

## **During and After Study Abroad Period: Perception and Attitudes on English Development and Maintenance**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the development and maintenance of English skills from the perspective of higher education alumni during and after studying abroad. The researcher consider attitudes, more specifically how, what, and to what extent attitudes could encourage development and maintenance in the context of study abroad from the 120 respondents' perspective. This study deploys quantitative data collection in form of a survey with both multiple choice items and open-ended questions. The numeric items were analyzed with tabulation and the open-ended questions responses were analyzed with the stages of Thematic Analysis. Foremost, the findings reveal that the respondents perceive oral production and fluency as the major skills that improved during the study abroad period, followed by an increase in vocabulary knowledge and listening skills. Most respondents regarded the improvement as an influence of high exposure to spoken English. Secondly, the majority of respondents conceive that their English keeps improving after the study abroad period. The most frequent reasons for using English are social life and entertainment purposes, which are mostly individual preferences, followed by academic purposes such as joining a course or working on journal articles. Work purpose, surprisingly, is not the main reason of using English after study abroad period. The conclusion is that study abroad benefits the respondents in developing their English and that attitude on affective domain (how we perceive a language) and conative (behaviour toward a language) help to maintain the cognitive domain (knowledge on a language) and its maintenance.*

**Keywords:** *attitude; English skills; maintenance; study abroad; alumni's perception*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Number of students going abroad for studying is increasing significantly in the last decade. Specifically, in a developing country such as Indonesia, with the support from its government, number of scholarship grantees are also increasing. The existence of scholarship providers has opened large opportunities for young bright Indonesians to study at the best universities in the world. Scholarship grants from the scholarship providers have become getaways to many prospective students who would like to study abroad since expenses are generally the major factors in decision not to study abroad (King & Young, 1994). In spite of the promises offered by scholarship providers, there are many types of requirements to be fulfilled by the applicants if they would like to get the grants. From the requirements, one thing in common is the compulsory language competency requirement. For students who would like to study abroad, English proficiency becomes one of the most important factors. Generally, scholarship applicants should have minimum IELTS band 6,5 or Ibt TOEFL 90 or other similar types of tests with equivalent scores. With the competencies, the students are expected to be able to do their study well. Therefore, the context of English proficiency could not be distinguished from the context of study abroad. However, the English proficiency that the students had already fulfilled before they studied abroad needs to be maintained during the study, and in extension, after the study finished.

According to Baker (2011) language maintenance is the relative stability of language based on the number of users, its proficiency, and its conservation in life fields such as education, domestic, and others. In this act of maintaining a language, attitude is one factor in the discussion (Tawalbeh, 2019). From the mentalist point of view, language attitude has three parts: cognitive, affective, and conative. Cognitive is knowledge about a language and the speakers, affective is about feelings toward a language and the speakers, and conative is related to behaviour toward a language and the speakers (Edward, 1994). While from the behaviorist point of view, attitude can directly be observed from the responses of the respondents, by meaning the respondents can directly be asked about their attitude toward a language and they are mindful of what the questions intend to ask (Hatoss, 2013).

The significance of this study on the development and maintenance of English skills according to perception of the alumni is layered in between the four factors: attitude, English skills, during, and after study abroad. Studying abroad is related the exposure of English in daily communication during study abroad that is affected by the attitudes of the individual such as students who spend more of their times daily with people with the same first language. In this case, the students do not have as much as exposure of English as a second language proficiency is often connected to the learner's attitudes (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Therefore, attitude has its merit to be researched on. Moreover, Lafford & Collentine (2006) suggest future study directions in the context of study abroad should take individual factors such as attitudes to a more comprehensive qualitative analysis of second language (L2) attainment during the study abroad period. Among the existing studies on study abroad (e.g. Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008; Cherciov, 2012; Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008; Sasaki, 2007, 2013; Freed et al, 2004; Segalowitz et al, 2004), none of them focused on attitude. In addition, none of the previous studies on study abroad covered the period after the study. Therefore, a study on how the alumni of study abroad perceive their English and their

attitudes towards English during and after their study abroad period becomes significant to instill the gap. .

This study will benefit second language learners in their study abroad period, scholarship providers, other researchers in the field of study abroad and other stakeholders. In line with the background context, this study aims to find out what language skills and knowledge have improved the most during the study abroad period according to the alumni's perception, what attitude they had towards using English during their study period, to reveal the attitude of alumni towards maintenance of their English and reveal the alumni's views on their English language ability after returning to Indonesia.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous research have been conducted related to the comparison of study abroad (SA) and at home (AH) contexts focusing on the linguistic improvements. While some studies focused on immigrants (e.g. Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008), other researchers focused on university students (e.g. Cherciov, 2012; Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008; Sasaki, 2007, 2013; Freed et al, 2004; Segalowitz et al, 2004). In her research, Sasaki (2007, 2011) studied the changes of writing of Japanese university students who studied abroad compared to a group of at-home learners. She found that both groups developed their English proficiency in various skills but only students of the study abroad group increased their motivation and improved their L2 writing proficiency. However, Freed et al (2004) stated that whether studying abroad contexts had made students became more fluent in their spoken French (the second language had been learned and investigated in the study) was something that they could not confirm. Based on the research, SA does not automatically affect fluency. Their research showed that other learning contexts such as summer immersion (IM) and at home (AH) also resulted on fluency of spoken English. When it was compared to IM and AH, SA students improved less in spoken than IM students but higher than at home students. Although it was not concluded in the research that the results were affected by the kinds of interaction students might have had during SA period, it was found that that IM students spoke and wrote more French than AH and SA students. Therefore, the success of study abroad (SA) context in promoting the gain of spoken fluency might be related to the kinds of interaction and the quality of the experiences and the efforts to use the second language within the real society or outside the classroom. However, specifically in why and how the SA students chose the attitude as to keep using English outside the classroom are not covered.

Age is also one of the focuses of studies on study abroad. More recent researchers found that adults exceeded the performance of children in lexical complexity (Llanes & Munoz, 2013) but not significantly different in the achievement of other parts such as spoken fluency, syntactic complexity or accuracy. Moreover, in term of writing acquisition, adult learners performed significantly better than children in all aspects except accuracy. The research revealed that in general the development of literacy was higher in the adult groups of learners.

Length of study period has also become the focus of some studies on study abroad. Pérez-Vidal, C., and Juan-Garau, M. (2011) found that when it was compared to a group of native speakers as the baseline data, the group of non-native speakers studying abroad for 3

years acquired improvements in their speaking and pronunciation. In Llanes and Munoz's (2009) study on the effects of short time length on second language acquisition in study abroad context, between 3 and 4 weeks period of SA, the study found that even 1 week length could give effects on greater development of oral fluency. About the length of study abroad, Jensen & Howard (2014) revealed in their study that the length of stay affected the improvement of oral production's accuracy and complexity in greatly various levels among individuals. However, based on their observation in two semesters, the participants improved more in their first semester rather than the second. Dwyer (2004) reported that students in intensive summer programs (monthly based) could receive similar significant long term benefits.

Studies on intercultural awareness and perception during SA and how it affected L2 achievements and motivation have been conducted by many researchers (e.g. Tsai 2012; Pollegrine, 1998). The studies revealed that intercultural awareness and beliefs related positively to the L2 learning achievements. The aforementioned studies investigated study abroad from many different factors that are related to this study. However, the study on how the alumni perceived their English skills and how their attitudes are to maintain their English skills after their study abroad has not been found.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

State This is a study that uses both qualitative and quantitative data from a survey which is not claimed as a mixed-method according to the boundaries of Creswell's (2014) categories of mixed-method designs because the data collection method is solely quantitative. Survey research provides quantitative data in form of numerical items from responses of multiple choice questions and qualitative data from description of attitudes, opinion, beliefs, feelings, or behaviours that are generated from the responses to the open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012).

The results of multiple choice questions are tabulated and shown in form of percentages for interpretation and the results of open-ended questions are analyzed with Thematic Analysis for open-ended questions responses from survey. According to "SAGE Research Methods Datasets" (2019), thematic analysis is used to identify and categorize data to find the patterns. The form of data that are used in this type of qualitative data is not limited by any barriers of responses, therefore thematic analysis could be used to analyse responses for open-ended survey questions and interview (Check & Schutt, 2012). This type of data analysis has been conducted by Swart (2017) to identify students' perspectives on critical thinking instruction and technology enhanced learning.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The research participants are 120 alumni of higher education in English speaking countries all over the world. A questionnaire was distributed to the group. The IELTS score they had when receiving the grants range from band 6.5 to 8, and TOEFL iBT of 84 to 104. These alumni were collected on the Google group of the scholarship providers named LPDP or the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education. By 2021, the scholarships have been

granted to more than 8000 students for different types of grants: masters degree and doctoral degrees in Indonesia and around the world, and research grants.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Data

<i>Ages</i>		<i>Length of study</i>		<i>Educational Degree</i>	
20-30 years old (65%)	30-40 years old (35%)	1-2 years (88%)	3-5 years (12%)	Masters (88%)	Doctoral (12%)

### 3.3 Instruments and Data Analysis

A survey was used to collect the data in this study. The questionnaire has 3 parts. The first part is about information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, gender, level of education, type of work, type of education, length of study abroad, and several other questions. The second part is questions about attitudes towards English and English proficiency in the past (while in study) and after the study is complete or current. Questions about English learning strategies or maintaining English language skills during and after studying abroad were also asked in the questionnaire. The last one is the respondent's opinion on their English proficiency before and after studying abroad in open-ended questions. The questionnaire as the main instrument in this study has many advantages in the efficiency factor, especially if it is done electronically so that it excels in cost benefits. To get a large number of respondents effectively and efficiently, an electronic questionnaire via Google form is used in this research.

Secondly, the data analysis on the close-ended were analyzed with grouped in tabulation and percentages, while the open-ended questions used “SAGE Research Methods Datasets” (2019) on Thematic Analysis for open-ended questions responses from survey which stages are referred to Braun & and Clarke (2006): 1) introduction to the data, 2) looking for codes, 3) looking for themes or topics, 4) reviewing these themes and topics, 5) giving definitions and naming of the themes and topics, and 6) make a report. Stage 1 until 4 were conducted and stage 5 (giving definitions and naming of the themes could be seen from figure 1 (Example of data analysis on defining and naming the codes and themes). The last stage (report) can be found in part 4. Lastly, the summary and report of the stages are discussed in the result and discussion.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 The findings and discussion on the language skills that improved and the use of English during the study abroad period.

Table 2. Responses on the use of English

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
	yes	no
Do you agree that studying abroad has helped in improving your English skills?	97%	3%
Total	100%	

First and foremost, in table 2 above, 97% of respondents admitted that their English improved during the study abroad period. The respondents' responses on the benefits of studying abroad for the development of their English skills are very positive. This is related to the duration of using English in daily activities (Table 3) which is above 70% of all times of the day (63%). Meanwhile, respondents who feel they only use it below 70% of their time are only 37%.

Moreover, in figure 2, on the specific factors that improved, based on the answers from respondents, the language skills that increased the most was fluency and spoken production, namely in the form of skill and fluency in speaking or conversing (91.7%). This is followed by the second skill, namely an increase in 'ability to listen' or the ability to hear and understand conversations (85.3%) and 'vocabulary' or an increase in vocabulary knowledge in English (85%).

Table 3. Responses on the use of English

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
During your study abroad, what percentage of the time you speak in a day are in English?	Above 70%	Below 70%
	63%	37%
Total	100%	

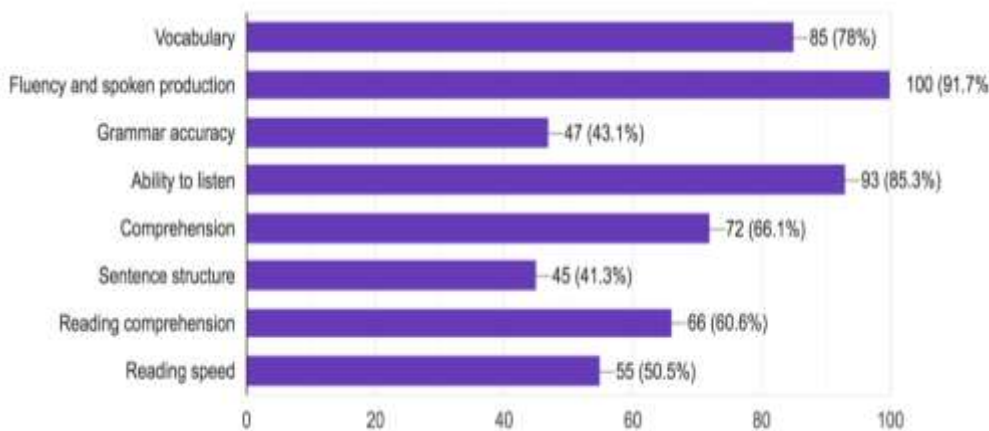


Figure 2. The skills that improved during study abroad period

In using language when studying abroad, students also write a lot as part of their coursework and read lecture materials and other learning resources. However, based on the answers from respondents, it turns out that reading (60%) and skill on structuring sentences (41.3%) such as in writing are not the most developed abilities during their lectures.

When they were abroad, the demand to utter in English made them get higher exposure to verbal communication, and this has a positive impact on improving their listening skills (85.3%) and increasing their vocabulary knowledge (85%).

**Table 4.** Responses on the use of English

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>		
	<i>English</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>Equally English and Indonesian</i>
While studying abroad, what language do you often use in daily conversation?	58%	7.5%	34%
Total	100%		

The surprising point is showed in table 4, 7.5% of the respondents admitted that they only used a very small amount of English in their time studying abroad. This can be described as a very passive participation in spoken interaction during study period. This is confirmed by the responses on the question of why the minority of the respondents (28%) think that their study abroad did not help to improve their English because they did not use it often in daily conversation. Although this is only a small number of respondents and this might not be supportive to the development and maintenance of the language, in reality there are those who prefer working more on receptive (reading) and be more productive in writing than in speaking during their study abroad period. In a broader context, this could also be correlated to their attitudes towards the use of spoken language in during their study abroad period.

However, the majority of respondents (58%) used English more often than Indonesian. While 35% used equally both English and Indonesian. These preferences of daily use of spoken English can be correlated to table 3, that 63% of the respondents used English in more than 70% of their daily conversation. This finding denotes that the exposure to spoken English is high among the alumni during their study abroad. Most importantly, this finding also correlates with the skill that they believe to have improved most during study abroad: fluency and spoken production (91.7%). It can be concluded that the more time the respondents spent for conversing in English, the more confident they would feel about their skill.

**4.2. The findings on alumni attitudes towards the use of English after returning to Indonesia.**

After the study abroad period, the respondents went back to their home country which first language in the society is not English. The findings in this part reveal what the respondents have done to preserve their English that already improved during the study abroad period. This part also describes how the respondents view their English in a longer period after the study abroad period.

**Table 5.** Attitudes towards the use of English

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
After you finish your study and return to Indonesia, do you still use English in your daily interactions?	60%	40%
Total	100%	

The answer of the respondents to this question (in table 5) is that they still use English everyday in social and professional interactions (60 %). Meanwhile, 40% of respondents answered that they no longer use English in their daily interactions.

**Table 6.** Responses to English skills after returning to home country

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>		
	<i>increase</i>	<i>decrease</i>	<i>Stay the same</i>
What do you think about your English skills after you return to home country?	58%	18%	24%
Total	100%		

When asked about their English skills after returning to Indonesia (table 6), 58% stated that their English skills improved, 22.5% apprehended that their English skills stay the same, and 18% answered that their English skills actually decreased when they returned to Indonesia. The assumption is that the 58 % of respondents who think that their English skills have improved when they return to Indonesia are equivalent to 66% (table 7) who continue using English in their daily interactions. On the other hand, the respondents who consider their English skills stay the same Indonesia or decrease are equal to the 34% (table 7) who do not continue using their English after returning to home country. In other words, those who keep using English think positively about their skills, while those who have stopped using English might feel insecure with their English skills.

**Table 7.** Responses to question about the attrition of English skills

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
Do you think that you can gradually lose your English skills after you finish your study and come back to Indonesia?	66%	34%
Total	100%	

In the end, when they were asked whether they felt their English skills would be lost or diminished after they finished their studies and returned to settle in Indonesia, 66% have worried about this, while 34.2% of the respondents still think positively that their English skills would be maintained. Despite the anxiety of the attrition of their English, the respondents responded that they keep enduring many efforts in preserving their English skills (as shown in table 7). However, it could be concluded that even with the efforts they make to maintain their English, in a long term, they are not optimistic that the insufficient use of English in daily interaction could help to preserve their English skills. That could be the reason why they think that it will still be reduced over time.

#### **4.3. Development and maintenance of English after study abroad period according to the respondents**

The following findings describe the attitude of the respondents in making efforts to maintain their English skills. The first finding is shown in table 8.



**Table 8.** Attitude towards English maintenance

<i>Question</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
	yes	no
Do you make any effort to maintain your English use or proficiency after you finish your study?	66%	34%
Total	100%	

66% of respondents admit the purposeful efforts they made in preserving their English skills, while the other 34% do not. The dominant answer (66%) are in forms of different activities that are depicted in table 8.

**Table 9.** Summary of Codes and Themes

<i>Example of responses</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Amount of responses</i>
- Hanging out with foreigner - Talk to friends - Built an English community in Bintaro	- Hanging-out - Hanging-out - Community	Social life purpose	17
- Watching English movies without subtitles - Watching Youtube	- Watching movies - Watching Youtube	Entertainment purpose	12
- Work part time as translator - I worked in an international institution which require me to speak English in daily basis - teaching English to students - I join academic writing class - Writing journal article	- translating - speaking at work - teaching - Academic writing - journal	Work purpose	8
- Taking some private lesson and also taking English certification - Attend and join events/courses in English	- English course and certification - English course	Academic purpose	11
- I am marrying a foreigner, so I do use English way more than Bahasa Indonesia. - Sometimes I have conversation in English with my wife	- family - family	Personal purpose	2
Total			51

Based on table 9, the various ways used by alumni in maintaining their English skills after returning to Indonesia are according to purposes: for reasons of socializing (17 responses), entertainment activities (12 responses), work (8 responses), academic (11 responses) and personal activities (2 responses). The total numbers of the responses according to the themes are 51, these are due to the limited number of respondents (66%, in table 8) that made conscious efforts in maintaining their English and that there are some responses that are uncategorized based on the codes and themes because they are too general. From these answers, it can be seen that activities that are carried out in group or in communication such as gathering with the English Club community, or simply chatting with friends or foreigners are the activities that are mostly preferred by the respondents to maintain their English language skills. Likewise for entertainment reasons such as surfing on social media and doing hobbies that are done alone such as reading and writing blogs in

English. This findings, by reasons are very personal in preference to the respondents willingness. This assumption is strengthened by the smaller number (only 8 responses out of 51) of mandatory use of English for work purpose. Whilst the majority of responses (43 responses) are self-driven.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The findings in figure 2. about the skills that improved during study abroad period are very prominent. Firstly, considering that the respondents were students of higher educations, the predominant assumption was that they would use most of the English for academic purposes such as reading text books or journal articles, having academic presentation in classroom context, or having discussion with classmates or professors by meaning using spoken English in classroom context. However, the main findings show that among those students' most related activities, the respondents' responsive skills (speaking and listening) that improved more than the other skills. Surprisingly, grammatical accuracy is not part of the highest choice that the participants thought had increased. It can be assumed that the spoken interaction they experienced during study abroad focused more on comprehension and the flow of conversation more than the accuracy of the utterances. This could also mean that none of the English interaction they experienced focused on the accuracy of their English, but more to the participation in the interaction. In addition, Rahayu (2020) showed that cultural background does not prevent students from different countries to collaborate in a discussion, furthermore, they were reported to spend more time on spoken communication to share, explain, and negotiate ideas than the pairs of students from the same countries. This point is supportive the respondents' claim that their fluency and spoken production had the highest improvement during their study abroad period.

After the study abroad period, the attitude (in table 5) can occur because of the necessity or demands of their work related to foreign parties, or it may occur because of the culture in the workplace that often uses foreign languages. However, in essence, the opportunity to use a foreign language in daily interactions becomes smaller when they returned to home country. According to Tawalbeh (2019), when a language is not supported by the government to be used in education, or in news and media, the maintenance of the language will be difficult to do.

The minority of the respondents also consider their English skills remain at the same level and even decline because they do not have the need to use English in professional and social life. It could be concluded that the reasons for keeping using English, in general, is not due to any work requirement. That means, in most of the respondents condition, using English is not compulsory, but it is a matter of personal willingness. This is, then, closely related to how the affective domain affects the cognitive domain in learning (Zhao, 2015), which means the more willingness that the respondents have to take an action, the bigger opportunity they have to maintain their English.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the findings show that alumni perceive oral production and fluency as the main skills that are most improved during the study abroad period, followed by an

increase in vocabulary knowledge and listening skills in the form of listening comprehension. This is quite surprising because in fact when studying abroad, all reading and learning resource materials are presented in English and all lecture assignments are written in English, but the respondents do not consider reading and writing skills to be the skills with the best improvement.

Most of the respondents think positively that by continuing to use English according to their main preferences: for socializing and entertainment purposes, they could maintain their English. Although in a longer term, an anxiety arises from most of the respondents that there will be lesser use of English in their routine in the future and it will slowly diminish their English. Yet, a small number of respondents are confident that they will keep using English to preserve it even in a longer term. In accordance to this finding, in her study on bilingualism, Rahayu (2016) found that attitude is an individual choice, regardless of any supports from environment and community, two siblings had different attitude towards their L1, which resulted in different level of proficiency. Similarly, the respondents' individual choice (affective domain) also dominates the realm of language maintenance.

Lastly, this study has several limitations. Firstly, this study only uses a survey as the source of data and does not use proficiency tests to measure the improvements of English proficiency during and after study abroad period. Although this does not affect the findings of this study because the purpose is to examine the alumni's perception, future studies on study abroad could consider using tests as in many standardized exams (IELTS, TOEFL, etc) for the measurement at the beginning, during and at the end of the study so that the improvement of English could be clearly seen and proven.

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