Agency Effects on L2 Speech: Study Abroad versus Stay at Home

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Abstract

In Study Abroad (SA) research, agency – defined as the capacity to make choices and effect personal or social change – has been extensively examined, particularly for long-term sojourns. Studies have largely focused on learners' engagement during SA programs and its impact on their second language (L2) identity. However, less attention has been paid to agency among students who remain in their home institution (SH). Based on the data of the LATISA project (Languages, Affordances and Transnational Identities in Study Abroad), this study compares the oral English development of SA and SH students majoring in French Business and Administration. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines keyword analysis with conceptual interpretation of student narratives across three points of the academic year, we look at how different forms of agency emerge and evolve. Findings indicate that some SH students show certain gains not displayed by their SA counterparts, thereby questioning certain received ideas about the supremacy of study abroad settings.

Keywords: agency, keyword analysis, study abroad, stay at home, L2 speech, narratives

Introduction

Learner agency has become a central concept in second language acquisition (SLA), as research increasingly acknowledges learners as true actors of their learning paths, capable of shaping their environment and their engagement with learning. In this article, we look at the role of agency in second language (L2) engagement comparing students who participated in Erasmus mobility programs (Study Abroad or SA group) with those who remained in their home country (Stay at Home or SH group). Drawing on longitudinal interviews, we explore how salient items – identified through keyword analysis – reflect each learner's evolving concerns and engagement. This corpus-informed, inductive approach aims to trace the contextual emergence and development of agency over time.

While SA programs are often seen as ideal contexts for L2 engagement, in this study, we focus on how learners create or neglect opportunities – affordances – for language use in their respective environments and propose that agency is as central to language engagement as

mobility itself. After outlining the concept of learner agency and its relevance in SA research, we analyse interview data for eight students over the academic year and examine how agency develops in relation to the use of L2 English. The underlying rationale is that of agency constituting a general feature of language learning experiences – whether abroad or at home.

Learner Agency

Agency is broadly defined as the capacity to make choices and effect personal or social change. It includes a range of acts and postures, from questioning one's *raison d'être* to simply engaging in personal development (Ahearn, 2001). Shaped by social, cognitive and emotional factors (Larsen-Freeman, 2019), agency is a dynamic process that involves a learner's ability to make strategic choices about their learning and to influence outcomes. While often discussed alongside motivation, engagement, autonomy, and investment (Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2009), agency retains a specific focus on context-sensitive action and decision-making. It is this central idea that has increased interest in language-learner agency and has given rise to numerous studies exploring how learners shape their trajectories and position themselves in different contexts at different times (e.g., Benson & Cooker, 2013; Deters et al., 2015; Gao, 2010; Kalaja et al., 2015; Miller, 2014; Tao & Gao, 2021). Typical agentive acts include building relationships with locals or other SA students, participating in extracurricular activities, or even reflecting on their language learning progress (Mitchell et al., 2017). Agency also connects to identity construction, as learners position themselves in new cultural and linguistic spaces (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The role of agency in SA is also important when considering the ways learners tackle challenges in their daily lives: in some cases, they actively embrace obstacles and take social risks (Devlin & Tyne, 2021; Tyne, 2023); in others, they avoid certain situations and refrain from taking on new or challenging tasks. Thus, agency as a concept within SA research provides a lens through which we can

explore how learners navigate the complex dynamics of language learning in terms of personal involvement.

Most of this research tends to adopt a deductive stance, identifying agency through predefined features – such as the use of "I" or verbs like "want", "decided", etc. – in narrative analysis. These are then interpreted in light of contextual or institutional constraints. The present study takes a complementary, corpus-informed approach. Rather than isolating specific linguistic forms (such as verb types or pronouns, as in Gao, 2010), it focuses on lexical prominence – items that become salient across learners' speech over time. When working with individual narratives, keyword analysis can offer a productive way to identify recurring or outstanding features that speakers themselves unconsciously foreground. This study draws on such patterns to explore not only what learners say, but how frequently and in what contexts certain ideas recur in their speech. In this way, it shifts the focus from pre-established markers to a more inductive view rooted in learners' lexical choices.

In order to observe and identify variations in learners' speech – and bearing in mind that agency involves actively seeking or creating opportunities for communication and learning, rather than passively absorbing input (Duff, 2012) – the concept of affordance (cf. Devlin & Tyne, 2021), offers a particularly useful analytical lens. This notion considers not only the opportunities available in the environment, but also how learners perceive, reject, or act upon them – making affordances a dynamic approach to agency in context. Devlin & Tyne (2021) provide a grounded means of examining how agency unfolds through engagement with surroundings. A key methodological limitation, however, is that most affordances are only identifiable retrospectively, through narratives and post hoc reflections. Given the importance of interaction as an outcome of agency-in-practice, spoken language appears as an immediate site for observing its effects. Learners with high agency often seek out conversations, embrace challenges, and persist through ambiguity – making oral proficiency

both a product and a reflection of agency in motion. Longitudinal research supports this: Okuno (2023), for instance, shows how the development of agency – particularly via the Ideal L2 Self – precedes measurable gains in fluency, lexical complexity, and expressive nuance.

Finally, building on key studies such as Kinginger (2004), Allen (2013), and Benson et al. (2013), which highlight how learners' decisions and actions shape their development abroad, recent research has extended the concept of agency to SH contexts (e.g., Kalaja, 2011; Ramberg & Bøhn, 2023), showing that learners who actively engage with local or out-of-class affordances can also make significant gains in spoken proficiency. This shift is noteworthy as it leads researchers to extend the same analytical approach to learners who remain in their home institutions; doing so, it invites to a deeper understanding of how agency can operate across diverse environments, not just in mobility settings. This article seeks to contribute to this emerging strand of research by providing a comparative analysis of how agency appears and develops in the spoken data of both SA and SH learners.

The Study

Context and Participants

The data used in this study comes from the LATISA project[1]. The present study comprises oral data from eight participants: four who undertook a semester abroad (SA group) and four who remained in France (SH group). Participant age, sex, and overall English level are detailed in Table 1[2]. None of the SA participants travelled to an English-speaking country. Instead, they studied in Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Canada (Francophone region).

[1]The LATISA project (Languages, Affordances and Transnational Identities in Study Abroad) is an original research program piloted by Laurie Buscail at the University of Perpignan. In this project, thirty-three students enrolled in the same international program (with one third of classes delivered in English) were recorded by Laurie Buscail and Maï Leray over the 2023–2024 academic year. Fifteen of them participated in an Erasmus mobility program during that period. See: https://www.academia.edu/128325412/LATISA_Language_Affordances_and_Transnational_Identities_in_Study_Abroad_

[2] Student levels in English were provided by their English for Business teacher (Laurie Buscail) prior to this study.

Table 1

Participant Details

	SA group				SH group			
Speaker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sex (M/F)	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	M
Age	19-20				19-20			
English level	B2				B1	C1	B1	B2

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using a semi-structured interview protocol focusing on students' experiences in relation to learning and using English, as well as their attitudes towards studying abroad. In order to observe agency from a diachronic perspective, data collection took place at different times during the academic year: at the beginning of the semester (Time 1 – Sept-Oct), mid-semester (Time 2 – Nov-Dec), and following the semester (Time 3 – Feb-March). All interview recordings were carried out in the target language (i.e., English), although students were allowed to use French if necessary. The three interview sets follow an open-ended format conducted in a "responsive interviewing" style (Duff, 2008), allowing the protocol to adapt to the flow of conversation.

At Time 1 (T1), students were asked about their past experiences with English and other languages, including any trips abroad, the languages they spoke, and their interactions with English speakers. They discussed where they learned English, their views on school-based language learning, and how comfortable they felt speaking the language. The protocol

also explored their thoughts on SA, reasons for applying or not, and expectations for improving English with or without immersion. T2 focused on current experiences and challenges during the semester, whether studying abroad or at home. They were also asked to estimate how often they used different languages and whether English was used more academically or in daily life. At T3, students were asked to reflect on their overall progress and experiences, giving self-assessment of their improvement, identifying specific gains and challenges, and reflecting on ease of use in various settings. Lastly, they considered whether they would make the same decision about studying abroad or staying at home and shared advice for future students. All eight students participated in all three stages of the protocol, yielding a total of 24 interviews. The full corpus comprises 46,635 tokens, transcribed using CapCut and manually corrected in Praat.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this project are the following:

- How can keyword analysis serve to reveal agency and its development over time in L2 narratives?
- Given the difference in terms of setting, experience and contact with the L2, how is agency displayed by SA and SH students?

Methodology

This study uses keyword analysis to trace the emergence and development of agency over time in learner narratives. In corpus linguistics, keyness refers to the statistical salience of a word that occurs significantly more (or less) frequently in a target corpus compared to a reference corpus. In this study, for each keyword extraction, a corpus consisting of the other participants' productions at the same data collection point (T1, T2, or T3) constituted the

reference. This internal contrastive approach highlights what is distinctive in one learner's discourse relative to their peers, rather than against an external benchmark. It anchors the analysis in a shared context, helping to identify discursive singularities that may reflect emerging or shifting forms of agency. In line with the study's inductive orientation, no stop-list or exclusion principle was applied to functional words or repeated forms: all items identified as salient were retained for analysis. Selecting only one keyword per participant per interview enabled a close, context-driven reading which can signal stance, hesitation, or learner positioning when viewed in narrative context.

In this sense, keywords function as discursive entry points. They guide the interpretation of learner narratives by drawing attention to what is foregrounded at each time point. The next step involves qualitative examination of these keywords in their surrounding context. Once a salient keyword was identified, we analysed its co-text and narrative context, focusing on how learners express intentions, decisions, evaluations, and social positioning over time. A particular emphasis was placed on how learners reference or respond to affordances – that is, the opportunities for action perceived or acted upon in their learning environment (Devlin & Tyne, 2021). This included explicit mentions of chances to speak, challenges encountered, or social contexts that shaped their use of English. Rather than isolating keywords, they are treated here as discursive gateways – points where agency is constructed or negotiated in response to available affordances.

Results

This section presents the development of learner agency as observed in the interviews of the two groups. We trace, for each speaker, the discursive focus suggested by the most salient

keyword at each time point (T1, T2, T3). We then interpret how learners engage with affordances and how this relates to their agency. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the keywords identified for each SA and SH speaker.

Table 2

Keywords in SA Group

	Spk1	**Spk2**	**Spk3**	**Spk4**
T1	app	Italy	was	new
T2	class	complicated	we	around
T3	about	great	Spanish	practice

Table 3

Keywords in SH Group

	Spk5	**Spk6**	**Spk7**	**Spk8**
T1	listen	like	speak	game
T2	she	you	SAE[3]	word
T3	he	gonna	don't	follow

Study Abroad group (SA)

In the SA group, keyword analysis reveals diverse, unevenly developing forms of agency. Beginning with Speaker 1, we can observe how, through contextual analysis of the three keywords across T1, T2 and T3, the general theme of '(meeting) people' comes to the fore. At T1, the keyword *app* appears repeatedly in reference to language-learning platforms like

[3] SAE (Situation d'apprentissage et d'évaluation) is project-based assignment typical of French IUT programmes.

Tandem or Duolingo. These are described primarily as tools to connect with others globally, suggesting an early desire to reach outward and interact – at least through mediated means.

(1) um_ I also use **app** like Duolingo […] I used ++ um Tandem […] it's to spoke [sic] with stranger [sic] uh in English for example or Spanish […] it's an **app** […] the goal of the **app** is to connect people ar- all around the world […] [Spk1_SA_T1]

At T2, the keyword *class* reflects a form of disillusionment with the classroom context in Canada, where the speaker had expected to meet people, as in France. Instead, she notes that the classroom was 'only for work,' implicitly marking an unfulfilled social affordance.

(2) in France when we_ go to **class** we meet people in **class** and ++ uh + in Canada people we met [sic] in **class** it's people to work they they won't be your friends + when you meet them in **class** + if you meet them at a party in the university you can + be friends but not really in **class** + **class** is for work and only for that + [Spk1_SA_T2]

At T3, *about* reveals what studying abroad ultimately meant to her: the experience is framed less in terms of academic learning than as an opportunity to learn 'about more about us,' especially in contexts of solitude and challenge.

(3) of course um studying abroad + is **about** also um a new way of learning + um_ + it's also **about** um_ ++ to_ + be out of our comfort zone […] to learn **about** more **about** ++ us ++ and_ um_ + it's also_ you know when you are alone really alone in a country + you_ start to know + how to_ do [sic] friend [sic] by your own [sic] like class [Spk1_SA_T3]

This trajectory – from mediated contact to unfulfilled expectations to personal growth – suggests a subtle but evolving form of agency.

A similar pattern can be seen with other SA learners, albeit with variations. For Speaker 4 – whose keyword is *new* at T1 – agency appears as a form of self-imposed pressure

to improve. Her goal, as shown in (4), is framed not as linguistic mastery per se, but as personal exposure to challenge.

(4) I really_ wanted to_ + try a **new** experience because I've never_ been um_ + abroad without my parents or family + […] um_ my goal is to_ + force me to_ talk to people because I'm shy + and + here + if people don't come to me + I won't uh_ talk to them + so + if I go to Belgium + I will have no choice so [Spk 4_SA_T1]

For Speaker 2, who qualified the experience as 'great' (keyword at T3), studying abroad was a dreamlike opportunity, an experience that unfolded largely outside of structured educational settings and where travel, cultural exposure, and meeting people are central to her satisfaction (5).

(5) I wanted to do an experience uh + in the school but also an experience with the people uh I mean + I wanted to uh visit a country to discover a new culture and that's what I did because I had the opportunity to move uh in other places I + uh in Italy such as Rome or Verona + so yes it was a really **great** experience and I met a lot of people so for me it was a + dreamy experience [Spk2_SA_T3]

It is worth noting that none of the students in the study-abroad group chose to study in a recognised English-speaking country or region: Speaker 1 was in the French-speaking part of Canada, Speaker 2 in Italy, Speaker 3 in Spain and Speaker 4 in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Therefore, speaking English is at times a side-effect of not being able to speak the local language (6) or reverting to a 'common' language in the university setting (7).

(6) I practice [sic] English because I couldn't speak Dutch [Spk4_SA_T3]

(7) Int: […] so when you meet new people + it is basically English that's it
Spk1: yes but only when I was on the university […] because it's common language [Spk1_SA_T2]

In terms of linguistic gains, we should note that all students tend to downplay their progress at T3, specifically mentioning that they feel they have not really improved (8-9), or in some cases, stating outright that they have not made any progress at all (10).

(8) I think my English improved because for example when I watch uh a movie or serie [sic] I can better understand the_ conversation and the language + **but it's always complicated to talk uh to people** [Spk2_SA_T3]

(9) I think I improve [sic] my speaking + **but I didn't improve my um + my grammar** [Spk3_SA_T3]

(10) **I definitely not improve [sic] my English** [Spk1_SA_T3]

However, the SA students all clearly express gains in relation to their particular personal key element (see Table 1). For example, Speaker 1, who wished to meet new people but had difficulties socializing in the classroom context, describes the ability to bounce back when things do not go well. Speaker 3, who just wanted to travel, knows better the kind of people he is going to like or not and feels more open-minded. Finally, Speaker 4, who wanted to experiment doing things on her own, is a little less disorganized now. In this sense, these results suggest that agency is more directed here toward social and personal experience than toward linguistic precision.

Stay-at-Home Group (SH)

Concerning the SH group, the keywords follow different routes. For example, if we look at Speaker 5, at T1 she mentions listening in contexts where she does not actively engage (*I don't really listen* when learning or watching films or *I'm forced to listen* in class). There is a sense of obligation rather than choice, which is also found in other speakers' data. This language implies a distinct lack of agency, as students feel compelled to do things under given

circumstances rather than doing so willingly or out of interest. At T2, all occurrences of the pronoun *she* refer to the speaker's sister (living in Australia), as shown in (11).

(11) […] we talk [sic] uh about uh my sister + she lived in Australia and **she** + [sic] gonna be to marry uh married an Australia_ [sic] man + […] yeah I go [sic] two times + to see my sister too uh **she** [sic] got she've [sic] got + uh_ semester in Aus- in Brazil + to_ + to a school + [Spk5_SH_T2]

In the ongoing conversation, Speaker 5 expresses her desire to live abroad and to see her parents visit her. Her *love* of *South America* and her consideration as a 'duty' (*I'm X uh + to my role*) to make her parents travel (as they already did to visit her sister in Australia) both reveal the underlying role of the sister (*she*) in the building of aspirations and expectations. The context in which *she* appears for the last time (12) confirms the importance of her sister in what is also the speaker's immediate life plans, as the possibility to do her internship (stage) in Australia is crucial for attending her sister's wedding. Most of all, the repeated use of *I hope* (underlined in 12), highlights further the strong connection between the speaker's affection for her sister and a forward-looking attitude towards both short-term outcomes and, *after that*, future life plans such as *years of travel*.

(12) it's the wedding of my sister so I hope I can be the_ my $stage$ of uh in Australia + so she can be uh_ + do_ his [sic] $mariage$ + in this time + because uh if it's not possible uh I can be + I can go + at his [sic] $mariage$ so I hope it's possible ++ and_ after that + uh_ I hope I can be uh my years uh_ + of travel + and_ + I hope uh that's gonna be [Spk5_SH_T2]

In the last interview (T3), the keyword *he* specifically refers to the speaker's sister's future husband. Example 13, where *he* is used for the first time, shows that mentioning this *boyfriend* is not the consequence of the interviewer deliberately going back to speak about the sister's story but an element provided by Speaker 5 to explain 'where' this new confidence in English is going to be useful (because he is coming for the summer and *he don't speak*

French). In this passage, the shift in the speaker's self-perception and willingness to engage in conversations can be observed through the contrast between the use of *I say that* and the earlier hesitation (*I don't talk*) when she lacked the *perfect phrase*, showing a transition from avoiding mistakes to embracing communication despite imperfections.

(13) … the_ boyfriend of my sister + is uh_ Australian […] so_ **he** don't [sic] speak French + **he** have [sic] some word [sic] because really really little really little + uh_ so I speak more with + with him in English because uh just my sister + have [sic] /a_, uh_/ have [sic] a fluent English + so I'm the better [sic] after her + so uh_ + sometime [sic] if uh we have a conversation we are six uh around the table + **he** don't [sic] uh_ **he** don't [sic] understand anything [Spk5-SH_T3]

Finally, as Speaker 5 describes situations where family members converse in English around the dinner table, her self-definition as one of the more proficient English speakers in family settings (*I'm the better after her* [sister]) highlights her responsibility in facilitating communication. The challenges of navigating a multilingual environment (*if we have a conversation... he don't understand anything*) underscore further her role in bridging language gaps and her desire to be a communicator within the group.

This active engagement in conversations, regardless of linguistic imperfections, and despite the challenging *Australian accent*, continues to be enhanced in another passage (14), where most of the occurrences of *he* are produced. We can also see here that the boyfriend's positive feedback as well as his understanding are both linked to the *lot of confidence* (underlined in the example). This external validation clearly reinforces her self-belief and encourages her to communicate more freely. Furthermore, it is her upcoming communication with her brother-in-law that marks the beginning of her *best English*, which seems to express a turning point in her mastery of the language.

(14) I translate + even if I don't have all the words + and he have [sic] some uh word [sic] in French so_ we make a mix and **he** understand [sic] + uh **he** talk [sic] to me I have

> a good English because if **he** have [sic] the same French that I have in English **he** was [sic] really happy + and uh I think uh just this phrase uh take [sic] me a lot of confidence + and uh_ if **he** understand [sic] me and_ **he** is really English and **he** have [sic] a_ total uh + accent uh_ the_ the Australian accent is really hard […] so if in un- if **he** understand [sic] me + uh_ I think uh in class uh we can uh understand me uh easily + so uh_ **he** make [sic] me a lot of confidence and uh I think is uh_ the beginning of uh + of the best of my English [Spk5_SH_T3]

To sum up, looking at the keywords produced by Speaker 5 across the three periods has shown: at first (T1), a passive approach to listening to English, perceived by the speaker as an obligation rather than a choice; the important influence (T2) of the sister's life abroad at the heart of the speaker's hopes for her own life; and, finally, proactive behaviour when it comes to dealing with family dynamics (T3) with a prominent role played by developing agency.

Her case also allows for a more detailed application of the affordance framework. For instance, examining affordances at T1 shows how these align with the initial observations concerning the use of the keyword *listen*. In other words, we find instances illustrating the speaker's awareness of her passive attitude: when she doesn't take the opportunity to engage with others when her sister is present (in Australia) – in a *perceived* affordance (15) – and when she does not really have the possibility to do so because of the sister's presence, which therefore appears more like a *denied* affordance (16).

(15) … but uh + **my sister speak [sic] for our + for us + but uh_ for heat [sic] someone or_ buying [sic] someone + we_ +++ we_ we do uh_ like uh_ like we can** [Spk5_SH_T1]

(16) in Australia uh_ I don't remember because uh + it was at [sic] three years so_ ++ and **my sister is always with us so + in fact I don't really speak English** + [Spk5_SH_T1]

In T2, the upcoming wedding of the sister seems to have sharpened a new attitude towards speaking. Indeed, all affordances noted here are utilised affordances, both in the private context (see example 11) and in the classroom (17).

(17) in fact I don't do_ something_ [sic] + uh I + have some class in English um_ ++ and it's all I don't see as + much much + movie or much serie [sic] + I don't know don't nothing in fact (LAUGHS) + but uh_ + we_ we speak in class and_ + the_ professor speak [sic] to_ + to me [Spk5_SH_T2]

In T3, examples showing the uses of the keyword *he* already offered an illustration of shaped affordances, whereby speaking in English simply brings happiness to the speaker or facilitates global communication within the family around the table (see Example 13).

This interplay between affordances and agency is also visible – in different forms – in other SH participants. Speaker 8, for instance, offers a complementary example of agentive growth grounded not in familial inspiration but in interpersonal trust. At T1, he confined himself to video *games* and avoided speaking English in other contexts. By T2, however, he began raising his hand in class (though still using simple *words*) and by T3, we learn about a pivotal meeting with a teacher (18).

(18) $monsieur X§ says um_said + everyone can w- w- watch + un + want + no ++ everyone can progress and_ come in uh international uh_ classes and I trust [sic] him […] I **follow** him [sic] and uh_I'm here […] yeah + I **follow** the_ way [Spk8_SH_T3]

In the case of Speaker 8, the development of agency revolves around finding someone he trusts, someone to 'follow'. Unlike speaker 5, who is not fully conscious of her own 'inner drive', Speaker 8 openly shares this when asked what his advice would be for joining this course, also mentioning the reduction of *fear* that comes with the *good intention* of the person you take to or *follow* (19).

(19) Int: yes what would you give would you say yeah go to the international group or no go there
Spk8:[…] it's very good for the environment English for_ improve [sic] ++ **and_ don't fear + so_ yes it's a little hard (LAUGHS) in beginning + that we can_**

progress I think ++ if uh we follow the that + and um + the teacher [sic] + have + a lot of advice and good intention for_ for us ++
[Spk8_SH_T3]

Whether attending courses at university or studying abroad, the general expectations concerning mastery of English tend towards improvement of some kind over the academic year but SA students typically commented on their lack of progress. In the SH group however, some students are perfectly aware of their progress, like Speaker 8 (20).

(20) **I learned a lot of um_ grammatical rule [sic] and word [sic] so my bank of words is + um + greater than before** [Spk8_SH_T3]

Referring again to Speaker 5 in the SH setting, we can observe how the linguistic changes she mentions from T1 to T3 align well with the salient elements used to describe her agency. Furthermore, the speaker herself, at the very beginning of the third interview (21), clearly states that this progress in speaking – identified by her as *fluency* – is largely part of a mental process (which is why she is uncertain about the effectiveness of this progress in the classroom).

(21) from the beginning of the year + uh **I think I have um it's more fluent in my head** […] I think in English or_ I prepare something + **I want to do in English in my head** + uh_ it's work [sic] + when I'm at my home + uh when I cook etcetera I + really think more in English + uh I don't know if I +++ if I want so I do or if it's do_ [sic] naturally + but it's work [sic] + so I think this is better + uh_ + **but in class etcetera I don't really know if my English uh it's [sic] better than September** +
[Spk5_SH_T3]

The key element here is that, at some point, this speaker decides to think in English as much as possible and she is conscious of the fact this effort is beneficial for her. Therefore, looking at agency – how it takes shape and materializes in discourse when she speaks English – offers

an understanding of a decision that would mostly likely be overlooked through a conventional assessment of outcomes.

In the SA group, at T1, all students mentioned a desire to improve their English-speaking skills during their Erasmus experience. However, the limited presence of affordances related to oral English practice in the data, along with a general tendency to minimize linguistic gains seem to highlight a social evolution whose effects are only due to the experience of being abroad, particularly through interactions with other Erasmus students in English. In other words, the forms of agency observed here may have pushed any initial goals in terms of language mastery into the background, to the extent that none of the students made significant efforts towards achieving this.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how learner agency unfolds over time in spoken discourse, comparing students who studied abroad (SA) with those who remained in their home institutions (SH). Unlike many previous studies relying on retrospective accounts, this investigation used a corpus-informed, inductive method in which agency was inferred from learners' discourse via keyword prominence and affordance engagement. This approach enabled a contextual reading of agency as it emerged in situated, often subtle, lexical patterns. One key contribution of this study lies in showing how learners shift from externally guided to more agentive positions. In the SH group especially, students move from passive stances (e.g., 'I'm forced to listen') to greater ownership (e.g., 'I say that even if I don't have the perfect phrase'), echoing Okuno (2023) and Mitchell et al. (20170. Some SH students demonstrated even more consciousness of language development than their SA peers, often driven by personal, emotional, or interpersonal triggers – such as family responsibility or trust in teachers. These cases illustrate how agency is context-sensitive, relational, and not

exclusive to mobility contexts (cf. Duff, 2012; Tao & Gao, 2021). While previous literature has predominantly focused on learners in Anglophone countries or in language-intensive contexts (e.g., Kinginger, 2004; Benson et al., 2013), our findings show that agency – and progress – can also emerge in less immersive settings. This also supports a growing body of work showing that SH learners, when engaged with their environment, may experience meaningful gains (Kalaja, 2011; Ramberg & Bøhn, 2023).

By contrast, learner agency in the SA group appeared more externally directed and sometimes constrained by situational factors. Several students described English as a fallback rather than a target, often due to social or institutional configurations. This finding nuances the common assumption that SA automatically enhances agency or guarantees progress and highlights that not all SA contexts are equally conducive to language development (Devlin & Tyne, 2021).

Beyond the comparison of groups, this study contributes methodologically by showing how keyword analysis can serve to identify recurring lexical concerns that point to underlying forms of agency. Unlike predefined markers (e.g., "I want"), this inductive approach allows agency to emerge through salience, frequency, and co-text. While interpretive in nature, this approach complements traditional performance evaluations and helps identify otherwise invisible forms of engagement and growth.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been shown how a keyword-based approach can serve to explore agency by highlighting salient elements in each speaker's data across three interviews. It has also been shown how agency helps illuminate shifts in learners' perceptions of affordances over time. Comparing SA and SH students further suggests that agency analysis is highly sensitive to the qualitative texture of the data and context in which it is produced. In the SA group,

interviews tended to revolve around the Erasmus experience, which may have narrowed the range of agentive behaviours expressed and tied them more explicitly to the SA setting. By contrast, SH interviews – not bound by a common defining event – allowed for broader, more personal accounts, revealing diverse ways of acting upon the language-learning environment in everyday life. This underscores the value of attending to narrative data beyond structured programs or mobility experiences, where subtler forms of agency may be expressed. It also invites further research into alternative and potentially overlooked forms of agency among SA learners – particularly those not directly tied to linguistic achievement – through more integrated frameworks that consider both SA and SH experiences. A logical follow-up to this study could be to compare the present results with quantitative analyses of the students' spoken data, to explore to what extent variable forms of agency align with observable language development.

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