-Hicks (1999), Ife *et al.*, (2000) and Fraser (2002) have proven longer is better for improving pragmatic abilities and vocabulary knowledge and writing skills. Llanes and Serrano (2011) and Gaia (2015) did not find significant differences in students' improvements in different durations of study-abroad programmes. Similarly, Jones & Bond (2019) found that regardless of how long they stayed, participants experienced reduced anxiety and discomfort during the immersion.

### **Advantages of study abroad programmes**

Previous studies have highlighted various advantages of study abroad and language immersion programmes for students. Among these are intellectual growth, development of intercultural competence, personal development and career development.

#### ***Intellectual growth***

According to Ingraham and Peterson (2004), intellectual growth has two dimensions: language learning and academic performance. As highlighted in Freed (1995), immersion in a native-speaking environment significantly improves language acquisition and fluency. Freed (1998) also highlights that the best environment for learning a second language is a combination of immersion in the native language community and formal classroom learning. Students are exposed to authentic language use in various contexts, which accelerates their learning process and helps them develop better pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary skills. This is evidenced in the study by Hoffman-Hicks (2000) which highlights an increase in students' pragmatic

abilities after embarking on a study abroad program. The results of Fraser's (2002) study also highlight improvements in the reading and writing skills of students who participated in one semester or year-long study abroad programmes. The challenges of adapting to a new language and culture enhance problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and adaptability. These in turn aid the improvement of students' academic performance. Studies like McKeown (2009) also report that study abroad participants develop sophisticated cognitive skills which are essential for academic improvement.

### ***Development of intercultural competence***

Although there are seeming inconsistencies in the literature on intercultural competence, they converge to a point and agree on one thing, that is, it is a necessary tool in today's globalized world (Deardorff, 2006; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Heinzmann et al., 2015). Gaia (2015) posits that studying abroad promotes cultural awareness and globalization, which is helpful in today's world. Thus, in today's world, language teaching should equip learners with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram & Wagner, 2018).

Furthermore, Byram & Wagner (2018) argue that learning a language does not automatically lead to acquiring intercultural skills. As such, studying abroad may help students overcome challenges with intercultural competence by letting them experience the culture firsthand, interact with locals and learn more naturally and effectively. It is worth noting that some researchers of intercultural competence and cultural understanding have linked the development of this skill to be most effective in study abroad programmes. In a study by Clarke, Flaherty, Wright, and McMillen (2009), the results revealed that students who participate in study abroad programmes have greater intercultural proficiency, increased openness to cultural diversity, and become more globally minded than those who do

not. Paige, Cohen and Shively (2004), Anderson and Lawton (2011) and Engle & Engle (2004) also report similar findings. Additionally, Lee & Song (2019) conducted a study among study abroad students and their findings showed that study abroad students outperformed the telecollaboration and on-campus groups in the affective aspect, cultural knowledge and the behavioural aspect of intercultural competence development. Likewise, the results from Heinzmann et al. (2015) revealed that participating in study abroad programmes increased students' willingness to engage with other cultures demonstrating the impact of study abroad programmes on intercultural competence.

### ***Personal and career development***

Maharaja (2018) also explored the relationship between study abroad and participants' personal development. Findings from this qualitative study suggest that studying abroad helps students better understand diverse cultures. She asserts that students gained a deeper understanding of cultural differences which increased their self-confidence, global-mindedness, tolerance, maturity, and self-awareness.

Study abroad programmes tend to play a vital role in preparing students for the globalized job market by providing them with the skills necessary to navigate and thrive in diverse cultural settings. In Preston's study (2012); cited in Xu, De Silva, Neufeldt, and Dane, (2013), 85% of 1008 students who participated in study abroad programmes felt that the experience helped them to build job skills. A study of employability among Italian graduates in Di Pietro (2015) also highlighted that studying abroad had a relatively large and statistically meaningful effect on the probability of being in employment three years after graduation. Study abroad programmes also enable students to develop skills like adaptability and flexibility, effective communication, language competence, interpersonal skills, and global awareness, which are highly valued by employers (Harder *et al.*, 2015). These competencies are increasingly important



in a globalized economy, making study abroad programme participants more competitive in the job market.

### **Motivation to participate in study abroad programmes**

Broussard & Garrison (2004) see motivation as the attribute that moves us to do or not to do something. Narayanan, Rajasekaran Nair, & Iyyappan (2007) also assert that motivation is the reason behind one's actions or behaviours. In language learning, Dörnyei (2005) conceptualizes motivation as the driving force that initiates, guides and sustains learners' efforts in acquiring a new language. It is a kind of desire for learning and is said to be the feelings of excitement offered by the extra enthusiasm students have to learn a foreign language in a better way. There are four types of motivation namely instrumental, integrative, intrinsic, and extrinsic motivation (Brown, 2000; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The current paper focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

#### ***Intrinsic factors***

Dörnyei (1998) describes intrinsic motivation as the motivation to engage in an activity because that activity is enjoyable. In the context of foreign language learning and study abroad programmes, intrinsic motivation often stems from personal interest, curiosity, and the pursuit of personal growth. Although personal interest is a strong motivator that can overcome significant barriers and obstacles to participation, Henthorne & Panko (2017) found that students highlighted personal growth as the second most important factor in the decision to study abroad. Studies have shown that students who possess a genuine interest in the target language and culture are more likely to participate in study abroad programmes (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

One study by Vande Berg et al. (2009) found that intrinsic motivations such as a desire for personal growth, intercultural competence, and intellectual curiosity were significant drivers

for students participating in study abroad programmes. Similarly, a qualitative study by Benson (2011) identified intrinsic motivations such as a passion for language learning, cultural exploration, and the desire to broaden one's worldview as key factors influencing students' decisions to engage in language learning abroad.

### ***Extrinsic factors***

According to Dörnyei (1998), extrinsic motivation refers to the actions that are performed to achieve some instrumental aims like earning a reward or stopping a punishment. Conversely, extrinsic motivation stems from external rewards or pressures, such as grades, praise, or social approval (Deci & Ryan, 1985). While extrinsically motivated learners may initially engage in language learning to obtain tangible rewards or avoid punishment, the sustainability of their motivation depends on the continued presence of external incentives. Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) highlighted the role of extrinsic motivations such as academic credit, career advancement, and résumé enhancement in influencing students' decisions to study abroad. Additionally, Shea (2022) found that social influences, such as encouragement from peers or family members, could significantly impact individuals' motivation to participate in language learning programmes abroad.

### **Challenges in study abroad programmes**

Despite all these advantages, students face certain challenges in accessing these programmes. As highlighted in most studies, the cost of participating in language immersion and study abroad programmes can be a significant barrier for many students. Expenses related to tuition, travel, and living abroad can be prohibitive, limiting access to these opportunities. Many students may opt out due to financial constraints (Mills, Deviney and Ball, 2010). Cost and visa-related issues also hinder students' participation in study abroad programmes.

Additionally, students may face difficulties adjusting to different academic systems and social environments. The transition can be stressful and may negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being (Mesidor and Sly, 2016). Culture shock and homesickness are also familiar challenges for students in immersion programmes. Adapting to new cultural norms and being away from familiar support systems can lead to feelings of isolation and emotional distress (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2020). In addition to that, extended periods abroad can strain relationships with family and friends back home. Maintaining these relationships can be challenging, potentially leading to a sense of disconnection and emotional turmoil (La Brack, 1993).

The nature and structure of the study abroad programmes have challenges. Doyle et al. (2010) indicated that, study abroad programmes extend the time required to complete a degree since it is mostly available only as an “add-on” rather than as part of the student’s undergraduate degree. They further indicate that there is usually insufficient information which gives students narrow views of potential destinations. There is also a lack of incentives for academic faculty to promote and support study abroad.

As mentioned earlier, language immersion and study abroad programmes in tertiary education offer substantial benefits, in spite of all its challenges. A balanced interplay of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors is essential for maximizing participation and ensuring a rewarding experience in language learning and study abroad programmes. Recognizing and fostering these motivations can lead to more effective educational strategies and enhanced student outcomes.

### **Methodology**

The authors employ a mixed-methods approach, using a questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions to gather comprehensive data. This design is suitable for understanding

the perceptions and outcomes associated with participants’ study abroad experiences. The data analysis is conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

### Participants

The target population comprises students from the Spanish section of the University of Ghana who took part in study abroad programmes from the 2014/2015 to 2022/2023 academic years. 31 former students agreed to participate in the survey. The inclusion criteria used for the sample were:

- Enrolment in the Spanish section of the University of Ghana at the time of participation.
- Participation in a study abroad programme in a Spanish-speaking country.
- Availability and willingness to take part in the study.

Finding participants who fall in these inclusion criteria was a difficult task thus, the snowball approach for sampling was used to enable us reach as many participants as possible. There were 31 participants in total and Table 1 below shows the distribution across the different academic years.

Table 1: Participants’ Characteristics Based on Sex and Academic Year of Participation.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b><i>Sex</i></b>		
Female	24	77.4%
Male	7	22.6%
<b><i>Academic year of participation</i></b>		
2014/2015	4	12.9%
2015/2016	2	6.5%
2016/2017	9	29.0%
2017/2018	4	12.9%

2018/2019	1	3.2%
2019/2020	4	12.9%
2020/2021	2	6.5%
2021/2022	3	9.7%
2022/2023	2	6.5%

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### **Data collection instrument**

The questionnaire consisted of three main sections. The demographic section elicited demographic information on participants such as age, gender, year of study abroad, country visited, and duration of stay. Closed-ended questions in the likert scale format addressed specific aspects of the study abroad experience, such as language proficiency improvement, cultural adaptation, academic benefits, and personal growth. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit detailed personal reflections on the study abroad experience, challenges faced, and overall impact on participants' academic and personal lives.

### **Data collection procedure**

The questionnaire was administered electronically using google docs. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the research. Informed consent was obtained electronically.

### **Data analysis**

Responses from closed-ended questions were coded and entered into IBM SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) were used to summarize the demographic data and responses to closed-ended questions. For qualitative analysis, responses from open-ended questions were categorized into themes. Thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data to identify common themes and patterns. This

involved reading all responses to get a sense of the data, coding the data by identifying significant statements and phrases and grouping the codes into themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Preliminary considerations**

The study sought to obtain data from students who had embarked on the language immersion (study abroad) programme over the past nine years, from the 2014/2015 academic year to the 2022/2023 academic year. There was at least one participant per year. The distribution is shown in Table 2. There were more participants for the 2016/2017 academic year which according to the Department of Modern Languages database, is the year that recorded the highest number of participants,<sup>1</sup> especially self-funded students, in the study-abroad programme.

Over the past nine years, students who participated in the study-abroad programme mostly travelled to Spain and Cuba. For more than two decades students were granted scholarships to spend an academic year in Cuba. The scholarship location was changed to Spain in the 2019/2020 academic year. This accounts for the reason these two countries are the only countries the participants indicated. This implies that students have over the years followed the trend and did not explore the variety of options (countries and universities) available. Students may also not have received adequate information on the variety of options available and the guidance to explore these options.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2016/2017 academic year, 20 students participated in the study abroad programme: 5 students on scholarship to Cuba and 15 self-funded students to Spain (14 - University of Zaragoza, 1 - University of Alcalá).

Table 2: Participants’ funding option based on country of study abroad.

	Cuba		Spain	
	n	%	n	%
Country of study abroad	10	32.3%	21	67.7%
<b><i>Funding options</i></b>				
GoG <sup>2</sup> scholarship	10	100%	9	42.9%
Foreign scholarship	0	0%	1	4.8%
Self-funded	0	0%	11	52.4%

From the data in Table 2, 100% of students who undertook their study abroad in Cuba over the years were on scholarship while Spain had a 50-50 split between scholarship and self-funding. This could be due to inadequate information and the cost of the programme as indicated by a participant, “*All we knew was going to Zaragoza on your own. I didn’t know I could go to other universities in Spain. Other countries were just out of the question*” (female, 18-20years). This indicates that they did not know they could go to Cuba and other Spanish-Speaking countries on self-sponsorship.

The duration for the study abroad programme is one academic year. It however differs in the number of months depending on the programme, the university or the country. It is worth noting that, according to records available at the Department of Modern Languages, the majority of the students that go to Spain either go to the University of Salamanca or the University of Zaragoza. In Cuba, at the University of Cienfuegos Carlos Rafael where students enrolled, the programme starts when students arrive given that it is a special programme for Ghanaian study abroad students of Spanish while at the University of Zaragoza and the University of Salamanca, the programme starts in September and ends in May (9 months).

<sup>2</sup> Government of Ghana

However, records at the Department of Modern Languages show that due to administrative and visa delays, some students tend to go later than the start date of the programme. However, some students may stay longer than the programme duration and thus, may still spend the same amount of time even if they arrive later than the start date of the programme.

Table 3: Duration of stay in study abroad country

Duration	Cuba		Spain	
	N	%	N	%
10-12 months	7	70%	11	52.4%
7-9 months	3	30%	9	42.9%
4-6 months	0	0%	1	4.8%

The 2017 handbook for students of the University of Ghana indicates the option for a 3-credit language immersion programme which could be a semester programme (3 to 4 months) or a summer intensive programme (3 weeks to 3 months). However, to partake in a semester programme while school is in session comes with its challenges. Students would have to find equivalent courses in the other programmes they study abroad and due to the administrative obstacles, they hesitate to go that route.

### Motivation for study abroad participation

Motivation plays a vital role in the success and impact of language immersion programmes as highlighted by Fraser (2002) and Lomotey (2019). To investigate the motivational factors driving students’ participation in language immersion programmes, the questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions on factors that influenced learners’ decision to participate in the programme. Motivational factors indicated by participants



included both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, however, the intrinsic factors had a higher percentage. As shown in Table 2, about 75% of participants were on scholarship. When asked whether they would have wished to undertake the programme even without scholarship, 60% (12 out of 20) indicated yes, 4 (20%) said ‘No’ and 4 (20%) said ‘Maybe’. This shows that, students were willing to participate in the programme and their willingness was not dependent on the availability of scholarship.

Table 4: Willingness to participate without scholarship

	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	12	60%
No	4	20%
Maybe	4	20%

However, the decision to participate in study abroad programmes does not solely lie on the individual. Availability of funds is also a key factor as indicated by Mills, Deviney and Ball, (2010). This explains why nineteen of the participants (61.3%) indicated getting a scholarship as one of their reasons for engaging in the programme. Learners may be willing as evidenced in Table 5, but the decision and ability to participate depends on other factors as well.

The majority of the participants indicated that, they participated in the programme to learn the Spanish language (93.5%) and culture (83.9%). The existing literature identify interest in the language and culture of a people as indicators of intrinsic motivation. At the same time, it could be an extrinsic motivation because they are students who were enrolled in the Spanish section. Learning the language and culture was part of the programme and that could fetch them better grades and other opportunities. A clear example of intrinsic motivation is the love of the language and culture which was indicated by more than half (64.5%) of the participants.

Table 5: Factors that motivated students to study abroad

<b>Motivational factors</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b><i>Intrinsic factors</i></b>		
To learn the Spanish language	29	93.5%
To learn the Spanish culture	26	83.9%
Love for the language and culture	20	64.5%
For the traveling experience	18	58.1%
Out of curiosity	4	12.9%
To connect with family abroad	1	3.2%
To seek greener pastures	0	0%
<b><i>Extrinsic factors</i></b>		
I got a scholarship	19	61.3%
Part of departmental programme	14	45.2%
To boost GPA	9	29%
Peer influence	1	3.2%

The majority of participants, 93.5%, indicated learning the Spanish language as their motivational factor. With the study-abroad programme being part of the Bachelor of Arts in Spanish programme at the university, it is not surprising that 45% of participants indicated this as a factor for participation. Student grades are an important aspect of their academic life. Ryan and Deci (2017) classify awarding grades as a ‘controlled motivation’ and posits that it reduces persistence in academic tasks because, over time, they shift the focus from the inherent value of learning to the external reward of obtaining a certain grade. This emphasis on external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation, which is essential for long-term engagement. If students’ persistence in academic tasks are reduced, they would not want to embark on a study abroad programme to receive grades. The results support this claim as just 9 out of 31 participants indicated that they participated in the programme to boost their academic grades.

## **Impact of study abroad on cultural understanding**

Study abroad programmes improve students' intercultural competence and cultural understanding (Paige, Cohen and Shively, 2004; Anderson and Lawton, 2011; Engle & Engle, 2004). The present study analysed participants' pre and post departure cultural awareness in order to investigate the impact of the programme on students' intercultural competence. The findings reflect a range of positive, negative, and neutral views influenced by prior experiences, cultural stereotypes, and limited direct exposure to these cultures.

### ***Participants' pre-departure perceptions***

Some positive pre-departure perceptions were reported by learners. Based on reports from students who had previously participated in the programme, some participants described Cubans as friendly and welcoming, aligning with the value Ghanaians place on hospitality. Many anticipated that Spaniards would be generally welcoming, open and friendlier as compared to other European countries. Students also expected to have positive interactions with Spanish lecturers, and classroom lessons which would improve their overall experience.

Other participants had negative pre-departure perceptions. There were concerns that Cubans might be opportunistic, befriending foreigners primarily to gain something. This perception could stem from anecdotal experiences shared by past participants. A few students expressed uncertainty due to limited exposure to Cuban culture through movies and books, contrasting with the more familiar American culture.

Regarding Spain, Spaniards were perceived as 'party-goers' and fast speakers, which could be challenging for non-native speakers. Some participants were concerned about potential racism and feelings of loneliness, reflecting broader societal issues. One participant stated: "*I had heard they were a bit mean and unfriendly. And also, that it's easy to faces [sic] racism and feel lonely*" (female, 21-23years). A few students,

influenced by negative stereotypes and anecdotal accounts, perceived Spaniards as mean and unfriendly. Others anticipated Spaniards as generally nice but overly inquisitive, with more liberal public behaviour compared to Ghanaians. Some were warned about potential deceit, recommending that students be cautious and discerning.

Neutral pre-departure perceptions were also reported by some participants. They indicated that, they anticipated Spaniards to be more open-minded about sexuality and gender, which contrasts with more conservative attitudes in Ghana, and this could be positive or negative depending on the individual. However, several students approached the experience as an adventure with no specific preconceived notions. In relation to Cuba, one participant specifically highlighted that the best advice was to keep an open mind and experience the country firsthand.

### ***Participants post departure perceptions***

Post-departure perceptions reported by participants also reflected a range of positive, negative, and neutral views. However, post departure perceptions were shaped by direct experiences during their stay and were generally positive. Many participants described Cubans and the Spaniards as genuinely nice, hospitable, and friendly. Many students found Spaniards to be welcoming, supportive, and helpful in language learning. Living with Spanish families and travelling with them offered deeper cultural insights. The similarities between Cuban and Ghanaian cultures contributed to a sense of home-away-from-home. The strong African presence and family-oriented nature of Cuban culture were particularly stressed. One participant noted “*I call Cuba home away from home because of some similarities I found between Cuban and Ghanaian culture*” (female, 21-23years). Students who went to Spain also noted some similarities between Spanish and Ghanaian cultures, such as the family-oriented nature of both societies.

Many of the participants admired the Cubans for their resilience, strength, and talent despite economic difficulties. The Cuban culture was described as festive, with a love for social gatherings and fiestas. The students appreciated this vibrant social life. Spain was recognized for its rich and diverse culture, unique customs, festivals, and its rare arts and literature. Others indicated that the study abroad experience provided valuable insights into Cuba's political history and identity, and students appreciated their free educational system and rich culture. Participants also reported significant improvements in their Spanish language skills and valued the friendships made during their stay.

Some participants however reported negative post-departure perceptions. While appreciating certain aspects of the communist system in Cuba, students mentioned the limitations, such as difficulties with internet connectivity. Experiences of subtle racism and ignorance about Africa were reported for both countries. Some students found Spaniards less friendly than expected, with regional variations in hospitality. The prevalence of smoking and more liberal public behaviour were identified as negative culture shocks. Differences in cuisine (food without stew, no pepper), standards of politeness, and way of dressing and were indicated, although these were mostly referred to as part of the learning experience.

The research findings also included some neutral post-departure perceptions. Although the initial culture shock was significant for some, many students adapted over time and learned to appreciate the differences. Certain cultural practices and attitudes, such as a laid-back approach and honesty over hypocrisy, were different from what students were used to in Ghana. The rapid pace of spoken Spanish in Cuba was both a challenge and a learning opportunity for the students.

In all, participants' post-experience perceptions of Cuban and Spanish cultures were predominantly positive, with a significant appreciation for the hospitality, resilience, and

cultural richness encountered. Participants indicated that their stay in the various countries dispelled certain misconceptions they had before travelling. However, whereas some perceptions evolved positively, others were reinforced, as students learned more about the culture and the people.

### **Culture shock<sup>3</sup> experienced by participants**

The responses reflected a wide range of unexpected cultural practices, societal norms, and everyday behaviours that differed significantly from what the students were accustomed to in their home country. These were themed into religious practices, social and public behaviour, and economic life.

With respect to religion, the practice of Santería, a syncretic religion combining African religious traditions with Catholicism, was one of the religions-based culture shocks indicated. Some participants indicated they knew Cubans were Catholics, but they did not expect a blend with African religious traditions. This practice highlighted the historical and cultural blending in Cuban society. In Spain, the presence of many churches but low attendance at religious services was surprising, given that in Ghana, the attendance of church services is usually remarkably high.

With reference to social and public behaviour, politeness in Ghana is very key. The informal way of addressing lecturers in Spain, often by their first names, was different from the formal respect typically shown in Ghanaian educational institutions. The close physical proximity during conversations was unexpected and the custom of kissing on the cheek as a greeting was unusual for them. Additionally, the revealing clothing of the female immigration officers at the Cuban airport surprised students, contrasting sharply with Ghanaian norms of modest dressing in official settings.

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<sup>3</sup> Culture shock, sometimes referred to as cultural shock is an experience of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with new culture and the feeling of loss of accustomed cultural and social cues (Obeng, 1954; Wilkenman, 1994).

Additionally, the frequent and open displays of affection in both countries, including kissing in public, were unexpected and contrasted with more conservative social behaviours in Ghana. One participant highlighted that these open displays of affection are usually seen in movies and so seeing it happen face-to-face had a different feeling: *“They kissed in public at all times. It was weird because I thought it was just in movies. I wasn’t expecting to see so much of it.”* (female, 24-26years). The prevalence of smoking in public places was a major cultural difference in Spain, as this is less common in Ghana. The practice of taking a mid-afternoon break, or siesta, where even schools closed, was a significant cultural difference in Spain. Another difference was the late dining hours in Spain, with dinner often eaten around 10 pm, which was a stark contrast to Ghanaian mealtimes. The widespread practice of eating bread with every meal and the absence of stew or sauce with rice were notable dietary differences. Regarding economic life, the use of two different currencies in Cuba (the US dollar and the Cuban peso) was a novel and confusing economic practice for the students. The Cuban market system was quite different from Ghanaian practices. In Cuba, they had to pay for shopping bags.

In sum, the culture shock experienced by students in Cuba and Spain highlights the diverse and often contrasting societal norms, practices, and behaviours encountered during their study abroad programmes. These experiences provided valuable learning opportunities, broadening the students’ cultural horizons, and deepening their understanding of the complexities and richness of Cuban and Spanish societies. Participants indicated that the exposure to diverse ways of life, despite the initial surprises and adjustments, contributed significantly to their personal and academic growth. One stated, *“I was very grateful to have experienced the Cuban culture despite the shocks and adjustments. Not only did I see a great improvement in my oral, listening and written proficiencies of Spanish, but I also made some great friends with whom I have fond memories we*

*tend to relive whenever we catch up”*. They also indicated that their encounter with various cultures broadened their worldview significantly. Some students who went to Cuba interacted with Angolan students which fostered a sense of Pan-Africanism and deepened their knowledge of Angolan history, culture, and cuisine. Students who went to Spain met with other cultures such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese, allowing them to taste their foods and learn about their traditions. The immersive experience enhanced their Spanish language skills and provided insights into Cuba’s revolutionary history, socialist system, and African influences in music, dance, and religion. Additionally, they appreciated the cultural diversity of Spaniards, their meal customs, and the unique Spanish practices like the siesta. Overall, participants strongly agreed that the experience improved their Spanish proficiency, helped them to foster cultural understanding not only within the context of native speakers of Spanish but also, people of diverse cultures, and helped them to better navigate issues related to culture shocks, cultural differences and understanding other people’s perspectives about life. They enjoyed the experience, and believed the programme is beneficial and should be continued.

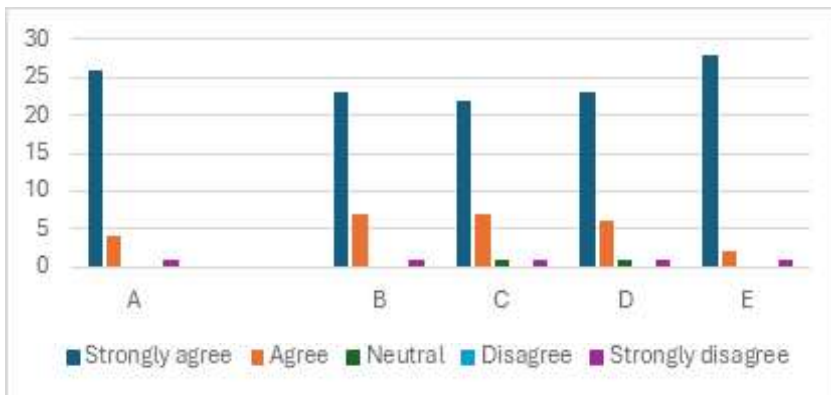


Figure 1: Overall Impact of Study Abroad Experience on Participants.



*Key: A = Improved language proficiency, B = cultural understanding among people of different cultures, C = navigate better issues related to culture shocks, differences and understanding of different perspectives. D = Enjoyed the experience E = programme is beneficial and should be continued.*

### **Limitations and recommendations for further studies**

The study had some limitations that future research could address for different results. These include a response bias. Participants may provide socially desirable responses rather than honest reflections. The results may also have been influenced by a recall bias whereby participants might not accurately remember their experiences from several years ago. As one participant stated, ‘I don’t recall much’. The small sample size is another limitation to this research. The study was limited to those who were willing and available to participate in it. The sample is not representative enough to provide conclusive findings on the experiences of study abroad students from the research setting. However, the limited sample size was also due to the fact that the database on previous year abroad students from the UG Department of Modern Languages was unavailable, thus, contacting them was a challenge. Based on these limitations, further studies may employ a longitudinal approach where they could create a database of students who participate in study abroad programmes over a period of time. Pre and post data in this case could be taken not too long after the time of completion of the programme to limit the recall bias.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, findings from the current research show that the impact of study abroad programmes are enriching — enhancing both language proficiency and cultural understanding and fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation for diverse cultures. The results also show that students are driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors to engage in study

abroad programmes. Intrinsic motivations, such as interest in the language and culture of the native speakers, personal growth, intellectual curiosity, and cultural exploration, play a crucial role in sustaining long-term engagement in these programmes. Extrinsic motivations on the other hand, including academic credit, career prospects, and social influences, also significantly impact learners' decisions. A balanced interplay of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors is essential for maximizing participation and ensuring a rewarding experience in language learning and study abroad programmes. Recognizing and fostering these motivations can lead to more effective educational strategies and enhanced student outcomes. Despite the benefits, challenges such as financial constraints inhibit students from participating in these study-abroad programmes. There are also challenges faced by participants, evident in adjustment difficulties, and impact on personal relationships. Addressing these challenges through adequate support and preparation can maximize the benefits and mitigate the disadvantages, ensuring that these programmes continue to play a vital role in higher education. These findings on study abroad and language immersion programmes have practical implications for educators and policymakers. They suggest that study abroad programmes can be an effective tool for enhancing communication and intercultural competence, as well as an overall personal growth.

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