

Of self-efficacy, overcoming linguistic barriers and gender: Lessons from University of Ghana female students studying abroad in Spain

Setor Donn  Novieto¹

Lecturer

Department of Modern Languages

University of Ghana

Email: snovieto@ug.edu.gh

Submitted: June 1, 2025/ Accepted: October 10, 2025/ Published: November 28, 2025

Abstract

Study abroad programs offer significant benefits to foreign language learners, including improved language proficiency and cultural immersion. However, limited research has focused on female learners' self-efficacy in overcoming linguistic barriers and integrating their personal identities in the host country. This study explores the experiences of female Spanish students from the University of Ghana who participated in a year-long study-abroad program in Spain. Their experiences are crucial because gender-related challenges and cultural influences often affect academic progress, social interactions, and linguistic development. This study examines how these students navigated language barriers and developed intercultural understanding during their stay. Data were collected through anonymous online surveys and WhatsApp messages, which offered qualitative insights into their personal experiences and coping strategies. The findings showed that many students initially struggled with self-efficacy and identity acceptance due to inadequate pre-departure orientation and language difficulties upon arrival. As they acclimatized, their self-efficacy improved, emphasizing the need

¹ Setor Donne NOVIETO trained as a certified teacher for primary and junior high schools in 1996. After teaching for four years, he studied at the University of Ghana where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Honours in French and Spanish. After completion in 2004, he worked as a senior research assistant at the Department of Modern Languages of the same university until 2006 when he enrolled for his Masters' studies in Spanish. After this qualification in 2008, he worked as a lecturer at the University of Ghana from 2009 to 2015. Setor completed his PhD in Spanish and Latin American Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. In his doctoral research, Setor looked at some of the theoretical and conceptual issues of Cuban and Ghanaian postcolonial literature.

for targeted support. Gender and cultural dynamics significantly shaped the learning and adaptation processes. This study underscores the importance of comprehensive mentoring programs before and during study-abroad experiences to support female students. Such initiatives can enhance foreign language learning, sociocultural development, and intercultural awareness, thus maximizing the benefits of studying abroad for female learners.

Key words: self-efficacy, linguistic barriers, study abroad, gender, mentoring.

Introduction

Interest in study abroad programs for foreign language learners has grown significantly in recent years, with an increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds participating in these programs worldwide. This expansion is driven by the recognition of the numerous benefits offered by studying abroad, including academic enhancement, personal development, and cultural exchange. The ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language is crucial to the success of students in study abroad programs. Proficiency in the host country's language facilitates better academic performance as students can understand lectures, complete assignments, and participate actively in class discussions. It also enables them to engage fully with their host community and form meaningful relationships with peers, teachers, and locals, which enhances their cultural immersion and overall experience. Students are exposed to new educational systems, diverse cultural practices, and unique perspectives that collectively contribute to their holistic development.

However, the increased interest in study abroad programs also bring to light various challenges that students must navigate, particularly when it comes to adapting to new linguistic environments and when it has to do with African/Ghanaian female students. Linguistic barriers pose significant challenges to students. These challenges can manifest in various forms, such as anxiety about speaking in public and difficulties in following academic content. Students may also experience feelings of isolation and frustration, which can affect

their mental health and wellbeing. Certainly, new linguistic environments can be daunting and present significant barriers to effective communication, academic success, and social integration among both male and female students (Brown, 2024; Devlin & Peacock, 2009; Ward, 2001; Zheng & Berry, 1991). However, female students are of particular importance in this context, as research has shown they may experience greater social and linguistic pressures in new environments, which can uniquely impact their adjustment and participation. Overcoming these barriers requires substantial effort and resilience, and the ability to do so is often linked to the concept of self-efficacy; that is, the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of female students, focusing on the intersection of gender and international education, as well as targeting the psychological and behavioral mechanisms that support female students' confidence and resilience abroad.

Self-efficacy, study-abroad challenges and linguistic barriers

Female students in foreign language study-abroad programs often face sociocultural and psychological hurdles that affect their academic and social integration. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed, is a key determinant of navigating these barriers. This literature review synthesizes research on self-efficacy, gender and foreign language learning, and study-abroad challenges.

Self-efficacy in foreign language study-abroad contexts

Self-efficacy, introduced by Bandura (1977), refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve goals. It is influenced by four key factors: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Success strengthens self-efficacy, whereas failure can weaken it. Watching others succeed boosts confidence, whereas witnessing failure can diminish self-belief. Encouragement enhances self-efficacy,

whereas stress and anxiety negatively impact it. Self-efficacy influences the cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes in foreign language learning. In cognitive processes, self-efficacy determines the level of challenge individuals set for themselves when dealing with educational materials and influences their problem-solving strategies. Higher self-efficacy promotes innovative thinking regarding education and language learning, whereas lower self-efficacy may hinder confidence in tackling complex learning tasks. In terms of motivation, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious goals, commit to them and persevere through challenges. Affectively, self-efficacy impacts emotion regulation; those with higher self-efficacy tend to manage stress more effectively and are less prone to anxiety or depression. In selection processes, self-efficacy influences the environment and tasks individuals choose, with people gravitating towards situations in which they feel competent and avoiding those perceived as high risk or beyond their capabilities. Understanding these dimensions is crucial in study abroad contexts, where students encounter unfamiliar academic and cultural environments that test their confidence and adaptability.

Within the context of foreign language study-abroad settings, self-efficacy has been shown to play a crucial role in academic success and psychological well-being (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1986) posited that self-efficacy influences students' willingness to take on challenges, persist through difficulties, and maintain motivation despite setbacks. Expanding on this, Zimmerman (2000) highlighted the importance of self-regulation, noting that students with high self-efficacy proactively engage in learning behaviors. Pajares (2002) further emphasized the link between self-efficacy and academic achievement, particularly in language learning. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) examined how self-efficacy shapes learning strategies and demonstrated that students with strong self-beliefs adopt more adaptive techniques. Komarraju and Nadler (2013) found a direct

relationship between self-efficacy, academic persistence, and resilience, which are crucial factors for success in study abroad programs. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) reinforced these findings and concluded that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist despite linguistic and cultural challenges.

In addition to academic persistence, self-efficacy influences psychological adaptation. Maddux (2013) explored its connection with emotional regulation and stress management, whereas Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) developed the General Self-Efficacy Scale to assess confidence in overcoming academic and social challenges. In the context of long-term academic aspirations, Betz and Hackett (2006) examined self-efficacy in career decision making, emphasizing its impact on students' goals. Wood and Bandura (1989) underscored the role of social modeling in fostering self-efficacy, highlighting the importance of mentorship in building confidence.

Environmental factors also influence self-efficacy. Lent et al. (1994) introduced the Social Cognitive Career Theory, linking self-efficacy to career outcomes and highlighting its relevance in academic and professional trajectories. Klassen and Usher (2010) examined cultural variations, emphasizing the challenges faced by students from non-Western backgrounds. In his foundational study, Vygotsky (1978) discussed the role of social interaction in cognitive development, which is particularly relevant for students navigating new linguistic environments, as was the case in this study.

Intrinsic motivation is also closely related to self-efficacy. Deci and Ryan (2000) argued that self-efficacy fosters autonomous learning and encourages students to take ownership of their education. Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) posited that self-efficacy is a key predictor of performance, particularly in high-stake academic settings. Hsieh and Kang (2010) investigated self-efficacy in second language learning and noted its influence on students' willingness to take linguistic risks. Artino (2012) examined self-efficacy within the framework of self-regulation

and demonstrated its role in effective study strategies. Finally, Pintrich and De Groot (1990) highlighted the interplay between self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness, underscoring its importance in guiding learning behaviors.

Several studies have identified the factors that influence self-efficacy in foreign language learning, including prior international experience, language proficiency, cultural adaptation, support systems, and pre-departure preparation. Students with prior exposure to international environments tend to exhibit higher self-efficacy as they are more familiar with cultural and academic adjustments. Structured pre-departure training enhances self-efficacy by equipping students with realistic expectations and coping strategies.

Language proficiency is another crucial determinant. Students proficient in the host country's language are more likely to participate in academic discussions, engage socially, and perform well academically (Coleman, 1997). Conversely, linguistic struggles can undermine confidence and increase stress. Successful cultural adaptation also plays a significant role, as students who integrate well into their host culture report higher self-efficacy and overall satisfaction (Ward et al., 2001). Institutional support, such as mentorship programs and psychological counselling, further strengthens resilience in foreign environments (Glass et al., 2013). However, existing research primarily focuses on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding self-efficacy among students from underrepresented regions such as Ghana. Given the significance of self-efficacy in academic success, it is essential to consider its interaction with gender and foreign language learning.

Gender and foreign language studies

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that gender is a crucial factor influencing self-efficacy, particularly in foreign language study-abroad programs. The specific challenges faced by students of different genders, including the need to navigate

cultural expectations, safety concerns, and social roles, can directly affect their confidence in their ability to succeed in new environments. Gender differences in self-efficacy have been widely documented in various academic and social domains. Research suggests that these differences often stem from socialization processes, cultural expectations, and educational experiences.

Research indicates that female learners often outperform male learners because of differences in learning styles, motivation levels, and social attitudes towards communication (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Female students tend to employ more metacognitive and social learning strategies, engage in cooperative learning, and exhibit stronger intrinsic motivation to master foreign languages (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Despite these advantages, female students may experience heightened anxiety and self-doubt, particularly in immersive foreign language environments (Dewaele et al., 2008).

According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), female learners report higher levels of foreign language anxiety, which can negatively impact their willingness to communicate and their overall proficiency. Horwitz et al. (1986) linked language anxiety to perfectionism, a trait more commonly observed in female learners that can manifest as reluctance to speak, fear of making grammatical errors, and avoidance of social interaction in the host language.

Cultural and societal expectations shape gendered experiences in language learning. Pavlenko and Piller (2008) highlighted that women in certain cultures are expected to be more reserved and less assertive, which affects their confidence in speaking a foreign language. Van Mol (2020) examined how these gendered expectations influence classroom participation and informal social interactions in study-abroad contexts, often leading to difficulties in asserting oneself. Female students may also face mobility constraints and limited networking opportunities in host cultures with restrictive gender norms

(Morita, 2004). While female students tend to be more receptive to feedback and exhibit a stronger orientation towards self-improvement (Kissau, 2006), excessive sensitivity to criticism can undermine self-efficacy (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Given these gendered dynamics, it is important to explore the challenges associated with foreign language learning in study-abroad contexts, and to tailor interventions that address gender-specific challenges in language learning.

Challenges in study abroad programs

Studying abroad presents multiple challenges including cultural adaptation, academic expectations, and social integration. For example, female students from Ghana may encounter unique obstacles such as cultural adjustment difficulties stemming from differences in gender norms between Ghana and Spain. Discrimination, safety concerns, and limited social support networks further complicate their experiences. According to Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler (2020), international students frequently experience linguistic insecurity and biases in academic and social settings. Financial constraints, homesickness, and academic pressure also contribute to stress, hindering student engagement with new educational environments (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Martinez et al., 2019). Institutional support structures are crucial in mitigating these challenges. Glass et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of tailored interventions that address safety concerns, cultural sensitivity, and gender-specific challenges, particularly for female students (Bista, 2016). Coping mechanisms such as peer networks and mentorship are also essential for successful adaptation (Ward et al., 2001). Overall, various critics have highlighted various factors that affect the performance of female students studying abroad, as they seek to assert themselves, calling attention to gender, culture, safety concerns, and limited social support networks during the study period. However, a review of the literature suggests that there is a dearth of studies that focus specifically on the experiences

of female students from African universities. This gap in the literature leaves a significant portion of students' experiences underexplored, particularly those involving the intersection of gender, cultural background, and linguistic adaptation.

In response to this gap in the literature, the current study seeks to address this disparity by examining, from a socio-cultural and linguistic perspective, how gender affects the self-efficacy of Ghanaian female students in a one-year language study abroad program in Spain. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of female students in study abroad programs?
2. How do female students develop and maintain self-efficacy abroad?
3. What strategies do female students use to overcome challenges in study abroad programs?

Considering the relative paucity of research devoted to the experiences of female students, this study sought to investigate these issues, focusing on the strategies they have adopted to overcome the challenges encountered during their studies abroad and subsequently provide recommendations on how to enhance their self-efficacy and navigate linguistic barriers. The current study is important because, as Lomotey et al. (2023) assert, there is a “need to promote the appreciation of FL learning among people of all genders and to adequately prepare Ghanaian youth to compete and succeed in our globalised world” (p. 3).

Methodology

The data collection methods, research participants and analytical approach are presented in subsequent pages.

Research design

The qualitative method was adopted for this study because it provided rich-data for the examination of the personal experiences and challenges of female Ghanaian students studying abroad.

Data collection methods

The data for this study were collected using anonymous online surveys administered to female students at the University of Ghana who had studied abroad in Spain (within a four-year span). Additional data were collected using anonymous WhatsApp messages. Pseudonyms were assigned to all questionnaire responses and WhatsApp messages to preserve the anonymity and identity of the participants. This approach ensured that students could share their experiences without worrying about their identification. Furthermore, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the recurring themes observed over the four-year period, participants with similar experiences were grouped together, regardless of their year of study. The survey instrument contained semi-structured questions focusing on personal experiences, challenges, and strategies related to self-efficacy. The participants were informed of their rights regarding participation in the study.

Research participants

Twenty-five (25) female students from the Spanish Section of the University of Ghana participated in the study. However, three of them started but did not complete the survey. Convenience sampling was used to select the study participants. This sampling technique was chosen because the study was exploratory and aimed to ascertain the coping mechanisms employed by female students to overcome gender-related challenges within the context of studying abroad. Female students from the Spanish section of the University of Ghana who had participated in study-abroad programs at various universities in Spain between

2020 and 2023 were invited to participate in the study. This period could be described as particularly ‘fertile,’ as it saw a high level of student participation in the year-abroad program. Additionally, these years (2020 and 2023) were chosen to ensure that the data were both current and relevant.

Analytical approach

The data gathered from the participants’ responses to the questionnaires were subjected to critical analysis. A critical analysis involves a structured process to ensure that the data are interpreted accurately and meaningful insights are drawn from them. Prior to analysis, the responses were checked for completeness, consistency, and accuracy. The responses were further categorized into themes or patterns through content analysis, identifying recurring themes, patterns, or keywords. The participants were grouped into two groups, with each group having 11 students and Joy and Evelyn representing each group. The following section presents the findings from the analysis.

Findings and discussions

The thematic analysis revealed three key challenges: inadequate pre-departure preparation, cultural shock and adaptation, and gender-related issues. These are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Pre-departure preparations

An analysis of the responses from participants revealed that thorough pre-departure preparation is critical for Ghanaian female students undertaking year-abroad studies in Spain. Most participants emphasized the need for comprehensive planning in three key areas: financial readiness, administrative documentation, and psychological preparedness. All the students (except one, who, according to the data, had an uncle in Spain) described the intense pressure they felt to secure adequate funding

before leaving. They noted that scholarships were either highly competitive or insufficient to cover the full costs of tuition, travel, accommodation, and living expenses in a European country. For some students, financial instability resulted in delayed travel or the need to seek part-time employment immediately upon arrival, which often affected their initial academic focus and performance.

For instance, the participant, Evelyn, was excited when she studied abroad. However, the initial excitement turned into a near-nightmare when she realized that she needed to raise money to cover the costs of the process, including her passport, legalization, and certification of certificates, insurance and registration with the Spanish university. The application process for studying abroad in Spain was unclear for students viewing their chosen school's portal for the first time. Therefore, participants in this category highlighted the complexity and stress of managing visa applications and other bureaucratic requirements as one of the main challenges of the study abroad program. This finding aligns with that of Lee and Rice (2007) and Ward et al. (2001). Several students described the process as daunting, citing a lack of clear guidance, delays in embassy responses, and the need to navigate unfamiliar legal procedures sometimes without institutional support. This created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety, as any misstep could jeopardize their academic progress. Furthermore, some students mentioned the additional difficulty of being first-time travellers unfamiliar with the requirements for international mobility, such as medical insurance, academic transcripts, and proof of accommodation. These procedural hurdles, coupled with unanticipated financial burdens including document legalization, visa application fees, travel insurance, and initial housing costs, constituted a significant source of anxiety and stress throughout the pre-departure phase, as indicated by Joy in the quotation below:

-Joy: It was not until I spoke to one other student that I got to know that we needed to translate the

documents and have them legalized at the embassy. When I went to the embassy, I was told that the translation must be taken to Spain and verified. The interesting part of it was the fact that these verifications were not for free. I had to look for extra money to pay for it. My anxieties were huge when I had to ask my dad for travel insurance. I didn't know that I needed an insurance to travel to Spain after paying all that money here and there. Where will I get money to pay for the accommodation?

The second group represented by Evelyn recounted how they got in touch with a former study-abroad student who helped them by suggesting schools and websites to visit. They also helped them select appropriate and affordable accommodation close to a particular university. Evelyn was also fortunate enough to receive a detailed orientation on the courses she would need to take, as well as an explanation of what to expect if she was staying with a host family. After realizing that there was someone to help her with all the necessary information, this participant did not experience many difficulties, and this person even accompanied her to the passport office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ghana. Evelyn arrived in Spain full of enthusiasm and was eager to succeed in her language-learning adventure.

While many participants expressed enthusiasm about the prospects of studying abroad, anticipation was frequently undercut by logistical and financial barriers. Navigating university websites proved difficult for several, particularly Evelyn and Joy, who noted that much of the content on these websites lacked clarity and presumed prior familiarity with bureaucratic procedures.

Evelyn: I found the website quite difficult to navigate. There was a potion that allowed me to change the language into English, but the result of this change was even more confusing, as there

was very scanty information in English. It was as if the school assumed that we already knew the information we needed to apply for the language study abroad program.

Some participants also cited a lack of comprehensive pre-departure orientation from sponsoring institutions.

-Joy: I think we (those going on foreign language study abroad) should be given formal orientation sessions. Imagine the Head of Department telling us what to expect, and she also bringing in some former students who have been there for them to share their experiences with us? That would be great. We would be very well informed.

However, informal peer support networks, particularly those involving alumni who had previously studied in Spain, were invaluable in demystifying application procedures, offering emotional reassurance, and suggesting affordable services.

Cultural shock and adaptation

Upon arrival, the students were confronted with a cultural reality that differed significantly from their preconceived notions, whether based on personal ideals or textbook knowledge. Several respondents described feelings of isolation and confusion when faced with Spanish social customs, which differed greatly from those in Ghana. Initial difficulties arose from interpersonal interactions, academic structures, and everyday cultural norms such as greetings and food preferences. Students with limited prior exposure to European cultures found the transition particularly challenging, emphasizing the importance of cultural preparation in facilitating adaptation.

Additionally, participants emphasized the critical yet often overlooked need for psychological and emotional

readiness. The transition from Ghana to Spain required profound adjustments beyond language and culture, encompassing deeper changes in social expectations, gender dynamics, and academic environments. Many students were initially shocked by the more individualistic social norms and perceived cultural insensitivity, which contrasted sharply with the collectivist values of Ghanaian society.

Despite having received formal training in Spanish, participants found it challenging to understand the rapid speech patterns and regional linguistic variations of native speakers. Evelyn encountered this difficulty in Madrid when trying to understand conversational Spanish. Daily practice also required adaptation. For example, reliance on digital navigation tools replaced the customary practice of asking for directions in person, which initially heightened feelings of isolation. Subtle yet meaningful differences, such as the absence of pre-meal prayers or participation in extended post-meal conversations (*sobremesas*), further challenged deeply ingrained social behaviours.

Regarding pre- and post-meal customs in her homestay, Evelyn discovered that the practice of inviting people to eat by saying ‘let’s eat’ and saying a prayer before eating, common in informal and some formal settings in Ghana, was not observed—the host family simply started eating as soon as the food was placed in front of them. Another cultural shock was the *sobremesas*. As a Ghanaian, Evelyn had been taught not to eat and talk simultaneously. Her grandmother told her that people fell ill while talking and eating. These experiences prompted an ongoing negotiation between preserving her cultural identity and adapting to her new environment, thus revealing the complex emotional dimensions of cross-cultural immersion.

Evelyn indicated that she did not expect what the literature indicated, a cultural shock, or the need for her to adapt to the new culture to self-efface. She also observed: ‘I was so shocked to get to Madrid airport and realized I could not speak

to anyone. The Spanish I learnt in school was spoken in a slow, calm and nice fashion, that the “speed” of Madrid made me think they were speaking something else’ (Evelyn).

Clearly, this student, trying to ‘import’ her experience and knowledge from her Spanish classroom at the University of Ghana, was shocked about the rhythm of the Spanish spoken in Spain compared to what she had learned in Ghana.

One major factor that cuts across the experiences of both groups is the linguistic challenges they face. The data reported severe linguistic challenges during the first three weeks of arrival in Spain. Many students could not communicate with receptionists in hotels. These communication challenges are in various forms: difficulty greeting people they meet on the bus and difficulty buying items in the supermarket. One participant (from Joy’s group) indicated that she had to learn the hard way that some people could be very intolerant and frustrated when they could not hear one speak Spanish with them. At some point, she had to tolerate the insults of someone who became frustrated because she could not speak Spanish well when she arrived in Spain during the first two weeks. The person used *palabrotas* (non-edifying words) such as ‘hija de puta madre’ on her and shouted at her ‘cállate’ (shut up).

These students also encountered significant cultural differences. These differences were most evident in their interactions in social settings such as churches, mosques, and classrooms. As they noticed these differences, the participants felt lonely, isolated, and frustrated to the extent that they found it difficult to participate in class discussions and understand lectures.

These Ghanaian students in Spain experienced the *honeymoon stage* (Schartner & Young, 2015) with initial excitement and fascination with the new culture. However, for them to benefit from the study abroad program and self-efface, they have to move from this stage to the *negotiation stage*, where they are confronted with cultural differences, leading to

culture shock and homesickness. Indeed, this is what Evelyn (representing 11 other participants), Joy (representing 11 other participants), and those in their category experienced. At this level, the students gradually became accustomed to the new system and developed coping strategies.

The academic experience posed other challenges. In the classroom, Evelyn was shocked to learn that she could not form groups with other students. Evelyn indicated that she wanted to form a study group with some of the students she felt was good in Spanish, so that she could practice with them, but these other students were not ready to share their time or knowledge with anyone. When she finally got an answer from one of them, it was, “pues, yo no me interesa estudiar en grupo” (Well, I do not like group studies). Evelyn felt that this other student could collaborate with her in terms of studies, and even more because she was from Jamaica and shared the English language and perhaps the same skin color as her; hence, a bit of closeness with her situation in Spain, but Evelyn was disappointed in the end. However, as suggested by cultural factor theory, she enhanced her self-efficacy by overcoming cultural challenges and becoming more competent in navigating the new environment. This leads to an increase in self-efficacy, which positively affects academic and personal growth. Her cross-cultural competence has also been enhanced. This manifested in her becoming more adaptable and open-minded, which would be a valuable skill in an increasingly globalized world (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Moreover, differences in educational systems, such as teaching methods, student-teacher interactions, and assessment methods require adjustment. However, the students appreciated the opportunities for independent and critical thinking. Participants also benefited from academic support services, such as tutoring and writing centers.

As mentioned earlier, another factor was the need for institutional support including orientation programs, counselling services, and peer support from student organizations. This was

considered crucial in helping students navigate academic and social challenges.

Gendered and racialized challenges

Gender- and race discrimination-related concerns were also identified as key issues in the responses. Some participants encountered overt gender discrimination. A participant affirmed that ‘there is a little bit of male chauvinism in Spain, I might be wrong, but I think there is’. These cases emphasize the *cultural dissonance* factor mentioned by Tufuor (2019), who conclude that female students might experience significant cultural differences in gender roles and societal expectations. For instance, while Ghanaian culture often emphasizes collegiality and gentleness when dealing with strangers and women, including designating roles for women, Western cultures might promote different sets of rules for men and women in terms of cultural comportment (Tufuor, 2019). Indeed, the insults and the ‘indiscriminate’ proposal might be due to cultural dissonance.

Some participants reported experiencing gender bias in academic and social settings, particularly in environments in which traditional gender roles were still prevalent. Despite Spain’s progressive approach to gender equality, some students said that they felt overlooked or dismissed in academic discussions and professional interaction. Additionally, some accounts mentioned racial discrimination, with students describing instances when they felt stereotyped or treated differently based on their background.

The experiences of the participants in this study are comparable to the experiences of other female African students studying in various European countries (Spain as well). Akoth and Enoksen (2022) examined the experiences of seven international students from Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania studying in Norway. This study highlights cultural shock, language barriers, and racial discrimination as key challenges. Experiences of racism and discrimination affected students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Perhaps the most profound adjustment was navigating gender relations and racialized encounters in their new social settings. Female students living in hostels, such as Joy and her friends, reported receiving unwanted and sometimes aggressive attention from local men, which made them feel vulnerable. The Spanish tendency towards direct communication often conflicted with Ghanaian traditions of modesty and distance, resulting in misunderstandings.

As Ghanaian female students, some felt particularly vulnerable, recounting moments of discomfort or misunderstanding in interactions shaped by racial or gendered stereotypes. These reflections underscore the importance of equipping prospective students with logistical information, as well as intercultural communication skills and strategies for self-care and resilience. Another thing that shocked these Ghanaian female students was the custom of giving ‘piropos’ or compliments in Spain. In the case of Evelyn, she felt she was being harassed when after being introduced in school, the gentlemen said, ‘que linda...¿eres de Ghana? Me parece muy bonita’ [how beautiful you are...are you from Ghana? you look very beautiful]. This kind of adulation was not what Evelyn expected, or she was not used to it.

Furthermore, participants recounted episodes of racial stereotyping, including assumptions about their academic abilities and Spanish language proficiency. These experiences resonated with broader discourses on the marginalization of African international students in European contexts (Lee & Rice, 2007). Several students described the cumulative effect of racial and gender-based microaggressions as emotionally exhausting, an example is the following observation from Evelyn; ‘I thought at some point that we were being heckled just because we were female. And it turns out finally that it was true. We were told by One gentleman that going abroad to study is not good for black females. They should rather stay home and cook for their boyfriends as their mothers did’. A clear case of gender-based discrimination.

As corroborated by the literature, for female students studying abroad, especially those from countries such as Ghana, self-efficacy can be influenced by various gender-specific factors. These challenges may include societal expectations, cultural norms surrounding gender roles, and concerns about safety in unfamiliar environments. Female Ghanaian foreign-language students may also face additional pressure to balance academic and social expectations, while navigating gendered perceptions in the host country. As indicated in the literature, these factors can affect their confidence in handling new situations, potentially lowering their self-efficacy. Female students face unique challenges regarding safety and gender discrimination. Fear of harassment or assault can limit their willingness to fully explore and engage in the new environment, potentially reducing their self-efficacy and overall satisfaction with their study abroad experience (Morley et al., 2014).

In the case of the other participant categorised under Joy and others, the data revealed that Joy and her friends were not shocked by the culture at their place, since they had previously travelled outside Ghana to the north of Spain. However, they still experienced the issue of gender frustration. The data revealed that Joy and her group were instantly accosted by a group of boys around their hostels in Spain during the first week of their arrival. They were not ‘fortunate’ to find a homestay; hence, they lodged in a hostel that had other people. These boys, who were also in that school to study Spanish (they were from the Basque region), were adventurous and decided to have fun with the Ghanaian ladies. Their approach to willy nilly being friends with these female students shocked them. These participants were not used to being openly asked to be friends with males; instead, they were used to the subtle and gentle approach of their male friends in Ghana. One of the participants indicated “The friend I had in Ghana will pass by my hostel to say hello and offer sometimes to get me food. He never directly proposed to me, but his endearing actions speak volumes”.

Lee and Rice (2007) emphasize the challenges of discrimination and stereotyping international students' experiences. They suggest that racial or gender-based discrimination could reinforce the need for these students to cling to their cultural identity as a source of strength and security. Studies have shown that African students often face stereotyping, which can affect their self-esteem and academic performance (Lee & Rice, 2007). Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated considerable adaptability and resilience. They adopted deliberate strategies, such as increased participation in intercultural dialogue, active practice of colloquial Spanish, and cultivating trusted peer circles to foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. Over time, many noted significant improvements in linguistic fluency and confidence in navigating the Spanish society.

This finding dovetails with a similar study of female Indian students who studied in Australia. Bista and Foster (2016) focused on adaptation strategies and the role of social support among Indian female students. Their key findings highlight cultural adjustment, social integration, academic challenges, and gender issues as important factors affecting female students. Concerning cultural adjustment, female Indian students experienced an initial cultural shock due to differences in social norms, lifestyles, and academic expectations. Gradual exposure to Australian culture and active participation in local activities has facilitated their adaptation. Social integration and forming friendships with local and other international students helped reduce feelings of isolation. Participation in community events and university clubs was also crucial to social integration. The study by Bista and Foster (2016), as in the case of Ghanaian students studying abroad in Spain, underscores the need for targeted support services that address both academic and social aspects of the study-abroad experience. Encouraging social integration and providing gender-sensitive resources can enhance female international students' well-being.

Conclusion

This study explored the complex journey of female Ghanaian students on year abroad programs in Spain. The findings underscore the fact that the path of these female students to self-efficacy is woven from and around the threads of language proficiency, cultural adaptation, social support, and most critically, the pervasive influence of gender dynamics. While these elements are common among many international students, this research demonstrates that they manifest in profoundly distinct ways among African women, especially Ghanaian female students, necessitating a dedicated scholarly and institutional focus.

The importance of this study lies in its deliberate address of a significant gap in the literature on foreign language studies in the study abroad context. Predominant research on foreign language study abroad experiences and self-efficacy has historically centered on Western students, whose sociocultural starting points, racial identities, and linguistic challenges often differ markedly from those of their African counterparts. By focusing specifically on Ghanaian female students in Spain, this study challenges the universality of existing models and provides critical, nuanced data from what could be considered an underrepresented, and underexplored context. This study moves the discourse from the periphery to the center, arguing that a true understanding of global student mobility must be inclusive of diverse global South perspectives.

The practical and policy implications of these findings are clear. To enhance future experience, universities must implement comprehensive pre-emptive support structures. This includes mandatory pre-departure orientations that move beyond logistical briefings to explicitly address cultural issues and gender dynamics, perhaps utilizing past study-abroad students as peer ambassadors and counsellors who can share first-hand knowledge. Furthermore, encouraging students to maintain reflective journals can serve a dual purpose: as a personal tool

for processing cross-cultural encounters, and as a valuable qualitative data source for continuously improving program support.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by female Ghanaian students studying foreign languages in Spain. Discussions of themes, such as pre-departure preparation, cultural shock, and gender-related challenges, highlight the multifaceted nature of international education. These findings emphasize the importance of institutional support structures, cultural awareness, and personal resilience in ensuring a positive and enriching experience of studying abroad. Self-efficacy is a crucial determinant of students' success in study abroad programs, influencing their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Factors such as gender-sensitive support systems play a pivotal role in shaping students' confidence in their abilities. Addressing these factors can enhance study-abroad experiences, ensuring that students develop resilience and adaptability in new academic and cultural settings.

Ultimately, addressing these factors is essential to ensuring that these students are not merely participants in international education, but are empowered to thrive, developing the resilience and cross-cultural competence that define truly transformative global education. It is highly recommended that policymakers and sending institutions develop and implement a comprehensive, multi-stage strategy (pre-departure, during the program, and post program) that focuses on building students' self-efficacy. This will ensure that they become resilient, adaptable, and cross-culturally competent global citizens, rather than just program participants.

References

- Akoth, A., & Enoksen, E. (2022). Experiences of East African students in Norway: Development of a process model. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 14(4), 117-131. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i4.3943>
- Artino, A. R., Jr. (2012). Academic self-efficacy: From educational theory to instructional practice. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 1(2), 76-85. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-012-0012-5>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Betz, N. E., & Hackett, G. (2006). Career self-efficacy theory: Back to the future. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 14(1), 3-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072705281347>
- Bista, K. (2016). Roles of international student advisors: Uncovering advising approaches. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 5(1), 28-39. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v5n1p28>
- Bista, K., & Foster, C. (2016). Exploring the social and academic experiences of international students in higher education institutions. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.483>
- Bong, M., & Skaalvik, E. M. (2003). Academic self-concept and self-efficacy: How different are they really? *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(1), 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021302408382>
- Brown, A. (2024). The impact of language barriers in global communication. *RRJ Educational Study*, 10(006), 11-12.
- Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008). The adjustment journey of international students at an English university: An ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 7(2), 232-249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240908091306>
- Coleman, J. A. (1997). Residence abroad within language study. *Language Teaching*, 30(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800012657>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- Devlin, S., & Peacock, N. (2009). Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to integration: An investigation of two models. In T. Coverdale-Jones & P. Rastall (Eds.), *Internationalising the*

- university: *The Chinese context* (pp. 165-184). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Dewaele, J.-M., Petrides, K. V., & Furnham, A. (2008). Effects of trait emotional intelligence and sociobiographical variables on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety among adult multilinguals. *Language Learning*, 58(4), 911-960. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00482.x>
- Ehrman, M. E., & Oxford, R. L. (1990). Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting. *The Modern Language Journal*, 74(3), 311-327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1990.tb01069.x>
- Glass, C. R., Wongtrirat, R., & Buus, S. (2015). International student engagement: Strategies for creating inclusive, connected, and purposeful campus environments. *International Educator*, 24(4), 14-34.
- Glass, C. R., Buus, S., & Braskamp, L. A. (2013). *Uneven experiences: The impact of student-faculty interactions on international students' sense of belonging*. Global Perspective Institute.
- Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2002). Language learning and perfectionism: Anxious and non-anxious language learners' reactions to their own oral performance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(4), 562-570. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00161>
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Hsieh, P. P.-H., & Kang, H.-S. (2010). Attribution and self-efficacy and their interrelationship in the Korean EFL context. *Language Learning*, 60(3), 606-627. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00570.x>
- Kissau, S. (2006). Gender differences in motivation to learn French. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 62(3), 401-422. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.62.3.401>
- Klassen, R. M., & Usher, E. L. (2010). Self-efficacy in educational settings: Recent research and emerging directions. In T. C. Urdan & S. A. Karabenick (Eds.), *The decade ahead: Applications and contexts of motivation and achievement* (Vol. 16A, pp. 1-33). Emerald Group Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0749-7423\(2010\)000016A004](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0749-7423(2010)000016A004)
- Komarraju, M., & Nadler, D. (2013). Self-efficacy and academic achievement: Why do implicit beliefs, goals, and effort regulation matter? *Learning and Individual Differences*, 25, 67-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2013.01.005>
- Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381-409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>

- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79-122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- Lomotey, B. A., Csajbok-Twerefou, I., Husein, A. A., & Diabah, G. (2023). The gender enrolment gap in foreign language education revisited: Contemporary issues in a Ghanaian higher education institution. *System*, 117, 103110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2023.103110>
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283-305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x>
- Maddux, J. E. (2013). *Self-efficacy, adaptation, and adjustment: Theory, research, and application*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Martinez, A., Glock, S., & Krolak-Schwerdt, S. (2019). Teachers' judgments of students' foreign-language proficiency: A mixed-methods study of bias in assessment. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 62, 166-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2019.05.005>
- Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 573-603. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588281>
- Morley, L., Bell, R., Jackson, C., & Hamilton, E. (2014). *Unsafe spaces? Crime and security in virtual worlds*. Routledge.
- Oxford, R. L., & Nyikos, M. (1989). Variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73(3), 291-300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1989.tb06367.x>
- Pajares, F. (2002). Gender and perceived self-efficacy in self-regulated learning. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 116-125. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_8
- Pavlenko, A., & Piller, I. (2008). Language education and gender. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 57–69). Springer Science + Business Media LLC.
- Pintrich, P. R., & De Groot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(1), 33-40. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.33>
- Sánchez-Hernández, A., & Alcón-Soler, E. (2020). Pragmatic gains in study abroad contexts: A longitudinal analysis of compliment responses. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 168, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.06.004>

- Schunk, D. H., & DiBenedetto, M. K. (2020). Motivation and social cognitive theory. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 60, 101832. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2019.101832>
- Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio. Causal and control beliefs* (pp. 35-37). NFER-NELSON.
- Schartner, A., & Young, T. (2015). Culture shock or love at first sight? Exploring the 'honeymoon' stage of the international student sojourn. In A. H. Fabricius & B. Preisler (Eds.), *Transcultural interaction and linguistic diversity in higher education* (pp. 12-33). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137454359_2
- Stajkovic, A. D., & Luthans, F. (1998). Self-efficacy and work-related performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 240-261. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.240>
- Tufuor, J. K. (2019). Cultural identity and adaptation of African international students in a Canadian university. *Journal of International Students*, 9(2), 558-576. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.402>
- Van Mol, C. (2020). Exploring explanations for the gender gap in study abroad: A case study of the Netherlands. *Higher Education*, 79, 995–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00671-7>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Ward, C. A. (Ed.). (2001). *The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions*. New Zealand Ministry of Education.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The psychology of culture shock* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Wood, R., & Bandura, A. (1989). Social cognitive theory of organizational management. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(3), 361-384. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4279067>
- Zheng, X., & Berry, J. W. (1991). Psychological adaptation of Chinese sojourners in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology*, 26(4), 451-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207599108247134>
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 82-91. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1016>