Beyond proficiency: Exploring affective dimensions of L2 development in short-term education abroad

by

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Abstract

Short-term study abroad (STSA) programs have become an increasingly prominent medium of education abroad for language learning, offering more flexible and accessible international experiences to students with diverse academic backgrounds, interests, and goals. Although research on language-based STSA has traditionally emphasized measurable gains in linguistic proficiency, less attention has been given to the potential effects of these experiences on learners' affective experiences and developing multilingual identities. This study examines outcomes from a 4.5-week study abroad program in Spain, investigating changes in students' linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism. Adopting a broader conceptualization of language learning, the study considers how short-term international experiences may shape students' perceptions of their linguistic abilities and their self-concept as multilingual language users. Responses revealed an overall shift toward lower levels of anxiety, with participants reporting greater comfort interacting with native speakers and increased confidence speaking in the target language. However, concerns about making mistakes persisted, suggesting that some anxieties associated with language learning may be more resistant to change. These findings suggest that even relatively brief international experiences may foster meaningful changes in students' linguistic self-perceptions, affective experiences, and developing multilingual identities. This study contributes to a broader understanding of language-learning outcomes in STSA by highlighting the importance of considering affective and identity-related dimensions alongside traditional measures of linguistic proficiency.

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Introduction

Historically, language learning has been among the most compelling motivations for students to study abroad (Alonso et al., 2026). Over the past decade, however, the landscape of both education abroad and the academic study of languages has undergone a significant transformation. Although participation in education abroad has expanded among students from increasingly diverse backgrounds (Alonso et al., 2026; Goldstein, 2022; Kang & Pacheco, 2021; Nolan & Hickman, 2024), not all students want to commit to an entire semester or academic year abroad. In response to this changing student population and its varied academic and professional goals, universities and program providers have expanded education abroad opportunities beyond the traditional "junior year abroad" model (Goertler & Schenker, 2021) historically associated with language study (Schwanger, 1970; Walton, 2005). Shorter and more flexible programs have consequently become an increasingly important component of education abroad, expanding access for students of underrepresented socioeconomic backgrounds or areas of study, such as STEM majors (Mitic & Wolniak, 2022).

This shift raises important questions about the role of language learning within an education abroad landscape increasingly characterized by short-term programming. As education abroad opportunities become more diverse in duration, purpose, and student population, language educators and education abroad professionals face the challenge of articulating the value of language learning (Monsour Puckett, 2026) while adapting pedagogical practices to the needs and expectations of contemporary college and university students. One promising approach is to examine whether short-term study abroad (STSA) programs can foster sustained investment in language learning by strengthening linguistic confidence, reducing L2 anxiety, and fostering the development of students' multilingual identities. Rather than treating language

proficiency skills as the sole possible outcome of language-based education abroad programs, this research centers on how STSA programs may benefit language learning by influencing how students perceive their linguistic abilities, their experiences using the target language, and their potential as future language users.

The present study examines outcomes from a 4.5-week education abroad program in Spain, focusing on whether participation in a short-term program (STSA) is associated with changes in students' linguistic confidence vs. anxiety and perceptions of multilingualism. Although the literature continues to debate whether STSA provides sufficient time and opportunity for linguistic development (Fischer & Viens, 2023; Schenker, 2018; Tseng et al., 2021), much of this research has evaluated language learning and progress only through measurable changes in proficiency (Benson et al., 2012; Gaugler & Matheus, 2019; Goertler & Schenker, 2021; Martinsen, 2010; Quan, 2019). Comparatively less attention has been given to how STSA experiences may shape the affective and identity-related dimensions of language learning, as is demonstrated by a robust thematic analysis conducted by Brady & Iskhakova (2023). They found that across the 23 selected studies focused on language-based STSA programs, only four of those examined attitudinal measures such as L2 anxiety or L2 identity (Brady & Iskhakova, 2023). Exploring these dimensions may be particularly important in short-term contexts, where measurable changes in proficiency may be constrained by program duration, but changes in students' confidence, anxiety, linguistic self-concept, and perceptions of multilingualism may emerge more quickly. This study therefore adopts a broader conceptualization of language learning that considers learners' affective experiences and developing identities as language users instead of solely evaluating L2 development through the lens of proficiency.

Background

Short-term education abroad for L2 development

STSA programs, typically defined as programs lasting one to eight weeks, have become increasingly prevalent since the turn of the twenty-first century (Goldstein, 2022; Martinsen, 2010). This growth has coincided with an increased emphasis among U.S. higher education institutions on internationalization strategies designed to foster students' global competencies (Fisher et al., 2023; Matheus & Gaugler, 2020). Developing global competencies such as openness, tolerance, knowledge of world history & current events, and intercultural communication & collaboration are particularly important (Fisher et al., 2023) as students prepare to enter increasingly globalized labor markets and culturally diverse work environments (Nolan & Hickman, 2024). According to the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* annual report, 64% of U.S. students who studied abroad during the 2023–2024 academic year participated in programs lasting eight weeks or less (2025). Within this expanding landscape, "faculty-led" or "faculty-directed" programs have emerged as a prominent model of STSA (Fisher et al., 2023; Gaia, 2015; Ostojski & Cilke, 2023; Walters, 2025). For instance, at the large 4-year university where the researcher is employed, 82% of students who participated in education abroad programs in the last twelve months traveled on a faculty-led program. As reported by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, these programs have evolved from grassroots initiatives organized by individual faculty members into an integral component of many institutions' education abroad portfolios (Monsour Puckett, 2026).

Faculty-led STSA programs designed specifically for language study are often valued for their accessibility (Goldstein, 2022) and for the linguistic and intercultural benefits they can provide (Quan, 2019). Their shorter duration may also mitigate some of the financial and

opportunity costs associated with longer-term international study (Mitic & Wolniak, 2022). Extended periods abroad, for example, may require students to forgo other academically or professionally valuable opportunities, including holding leadership roles on their home campus or getting internships that provide skills and experiences directly applicable to their future careers (Martinsen, 2010), as well as causing them to lose wages gained from working in on-campus or off-campus roles (Mitic & Wolniak, 2022). STSA programs may therefore provide an alternative means of gaining linguistic and international experiences which remain compatible with students' academic pursuits in addition to personal and professional commitments.

At the same time, the value of STSA for language learning remains contested. The relationship between program duration and linguistic development is one of the central questions in the literature on language-based education abroad. Much of the published research, including large-scale studies and meta-analyses, suggests that longer-duration programs are associated with greater linguistic development (Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Fischer & Viens, 2023). One straightforward explanation is that programs lasting only several weeks provide fewer opportunities for sustained interaction, meaningful language use, and continued exposure to the target language than programs extending across an entire semester or academic year. However, the relationship between duration of stay and linguistic development is not necessarily linear (Tseng et al., 2021; Yang, 2016). While some researchers argue that extended stays, particularly those lasting a full academic year, are associated with greater linguistic development, others suggest that language gains may be "front-loaded" and begin to level off after the first few weeks, once learners become more comfortable in their new environment (Neff & Apple, 2020). This debate suggests that duration alone may not fully account for the outcomes associated with language learning abroad. Instead, greater attention should be given to the nature and quality of

students' linguistic experiences during their time abroad. Even though STSA may offer fewer opportunities for sustained linguistic exposure, the question remains as to how affective and identity-based dimensions of language impact how students perceive and engage with the target language, given that STSA programs do indeed offer intentional opportunities for language use, interaction, and reflection. Accordingly, examining only changes in proficiency provides an incomplete account of what students gain from a STSA experience.

The role and value attributed to language learning may also vary across institutional contexts. Academic language departments often prioritize communicative competence, linguistic development, and sustained cultural and linguistic engagement, whereas university education abroad offices or program providers may place greater emphasis on logistical accessibility, everyday intercultural interaction, cultural humility, and broader experiential learning (Dou et al., 2024). Although these priorities are not necessarily incompatible, differences in institutional objectives may shape how STSA programs are designed, how students are prepared for linguistic and intercultural engagement, and the extent to which language learning is explicitly integrated into the broader education abroad experience. These considerations are particularly consequential in STSA programs, where limited time abroad may make intentional opportunities for meaningful language use especially important.

Moving beyond proficiency: Linguistic confidence and multilingual identity as affective dimensions of L2 development

Much of the existing research on language-based education abroad has evaluated linguistic outcomes through measures of proficiency. Researchers have used standardized proficiency frameworks such as ACTFL (Gaugler & Matheus, 2019; Goertler & Schenker, 2021; Martinsen, 2010) and CEFR (Schenker, 2018), as well as assessments targeting specific

linguistic domains, including speaking, writing, reading, listening, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and fluency (Borrás & Llanes, 2020; Cubillos et al., 2008; Di Silvio et al., 2016; Guo & Chen, 2026; Hernández, 2016; Zalbidea et al., 2022; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Llanes & Serrano, 2011; Leonard & Shea, 2017; Lu & Ke, 2026; Quan, 2019; Sasaki, 2011; Schenker, 2018; Silvina Bongiovanni et al., 2015; Song, 2020; Strawbridge, 2023; Yang, 2016; Zalbidea et al., 2021). These measures provide valuable evidence of changes in linguistic performance and have contributed substantially to understanding the relationship between education abroad and L2 development.

At the same time, proficiency measures offer a limited account of the cognitive, motivational, and affective processes that shape students' experiences as language learners. Several applied linguistics researchers have therefore examined how STSA programs influence learners' engagement with the target language, particularly with respect to linguistic anxiety and confidence (Artamonova, 2025; Cubillos et al., 2008; Fischer & Viens, 2023; Khoroshilova et al., 2015; Lang-Rigal, 2023; Martinsen, 2010; Neff & Apple, 2020; Thompson & Lee, 2014). Foundational work by Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualizes foreign language anxiety as distinct from generalized anxiety, defining it as a "complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process". Although the feelings, symptoms, and behavioral responses that arise from foreign language anxiety, such as apprehension, worry, dread, difficulty concentrating, becoming forgetful, feeling sweaty, experiencing palpitations, or displaying avoidant behaviors, are similar to those experienced with generalized anxiety, some students who never suffer from generalized anxiety may nonetheless experience foreign language or second language (L2) anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Yılmaz & De Jong, 2024). Building on this theory, subsequent research has

examined how education abroad experiences may influence learners' L2 anxiety and speaking confidence. For example, Lang-Rigal (2023) found that education abroad experiences can yield a range of linguistic and non-linguistic benefits that affect L2 use, including reduced L2 anxiety. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), has been adapted and employed in studies investigating the relationship between education abroad and L2 anxiety & confidence (Dewaele et al., 2024; Lang-Rigal, 2023; Thompson & Lee, 2013; Thompson & Lee, 2014). These studies analyze dimensions of language learning that go beyond traditional proficiency measures and instead seek to identify affective outcomes of linguistic development associated with participation in STSA programs.

Neff and Apple (2020) further conceptualize L2 speaking confidence as comprising two related dimensions: L2 anxiety and L2 self-competence. Their findings suggest that one of the most statistically significant effects of both short- and long-term education abroad experiences is an increase in L2 speaking confidence (Neff & Apple, 2020). For most participants, this increase appeared to result from a perceived decrease in speaking anxiety accompanied by a corresponding increase in perceived self-competence (Neff & Apple, 2020). Taken together, this research suggests that linguistic confidence is not simply a reflection of language proficiency. Rather, learners' perceptions of their ability to communicate may influence how they engage with the target language and how they understand themselves as language users. This distinction is particularly relevant in STSA contexts because as the literature suggests, even when measurable changes in proficiency are limited by the duration of a program, students experience changes in their willingness to use the language, their perceptions of their own competence, and varying levels of anxiety about communicating in the target language. These affective changes may subsequently influence students' engagement with the language both during and after the

program. Understanding these outcomes therefore provides a broader account of language learning than proficiency measures do alone.

In addition to L2 confidence and anxiety, research has examined how education abroad experiences influence L2 learners' identities, including their conceptions of their L2 selves and perceptions of multilingualism (Apple & Aliponga, 2018; Benson et al., 2012; Kang & Pacheco, 2021; Machin & Tragant, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2020). Benson et al. (2012) note that although considerable research has focused on language gains in terms of proficiency, less attention has been given to the relationship between L2 proficiency and broader dimensions of personal development, particularly identity. They pinpoint linguistic self-concept, defined as "how learners perceive their ability as language learners and their progress in relation to the particular context in which they are learning," as a key component of L2 identity development (Benson et al., 2012). In their study, participants reported increased confidence in using English, suggesting that greater proficiency and confidence may contribute to a shift in learners' linguistic self-concepts, specifically from language learners to language users (Benson et al., 2012). Such a shift may strengthen learners' confidence in L2 contexts and alter how they understand their own linguistic capabilities (Benson et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2020).

Relatedly, Apple and Aliponga discuss the concept of the "ideal L2 self," or the type of L2 user a learner aspires to become, and its relationship to confidence and reduced language anxiety (2018). The ideal L2 self therefore extends the linguistic self-concept beyond learners' perceptions of their current abilities to include their imagined future identities as language users. This suggests that linguistic confidence and identity may be closely connected: as learners become more comfortable using the target language, they may begin to perceive themselves not simply as students acquiring an additional language but as legitimate users of that language. This

literature suggests that the value of education abroad may extend beyond changes in what learners can do with the language to changes in how they understand themselves as language users. Linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety, linguistic self-concept, and the "ideal L2 self" represent interconnected dimensions through which learners may interpret their experiences abroad and imagine future relationships with the target language.

Perceptions of multilingualism represent another dimension of identity relevant to understanding how STSA programs influence language learning. Even brief education abroad experiences can highlight the value of multilingual competencies; in particular, they may prompt students from U.S. contexts who encounter discourses that reinforce monolingual ideologies rooted in both the development of the United States as a monolingual nation state and in early twentieth-century naturalization policies (McGregor, 2016) to reconsider their attitudes toward languages and L2 learning (Artamonova, 2025). Moreover, many L1 English speakers may feel little incentive to adopt a multilingual identity because the English language is often associated with power, mobility, and global success through its status as a lingua franca (Artamonova, 2025; Mitchell et al., 2020).

Developing more positive attitudes toward multilingualism and L2 learning may, in turn, encourage continued investment in language study beyond the education abroad experience. Artamonova (2025), for example, found that learners who developed more positive attitudes toward language learning were more likely to express intentions to continue studying the L2 or to renew their commitment to language learning, including through additional coursework. The value of multilingualism emerged as a central theme in the qualitative data, suggesting that education abroad experiences may influence not only students' linguistic development but also

their perceptions of multilingualism and willingness to pursue continued L2 learning (Artamonova, 2025; Machin & Tragant, 2022).

Researchers have also begun to examine the relationship between linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism in language-focused education abroad contexts, although this area remains comparatively underexplored (Thompson & Lee, 2013). In Artamonova's (2025) study, students described renewed excitement and commitment to L2 learning that they attributed not only to increased proficiency but also to greater linguistic confidence and a sense that their efforts to learn the language had been rewarded. Thompson and Lee (2013) similarly suggest that individuals who identify as multilingual may develop a "heightened sense of metalinguistic awareness," which may contribute to reduced L2 anxiety. Supporting the relationship established by Thompson & Lee, Dewaele et al. also found an association between multilingualism, lower foreign language anxiety (FLA), and greater foreign language enjoyment (FLE) (2025).

Although this body of research has established a foundation for examining the emotional and identity-related dimensions of L2 development abroad, comparatively little is known about how short-term education abroad experiences may shape linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety, and learners' perceptions of themselves as multilingual individuals. Existing research has often examined these dimensions separately, while fewer studies have considered how they may intersect within the same short-term education abroad experience. This gap is particularly important because changes in students' confidence, anxiety, and linguistic self-perceptions may emerge even when measurable changes in proficiency are constrained by program duration. Ultimately, examining these affective and identity-related outcomes may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of short-term education abroad on L2 development.

Rather than treating proficiency as the sole indicator of language learning, the present study considers language learning more broadly to include changes in students' perceptions of their linguistic competence, their emotional experiences using the L2, and their developing identities as multilingual language users.

Research questions

The literature reviewed above points to three related developments. First, education abroad is increasingly characterized by short-term programming designed to accommodate a broader and more diverse student population, meaning that faculty and staff leading programs abroad have also adopted this model. Second, the growing prevalence of short-term programs for language study merits a closer examination of the conditions necessary for meaningful language development. Third, although research has extensively examined proficiency gains in both STSA and semester long programs, comparatively less attention has been given to the affective and identity-related dimensions of language learning, particularly the relationships among linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety, and perceptions of multilingualism.

The present study therefore examines whether a 4.5-week education abroad experience in Spain is associated with changes in students' linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety, and perceptions of multilingualism. By examining these outcomes together, this research seeks to expand conventional understandings of language learning abroad beyond measurable proficiency gains and toward a broader account of learners' affective and identity development.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does participation in a 4.5-week education abroad program in Spain influence students' linguistic (L2) confidence vs. anxiety?

2. How does participation in the education abroad program influence students' perceptions of multilingualism and their developing linguistic identities?
3. How do students describe the relationship among linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety, and their perceptions of themselves as multilingual language users?

Methodology

Program

Data was collected as part of a 4.5-week, faculty-led education abroad program in Madrid and Pamplona, Spain. The participants were predominantly L1 English speakers, apart from three students who identified as Spanish heritage or native Spanish speakers who learned English simultaneously. All participants were undergraduate students enrolled at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. As part of the program, participants completed six credit hours of Spanish-language coursework. One course was taught by native Spanish-speaking instructors at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, while the second course was taught by a faculty member from the participants' home institution who uses Spanish as a second language.

Researcher positionality

Because the researcher occupied both a professional and participant role within the education abroad program, positionality is particularly relevant to the present study. As applied linguistics scholarship increasingly recognizes, researchers' identities, experiences, and relationships with participants can shape multiple stages of the research process, including the formulation of research questions, data collection, interpretation, and representation (King, 2024; Warren & Yazan, 2026). This process of critical self-examination, commonly referred to as reflexivity, emphasizes the importance of examining not only research findings but also the relationships and processes through which those findings are generated. Providing a positionality statement therefore offers an opportunity to situate the present study within the researcher's linguistic, academic, professional, and social contexts.

The researcher is an L1 speaker of English and an L2 speaker of Spanish. She primarily uses Spanish in academic and personal contexts and English across academic, professional, and

personal domains. Although she has studied and used Spanish for more than 14 years, she considers English to be her dominant language, particularly because the frequency and intensity of her Spanish use varies across contexts and time periods. At the time of the study, the researcher was pursuing an MA in Spanish while working full-time as an Education Abroad Advisor at the same large public institution attended by the undergraduate participants. She had worked in the field of education abroad for nearly four years. Her academic and professional experiences in second language acquisition and education abroad inform her interest in understanding how education abroad experiences may contribute to language learning and development beyond traditional measures of linguistic proficiency, including the ways learners' emotions, perceptions, and experiences may influence their motivation to continue language study and their developing conceptions of themselves as multilingual and globally engaged individuals.

This perspective is particularly relevant to her professional role, which involves developing and supporting short-term, faculty-led education abroad programs, including both language-focused programs and programs in which English serves as the primary language of instruction. The researcher not only recognizes how her professional and academic background may influence the ways in which she interprets and characterizes participants' experiences, but also how her dual role within the education abroad program may influence participants' interactions with her, what they ultimately choose to share, and their perceptions of the research process. As a graduate student participating in the program alongside the undergraduate participants, she may have been perceived as a peer, potentially facilitating rapport and encouraging participants to share their experiences more openly. Simultaneously, her professional role as an Education Abroad Advisor at the participants' home institution positioned

her as a university staff member with institutional authority. This intersection of peer and professional roles introduced a potentially complex researcher–participant relationship in which she occupied both a relatively proximate and an institutionally authoritative position.

Participants

A total of 15 undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 22 participated in the study. Twelve participants identified English as their first language (L1), two identified as Spanish heritage language speakers, and one identified Spanish as their L1 and English as an additional dominant language. Heritage languages are generally understood as minority languages acquired through early childhood exposure in the home and subsequently developed within a broader sociolinguistic context in which another language is dominant (Almalki et al., 2026). As children enter school and experience increased exposure to the dominant societal language, the heritage language may become displaced as the primary language of communication and consequently be "developed under conditions of reduced exposure and use" (Almalki et al., 2026; Cangelosi et al., 2024).

With respect to language dominance, all participants identified English as their primary language or, in the case of the L1 Spanish participant, one of two dominant languages alongside Spanish. The two heritage Spanish speakers also identified English as their primary language. Several participants reported previous travel to Spanish-speaking contexts, including Spain, Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, and Puerto Rico, either for tourism or to visit family members. However, none of the participants had previously participated in an education abroad program. While some participants had prior experience traveling in Spanish-speaking contexts, participation in this program in Spain represented their first formal education abroad experience. Linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism were evaluated irrespective

of L1 or heritage speaker status because the focus of the study was the affective dimensions of L2 development as opposed to capturing how STSA programs impact proficiency level. This point will be elaborated further in the discussion section.

Table 1. Participant Background and Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Major(s)	Spanish heritage speaker (Y/N)
Olivia	F	Biochemistry, Microbiology & Spanish	N
Charlotte	F	Psychology & Spanish	N
Emma	F	Social Work & Spanish	Y
Liam	M	Civil Engineering & Spanish (minor)	N
Amelia	F	Dietetics, Sports Nutrition, & Spanish (minor)	N
Noah	M	Computer Science & Spanish	N
Sophia	F	Animal Science & Spanish (minor)	N
Mia	F	Political Science & Spanish	Y
Oliver	M	Human Health Biology & Spanish	N
Isabella	F	Architecture & Spanish (minor)	N
Theo	M	Electrical Engineering & Spanish	N
Evelyn	F	Human Health Biology & Spanish (minor)	N
Eliana	F	Animal Science & Spanish	N

Procedure

Before data collection commenced, this study was reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was granted approval (IRB-13740). The research took

place in three different phases: Phase 1 (n=13) took place at the home institution 2-3 weeks before the STSA began, and Phase 2 (n=15) took place approximately 2 weeks into the STSA program in Spain (n=15). Phase 3 (n=15) took place approximately 6 weeks after the STSA program ended, after the students had returned to U.S., but before the fall semester started, to control for any potential effects of additional L2 instruction. During all three phases, participants completed a Qualtrics survey containing quantitative items on a 6-point Likert scale, and qualitative, open-ended reflection questions related to their L2 language use, perceived confidence or anxiety levels, and perceptions of multilingualism. The same quantitative items were presented in all three phases of data collection. During Phase 1, participants also answered survey questions that collected information about their demographic and linguistic background, which also helped the researcher understand prior engagement with the Spanish language and if the participants had any previous travel to Spanish-speaking countries or education abroad experiences. The three rounds of data collection via survey questionnaire were a required assignment of the course taught by the faculty from the participants' home institution. However, these assignments were graded on completion only; participants were not graded based on their responses.

Participants who continued their studies at the university during the fall semester were also invited to participate in a voluntary focus group, where they answered additional questions about their L2 use on the STSA program in Spain via small group discussion. Focus group subjects were compensated for their time by providing a meal during the session. Audio of the focus group session was recorded and later transcribed.

Table 2. Data Collection Procedures

Pre-STSA (2-3 weeks before the program)	During STSA (2-3 weeks into the program)	Post-STSA (2-3 weeks after the program)
Demographic information (Qualtrics survey)	Items adapted from FLCAS scale (Qualtrics survey)	Items adapted from FLCAS scale (Qualtrics survey)
Items adapted from FLCAS scale (Qualtrics survey)	Reflection questions (Qualtrics survey)	Reflection questions (Qualtrics survey)
Reflection questions (Qualtrics survey)		Supplemental reflection questions (voluntary focus group)

Materials

The review of the published literature surrounding the impact of STSA programs on linguistic confidence and identity factors, such as perceptions of multilingualism, not only informed the theoretical backbone of the project, but guided the study's structure and methodology as well. Quan presents the case for incorporating a mixed-methods data collection and employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures administered in three phases: pre-STSA, during STSA, and post-STSA (2019). Benefits of a mixed-methods approach include maintaining the ability to assess participants over time and across conditions, while collecting in-depth responses which provide context for the trends identified in the quantitative data (Dou et al., 2024; Neff & Apple, 2020; Quan, 2019). The work of Dou et al. (2024) and Nolan & Hickman (2024) informed the decision to include a supplemental post-program data collection phase, with a focus group conducted several weeks after the intervention.

To generate the survey items utilized in all three phases of data collection, the "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale" (FLCAS), originally developed by Horwitz et al. in 1986, was adapted by the researcher to adjust language referring to the foreign language classroom to fit the context of STSA. Seven of the original 33 FLCAS items were chosen to prevent fatigue or loss of interest while the participants completed the surveys. Participants will respond to the FLCAS items using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 6 'Strongly agree', meaning that 1 is the minimum and 6 is the maximum possible score for each measure. The FLCAS items utilized in this study are listed in the appendix. Participant responses will be grouped by subscales for linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism. For each respective subscale, participants receive a mean score which averages their responses for the individual items present across the stages of data collection. Negatively phrased items in both subscales will be reverse coded to ensure that higher values consistently signify higher levels of linguistic confidence or a stronger multilingual identity.

Reflection prompts were also developed for inclusion in the qualitative section of the survey questionnaire. Participants were able to elaborate on and provide context for the answers given in response to the FLCAS items. These questions were considered part of the journal entries assigned in the home institution course associated with the STSA program and were graded for completion only. All reflection prompts are included in the appendix.

Results

Quantitative data analysis

Although the original participant pool consisted of 15 individuals (n=15), the final sample size included 13 individuals (n=13). Two participants were excluded from the analysis because they did not complete all three stages of data collection. As averaging items within a scale to generate a composite score assumes that the items measure the same underlying construct, the internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α). All Cronbach's α values exceeded 0.80, indicating good consistency and supporting the use of averaged item scores to measure linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism. It is important to note that because the perceptions of multilingualism scale only contained two items, the α value functions essentially as a correlation between those two items, meaning it is ultimately a weaker check of reliability.

One of the participants failed to respond to the FLCAS item labelled as "Others speak better" in the pre-STSA phase of data collection, so their score was excluded when calculating descriptive statistic values. Table 3 summarizes the main features of the dataset by including parametric (mean and standard deviation), non-parametric (median), and range (minimum & maximum) values.

Table 3. Summary of Descriptive Statistics

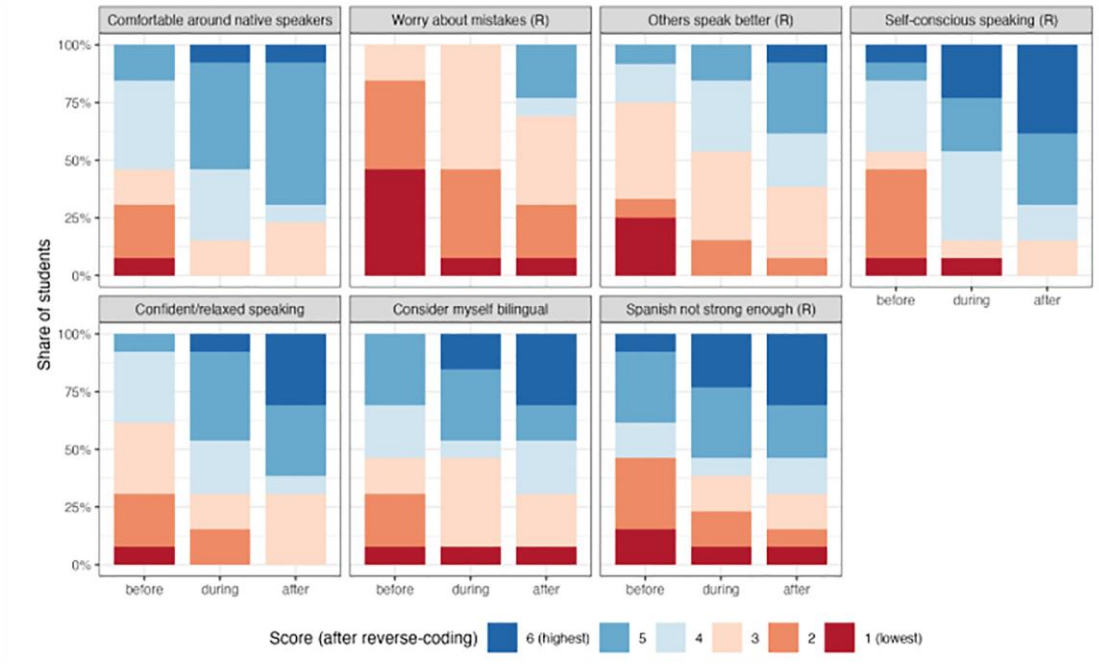
Scale	Time	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max
Linguistic confidence	Before	2.80	0.95	2.75	1.2	4.6
	During	3.77	0.82	3.80	2.0	4.8
	After	4.25	0.98	4.40	2.8	5.4
Multilingual identity	Before	3.42	1.54	4.00	1.0	5.5
	During	4.04	1.55	4.00	1.0	6.0
	After	4.31	1.58	4.50	1.0	6.0

Table 4 provides the mean for each survey question by timepoint (pre-STSA, during-STSA, and post-STSA), as opposed to the previous table which provides means for the subscale instead of each individual item. Figure 1 accompanies Table 4 in that it visualizes the distribution of responses to the FLCAS items over time by demonstrating the percentage of students who selected each score value after reverse coding for the negatively worded items.

Table 4. Item Means by Timepoint

Scale	Question	Before	During	After
Confidence	Comfortable around native speakers	3.31	4.46	4.54
	Worry about mistakes (R)	1.69	2.46	3.15
	Others speak better (R)	2.75	3.46	4.00
	Self-conscious speaking (R)	3.15	4.38	4.92
	Confident/relaxed speaking	3.08	4.08	4.62
Identity	Consider myself bilingual	3.46	4.00	4.31
	Spanish not strong enough (R)	3.38	4.08	4.31

Figure 1. Distribution of Responses to FLCAS Items by Timepoint



The comparisons in Table 5 and 6 show the point differences between participant responses from the pre-STSA and the during-STSA surveys, pre-STSA and post-STSA surveys, as well as during-STSA and post-STSA surveys for each subscale. For the linguistic confidence subscale, confidence changed significantly over time and every pairwise difference was significant (see Table 5). The multilingual identity variable also changed significantly over time, but the majority of the gain happened by the during-STSA survey (see Table 6). The 95% confidence intervals (CI) listed in both Table 7 and Table 8 provide a range of possible values for an unknown population parameter such as a mean or proportion. If the same sampling process was repeated and a 95% confidence interval was calculated 100 times from the same population, it is expected that about 95 of those intervals would contain the actual population parameter and 5 would not.

Table 5. Linguistic Confidence: Pairwise Differences Between Timepoints

Comparison	Difference (points)	95% CI	p
During − Before	+0.97	0.53 to 1.42	$< .001$
After − Before	+1.45	1.00 to 1.90	$< .001$
After − During	+0.48	0.03 to 0.92	.034

Table 6. Multilingual Identity: Pairwise Differences Between Timepoints

Comparison	Difference (points)	95% CI	p
During − Before	+0.62	0.19 to 1.04	.004
After − Before	+0.89	0.46 to 1.31	$< .001$
After − During	+0.27	−0.15 to 0.69	.27

Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data, comprising written responses to reflection prompts in the survey questionnaire, was analyzed thematically in two stages. First, the data was reviewed and

summarized to identify recurring patterns and preliminary themes across participants' responses. After the initial review of the qualitative data, the researcher identified words and phrases present in the responses that were related to the linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism (multilingual identity) subscales. Table 7 captures the top themes that emerged, along with quotes from participants which illustrate the codes used. The emergent themes were also tracked across timepoints to identify threads related to linguistic confidence and perceptions of multilingualism that further contextualize and complement the quantitative findings.

Table 7. Themes from Responses to Reflection Prompts

	Top themes	**Sample quotes from participants**
Confidence (comfortable, confident, reaffirming)	Native speakers	***"The locals are very friendly. I think that it helped that even when I made a mistake, they tried to understand me and would ask for clarification when I made mistakes instead of brushing me off."***
	Functional communication situations like ordering food	***"By the end of the trip, I felt confident with simple social interactions that preciously intimidated me. I spent a day alone in Madrid and felt very confident ordering food, talking to store owners, and any other conversations necessary."***
	Academic course	***"I think I felt especially confident in my Spanish language abilities during the classes we took at the University of Navarra. My professor did a great job***

		of making me feel included and comfortable. There was never a time when I felt uncomfortable making a mistake or let that stop me from practicing Spanish."
Anxiety (anxious, worry, uncomfortable, nervous, ashamed, embarrassed)	Native speakers	***"I am most nervous thinking about speaking with and trying to understand native Spanish speakers."***
	Grammar	***"I worry that I will make a lot of grammatical errors and not be able to communicate easily."***
	Vocabulary	***"I am anxious about the parts of the language that are not taught in the curriculum that I have learned such as slang, many vocabulary words."***

Discussion

Quantitative data

The first research question centered on whether a 4.5-week education abroad experience could influence L2 students' levels of linguistic confidence vs. L2 anxiety. The quantitative results show that participation in STSA increases participants' linguistic confidence and reduces L2 anxiety. Table 3 demonstrates that linguistic confidence averages increased by measures of 0.2 to 3.0. Students who had the lowest levels of linguistic confidence before the STSA program tended to increase the most after the experience; there was a correlation between starting score and change ($r = -0.40$). All the participants in the sample ($n=13$) had a higher level of linguistic confidence after the STSA program in comparison to their level of linguistic confidence before the program.

The second research question focuses on how participation in STSA impacts students' perceptions of multilingualism and their developing linguistic identities. The results support that the program in Spain promoted adoption of a multilingual identity by strengthening participants' perceptions of multilingualism. Table 3 reveals that multilingual identity averages increased by 0 to 3.0 points and changed significantly over time. This increase mainly occurred during the initial period between the pre-STSA and during-STSA surveys (see Table 4). Eleven participants had higher averages for multilingual identity post-STSA in comparison to pre-STSA, although two participants experienced unchanged perceptions of their multilingual identities. In comparison to the results for the linguistic confidence variable, the participants' responses differed more from each other on the multilingual identity subscale, with averages ranging from 1 to 6.

The mean value for each FLCAS item on both the linguistic confidence and multilingual identity subscales increased when comparing responses from before and after the STSA program. However, the lowest scoring question at every timepoint was the question about whether students "Worry about making mistakes". In fact, it was still below the scale midpoint after the STSA program, despite having increased by 1.5 points, suggesting that participants were generally still concerned about making errors while using the L2, even after spending several weeks in Spain. This finding may reflect deeply ingrained beliefs about language learning in which proficiency and fluency are prioritized as primary indicators of linguistic development, potentially at the expense of affective changes such as linguistic confidence and broader dimensions of multilingual identity.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of responses across FLCAS items over time. For most items, the proportion of low scores (red) decreased, while the proportion of high scores (blue) increased, suggesting an overall reduction in foreign language anxiety, greater linguistic confidence, and a potentially stronger multilingual identity. Specifically, the response patterns indicate that participants became more comfortable interacting with native speakers and more confident when speaking in the L2. Nevertheless, concerns about making mistakes persisted in particular. The items pertaining to "worry about mistakes" and "self-conscious speaking", both of which might be expected to capture closely related dimensions of L2 anxiety, exhibited divergent response patterns. This could be due to the fact that the former item described speaking Spanish generally, while the latter referred to feeling self-conscious while speaking specifically with the professor and other students on the program. In the post-STSA survey, responses to the "Self-conscious speaking" item trended downward as participants felt more comfortable with the program cohort, whereas concerns about generally making mistakes when speaking Spanish

remained prevalent. This divergence also could suggest that participants' increasing comfort with speaking did not necessarily correspond to a comparable reduction in concerns about linguistic accuracy. More broadly, these contrasting patterns raise questions about the extent to which learners' understandings of language development remain shaped by proficiency-oriented conceptions of success, even as their affective experiences and confidence in using the L2 evolve. The findings thus underscore the importance of recognizing affective outcomes as meaningful dimensions of language learning, alongside conventional measures of proficiency and fluency.

Qualitative data

The qualitative data addresses the third research question about how L2 learners describe the relationship between linguistic confidence, L2 anxiety and perceptions of themselves as multilingual language users. Themes that emerged from the reflection prompt responses suggest that linguistic confidence emerged through successful interactions rather than self-evaluation of linguistic mastery or demonstrable gains in proficiency. One recurring activity that participants described was ordering food and drinks in restaurants and bars throughout their STSA experience (38% of responses mentioned this task in the during STSA and post-STSA surveys). Although ordering food may seem a relatively simple communicative task, doing so in Pamplona required participants to apply their Spanish in an authentic social setting while navigating unfamiliar cultural practices. These encounters provided opportunities for students to move beyond the controlled conditions of the classroom and develop strategies for successful functional communication in the L2 that, over time, contributed to a heightened level of linguistic confidence.

The cultural context of these interactions is particularly relevant. As anthropologist Nikki Gorrell (2017) describes, gastronomic traditions in the Basque Country center on the pintxo, a small portion of food commonly served on a slice of bread or secured with a toothpick, which is typically enjoyed while standing at a bar (Leizaola, 2021). During their 4.5-week program, participants joined local Pamplona residents in the busy taverns along Calle Estafeta and Calle San Nicolás, enjoying pintxos and drinks for the weekly social tradition of *juevintxo* (a portmanteau of *jueves* and *pintxo*), on weekends, and generally whenever the opportunity arose.

The pintxo culture situated language use within everyday socio-cultural practices that provided opportunities for participants to engage with Spanish beyond the classroom in repeated encounters that became familiar, yet at the same time, remained challenging due to the fast-paced and informal ordering procedures required in these interactions. This setting starkly differs from other restaurant or food service situations where there is an opportunity to sit down and carefully read a menu while a server attentively assists. Encounters within Pamplona's bar culture may have resulted in increased linguistic confidence by providing participants with tangible evidence that they could communicate successfully irrespective of the accuracy of their grammar or level of fluency. When an interaction resulted in a successful order, this offered immediate confirmation that the participant's linguistic resources were sufficient to accomplish the task. In this sense, participants quickly experienced L2 language use as a practical means of achieving an interpersonal and situational goal rooted in communication, not necessarily proficiency.

> *"I feel like the most common "win" I've been experiencing has just been ordering at restaurants and bars. It's something small but I feel a lot more confident ordering than I did before, and I know I can communicate what I want."*

"By the end of the trip I felt confident with simple social interactions that preciously intimidated me. I spent a day alone in Madrid and felt very confident ordering food, talking to store owners, and any other conversations necessary. This is a small thing that is huge for me."

The significance of these encounters lies in both the frequency with which participants used Spanish, and the relationship between communicative success and their perceptions of their own linguistic capabilities. Repeated opportunities to complete familiar tasks may have made everyday interactions more manageable, allowing participants to apply classroom learning in contexts where the primary objective was to be understood. Such experiences suggest that linguistic confidence can develop through the successful mobilization of their existing L2 knowledge base, even when learners are aware that their level of proficiency is incomplete. In this sense, the STSA provided opportunities for participants to reconsider what it means to be capable communicators in Spanish, realizing that making errors does not always completely hinder understanding, and thereby increasing linguistic confidence so they could more fully participate in cultural practices and everyday life in Spain.

Another prominent theme that emerged from the qualitative data was a concept I will refer to as a "native speaker paradox." In the survey data, native speakers occupy a complex position in relation to L2 learners' linguistic identities, functioning as both a source of anxiety and a source of confidence, or validation. This tension was evident in the pre-STSA survey responses, as 13/13 participants in the sample identified some aspect of speaking as a primary source of nervousness or anxiety about their time in Spain, and 54% of those specifically expressed concern about interacting with native speakers or locals during the STSA experience. These findings align with previous research suggesting that interactions with native speakers are

among the situations in which L2 learners experience heightened anxiety (Lee-Amuzie, 2025; Özdemir et al., 2022; Yılmaz & De Jong, 2024; Woodrow, 2006). The following responses illustrate participants' initial apprehension about these interactions:

> *"I am most nervous thinking about speaking with and trying to understand native Spanish speakers."*
>
> *"I am most nervous about talking to the local people there."*
>
> *"I worry that I won't be able to keep up with native speakers and since they'll probably know better English than I know Spanish, they'll just want to speak in English because it would be easier. I don't want to feel like a burden on the people I speak to."*

Their responses suggest that participants' anxiety extends beyond concerns about linguistic proficiency to include fears of inadequacy, difficulty keeping pace with native speakers, and the possibility of becoming a burden to their interlocutors. According to work by Lee-Amuzie (2025), 95% of respondents in a meta-analysis of TESOL studies expressed a desire to sound like native speakers. When L2 learners internalize the goal of sounding native-like in their target language use, they put immense pressure on themselves to perform at a high level. This not only reflects the influence of native-speaker norms on L2 students' understandings of their own competence and legitimacy as language users but also perpetuates L2 anxiety.

However, the STSA experience provided participants with opportunities to reconsider these perceptions, and evidence of this reevaluation emerged as early as the during-STSA phase of data collection, only two weeks into their time abroad. Participants' responses indicated growing confidence in their ability to communicate with native speakers, even when they knew that their Spanish was not grammatically perfect. This shift suggests a developing orientation toward Spanish as a language they could actively use in real-world situations rather than one

they were strictly learning in a classroom. As participants gained experience navigating everyday interactions, the data suggests that they began to perceive themselves as more legitimate language users and feel less distant from native speakers than they had before departure.

Successful everyday communicative tasks with the local population, such as ordering food, offered tangible evidence that L2 communication did not require grammatical perfection but rather the ability to convey meaning and accomplish communicative goals. The following responses illustrate participants' positive recognition of both their changing confidence levels and functional use of the L2:

> *"Spanish speakers can understand me even if I make grammar mistakes."*
>
> *"I think that feeling more comfortable speaking Spanish in front of native speakers as well as doing well in class are my 'wins' so far."*
>
> *"Some wins I have had are being able to order in Spanish without then switching to English, and becoming more comfortable speaking to native speakers."*

Together, these responses suggest a shift in how participants evaluated their own L2 skills. Rather than measuring success exclusively against an ideal of native-like competence, participants increasingly recognized their ability to communicate effectively. This shift is significant for understanding the development of multilingual identity. As participants accumulated successful L2 interactions, they appeared to develop their linguistic self-concept as they gained greater confidence in their status as users of Spanish (Benson et al., 2012), potentially strengthening their identification as multilingual individuals.

Contrary to the findings of Lee-Amuzie (2025), this development did not hinge upon participants viewing themselves as equivalent to native speakers. Instead, it may have involved a reconsideration of the assumption that native-like proficiency was necessary for successful

communication or for claiming an identity as a legitimate language user. Although participants may have become more aware of the differences between their own linguistic abilities and those of native speakers, this awareness did not preclude them from communicating. Rather, their experiences suggest that the ability to express themselves and make meaning increasingly took precedence over the pursuit of linguistic perfection. In this sense, the development of multilingual identity may involve not the elimination of perceived linguistic inferiority or inequality but a growing willingness to communicate despite these imperfections.

At the same time, native speakers continued to occupy an important role in participants' evaluations of their progress. For some, interactions with native speakers served as a source of external validation, particularly when their use of Spanish received positive feedback. One participant explained:

> *"Some 'wins' that I have had so far while here have been the few times that I have been complimented for my use of Spanish by a native speaker or local."*

This response highlights the dual role of native speakers within participants' developing linguistic identities. Whereas anticipated interactions initially generated anxiety, successful encounters and positive feedback could affirm participants' emerging confidence as Spanish users. While some studies have shown that L2 learners may view themselves as inferior to native speakers or view the native speakers as models to which they aspire (Cook, 1999), the qualitative data collected throughout this study does not reflect this idea. Native speakers therefore remained influential reference points, but this is not necessarily because the participants want to sound exactly like them. Anxiety is a negative emotion, but this study's L2 learners did not frame their relationship with the native speaker as negatively as the relation described in the work of Cook (1999).

In addition to the influential role that native speakers played in shaping participants' experiences throughout the study, the researcher's own positionality may have also influenced the way participants interpreted and responded to the survey questions. As a graduate student studying abroad on the same program and sharing many of the participants' experiences in Spain, the researcher occupied a position like that of a peer rather than an entirely external researcher. This shared experience may have contributed to a sense of familiarity, relatability, and rapport between the researcher and participants. While this relationship may have encouraged participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives, they may have felt inclined to provide more favorable or positive responses out of a desire to support the researcher, contribute to the success of the study, or maintain a positive relationship with someone they viewed as a fellow student. As a result, their responses may not have fully reflected their perceptions or experiences but may have been influenced, to some extent, by their relationship with the researcher. Had the researcher been perceived as an unfamiliar or entirely external individual, participants may have approached the survey differently or felt less inclined to provide responses that reflected a particularly positive perspective.

Conclusion

This study examined how participation in a 4.5-week STSA program in Spain was associated with increases in L2 learners' linguistic confidence and development of a multilingual identity. The findings suggest that even a relatively brief STSA experience can provide meaningful opportunities for students to reduce L2 anxiety and reshape their relationship with the target language by building a stronger multilingual identity. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this mixed-methods study substantiates the value of STSA programs for the affective and identity-related progression observed in participants' L2 development. As participants accumulated successful L2 experiences, they appeared to develop greater confidence in their ability to use Spanish while reconsidering their expectations of linguistic competence and the value of multilingualism. Even so, these developments were not uniform across all measures or participants. Concerns about making mistakes persisted even as participants reported greater comfort speaking Spanish, suggesting that increased confidence does not necessarily eliminate anxiety about linguistic accuracy.

Several limitations should be considered while interpreting these findings. Although the items adapted from the FLCAS scale showed good internal consistency, future research should further evaluate their suitability for measuring linguistic confidence in STSA contexts. Future work in this area might consider incorporating additional items from the FLCAS scale to ensure that there is an even higher level of reliability among the items chosen to measure the constructs. In particular, the perceptions of multilingualism measure would benefit from additional items being incorporated into the survey to better capture the nuances of multilingual identity development. Further studies should also examine larger and more diverse participant samples to see the extent to which these findings extend to other STSA contexts. Finally, the focus group

data holds more promise in a future study related to the longer-term effects of STSA on motivations for continued language study after the program.

Despite these limitations, this research highlights the need to move beyond proficiency as the sole measure of L2 progress and to incorporate affective and identity-related outcomes as meaningful dimensions of language development. This would ultimately allow language educators and education abroad professionals to better understand how STSA experiences may encourage learners to communicate with greater confidence and develop a more positive relationship with the target language by recognizing themselves as multilingual.

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Appendix A - Quantitative data collection

Linguistic confidence subscale (adapted from FLCAS)

Please respond to the following statements using a Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Mostly disagree, 3=Partially disagree, 4=Partially agree, 5=Mostly agree, 6=Strongly agree).

1. "I feel comfortable speaking around native speakers of Spanish".
2. "I worry about making mistakes when I speak Spanish".
3. "I keep thinking that the other students on my study abroad program speak Spanish better than I do".
4. "I feel very self-conscious about speaking Spanish in front of the other students and professor on my study abroad program".
5. "I feel very confident or relaxed when I think about speaking Spanish during my study abroad program".

Perceptions of multilingualism subscale (adapted from FLCAS)

Please respond to the following statements using a Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Mostly disagree, 3=Partially disagree, 4=Partially agree, 5=Mostly agree, 6=Strongly agree).

1. "I consider myself a bilingual or multilingual individual."
2. "I don't think my Spanish language abilities are strong enough to consider myself to be bilingual."

Appendix B - Qualitative data collection

Please respond to the following reflection prompts to help the researchers understand more about your personal perceptions and experiences in your own words.

Pre-STSA reflection prompts

1. What are you most nervous or anxious for when thinking about speaking Spanish during your education abroad program in Spain?
2. Is there something you feel very confident, excited, or prepared for when thinking about using Spanish during your education abroad program in Spain?

During STSA reflection prompts

1. Have you been using your Spanish more or less than expected? Explain briefly or give an example.

2. Regarding your use of Spanish, what are some of the challenges you are facing? How are you working to overcome them?
3. Regarding your use of Spanish, what are some successes or "wins" you have had so far?
4. When does Spanish feel like a resource? When does it feel like a barrier?

Post-STSA reflection prompts

1. Elaborate on a moment or experience while studying abroad in Spain where you felt more confident (less anxious) with your Spanish language abilities?
2. Elaborate on a moment or experience where you felt less confident (more anxious) with your Spanish language abilities.
3. Has your experience utilizing your Spanish language abilities while in Spain changed your perception of your own bilingualism or multilingualism? Please explain.
4. Has your experience utilizing your Spanish language abilities while in Spain changed your perception of bilingualism or multilingualism on a broader scale (e.g., Spanish, European, or US cultures; professional or academic contexts, etc.)? Please explain.
5. Do you plan to continue studying or utilizing Spanish on a regular basis after your return from your education abroad program?

Focus group questions

1. Is there anything you would have done differently or would have changed about your education abroad experience in Spain, specifically thinking about your Spanish language use and/or abilities?
2. What role does Spanish have in your professional, academic, or personal life now that you have returned from your education abroad program in Spain?