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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY AS A LANGUAGE LEARNING ECOLOGY: REVISITING AND REVISING INFLUENTIAL VARIABLES

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This study revisits and revises Pérez Vidal's (2014) framework of variables influencing language learning during study abroad. Drawing on an ecological perspective of language learning (van Lier, 2010) and recent empirical research, it proposes a dynamic framework of international student mobility that integrates newly salient variables. The revised framework emphasises the interdependence of contextual, individual, programmatic, and social dimensions.

Key words: ecological framework, influencing variables, international student mobility, language learning, study abroad

1. Introduction

International student mobility (ISM) has long been considered a rich context for foreign language learning, offering learners opportunities to use the target language in socially and culturally authentic environments. While intuitively associated with language gains, ISM experiences are highly heterogeneous, and research has revealed mixed results regarding their impact on linguistic development, with outcomes varying across linguistic domains, learner characteristics, programme features, and study contexts (Tseng et al., 2021; Varela, 2017; Xu, 2019; Yang, 2016). Growing evidence shows that ISM contexts are not static backdrops but are actively shaped by learners' goals, agency, and social positioning (Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Kinginger, 2013b). Language development during ISM depends not only on the quantity of exposure or interaction, but also on the perceived quality and personal meaning of these experiences, filtered through learners' identities, motivations, and emotional investments (Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2008). Rather than viewing learners merely as cognitive processors of linguistic input, current research increasingly positions them as whole individuals, whose language learning is inseparable from their affective, social, and personal trajectories (Coleman, 2013; Isabelli-García et al., 2018;

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Kinginger, 2013a). This shift in perspective has directed attention toward the dynamic interplay of contextual, social, and individual factors, and underscores the need for more integrative and nuanced conceptual models.

A key conceptual framework for understanding language acquisition in study abroad contexts was proposed by Pérez Vidal (2014), who categorized influential variables into three broad groups: macro-level variables (linguistic and sociocultural exposure), micro-level variables (individual learner differences), and programme-related variables (institutional and structural features). This paper revisits and revises Pérez Vidal's framework through a critical synthesis of recent research, extending its original scope to better account for contemporary perspectives on learner identity, agency, and the social embeddedness of language learning. Drawing on the ecological approach (van Lier, 2010), the revised model aims to provide a more dynamic and integrated understanding of the factors shaping language development during ISM.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews key theoretical and empirical foundations, including research on ISM and language learning, the ecological approach, and Pérez Vidal's original framework. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents and discusses the revisited framework. Section 5 offers concluding reflections, and Section 6 explores implications and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Diversification of international student mobility

The internationalization of higher education has contributed to increasing diversification in the forms and contexts of ISM. Although ISM now encompasses a range of educational experiences, much of the research on language learning has traditionally focused on traditional study abroad (SA), in which students undertake part of their education in a country where the target language is the official or majority language (Borràs, 2024; Köylü, 2021). Consequently, influential theoretical frameworks, including that proposed by Pérez Vidal (2014), were developed primarily with this form of mobility in mind.

One important manifestation of this diversification has been the rapid expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI), whereby academic programmes are delivered in English in countries where English is not the majority first language (Macaro, 2018; Rose et al., 2023). The expansion of EMI has also contributed to the growing prominence of English as a Lingua Franca Study Abroad (ELFSA), in which English

serves as the principal language of academic and social interaction among multilingual groups of international students, despite not being the local language (Borràs, 2024; Köylü, 2021). Unlike traditional SA, where students are typically expected to engage extensively with the host language, ELFSA is characterised by multilingual communicative practices and more complex linguistic ecologies.

ELFSA has become particularly common among students from non-language disciplines, who often select mobility programmes based on academic opportunities rather than the language spoken in the host country and may approach language learning differently, often with lower initial investment or fewer explicit expectations (Marinov & Pavičić Takač, 2019). While these settings may provide fewer opportunities to interact in the local language, research suggests that they nevertheless support meaningful language and intercultural development (Heinzmann et al., 2024). Studies have reported gains in lexical development (Borràs, 2024; Köylü, 2021; Llanes et al., 2016), continued development of additional languages alongside English (Borràs, 2024), and affective benefits such as reduced language anxiety and increased learner engagement (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022). These findings indicate that language learning remains an important outcome even in mobility contexts where the target language is not the primary language of communication.

At the same time, opportunities for international learning have expanded beyond physical mobility. Internationalisation at Home (IaH) seeks to provide international and intercultural learning experiences within students' home institutions, thereby increasing access to international education for those unable or unwilling to study abroad (Teichler, 2017). One common form of IaH is telecollaboration, or virtual exchange, through which students from different institutions collaborate online in multilingual and intercultural learning environments (Lee & Song, 2019). Such initiatives gained particular prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, when virtual exchanges enabled international collaboration despite severe restrictions on physical mobility (Reynolds, 2022). As summarised by Soulé et al. (2025), these initiatives aim to foster intercultural competence, promote international collaboration, strengthen transferable skills, encourage pedagogical innovation, and support learner autonomy.

These developments illustrate that ISM is no longer synonymous with traditional SA but encompasses a broader range of educational contexts characterised by different patterns of language use, social interaction, and intercultural engagement. Recognising this diversification provides a rationale for reconsidering existing models of language learning during mobility. Accordingly, the present paper adopts the

broader term international student mobility (ISM) when discussing the revised ecological framework, while retaining the term study abroad when referring to earlier literature and to Pérez Vidal's (2014) original framework.

2.2. Language learning during international student mobility

Research on language learning during ISM has generated a substantial body of work, much of which has examined traditional SA contexts. This section reviews key findings from meta-analytic studies on the effectiveness of SA and the factors shaping language learning outcomes. Meta-analytic research consistently shows that SA supports L2 development, although outcomes vary depending on programmatic, contextual, and learner-related factors. While each study approaches the question from a different perspective, a common finding emerges: SA generally supports language learning, but the benefits are not uniformly predictable.

Yang (2016) reported particularly strong gains in oral fluency and vocabulary, following SA programmes. Interestingly, this study found that short-term programmes produced larger effect sizes than longer ones. While focused primarily on language development, Yang also observed a shift in SA research interests from purely linguistic measures to broader outcomes and moderating factors such as motivation, learner beliefs, and intercultural competence. Varela (2017) moved beyond language proficiency by adopting a three-part framework of learning outcomes, finding the strongest gains in cognitive learning, followed by affective changes and more modest behavioural improvements. Among four programme features analysed, immersion type and sojourn length most strongly influenced outcomes. Xu (2019) focused on linguistic complexity, finding gains in oral over written complexity, and in lexical over syntactic complexity. Moderator analyses showed stronger benefits for intermediate learners and those enrolled in formal language courses abroad. Tseng et al. (2021) confirmed speaking as the most improved skill, followed by listening, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing. Their meta-analysis also examined moderators such as programme duration, proficiency level, target language, residence type, programme content, and pre-departure instruction. Lower-proficiency learners benefited most when formal instruction was combined with immersive living (e.g., host families). In contrast, age, pre-programme training, and domestic instruction length had no significant effect. More variance was explained between studies than within, pointing to differences in how programmes and learner characteristics were defined and measured. Together, these meta-analyses confirm that study abroad can meaningfully

enhance L2 development but the effectiveness depends on a combination of individual and context-specific features.

These findings highlight the complexity of SA learning environments and suggest that language development cannot be explained solely through exposure to the target language. Rather, outcomes emerge from the interaction of multiple learner, contextual, and programmatic variables. The following section therefore considers language learning from an ecological perspective, which offers a conceptual framework for understanding how these interacting influences shape language development during study abroad.

2.3. Language learning as an ecological process

The ecological perspective in language learning, most prominently articulated by van Lier (2010), shifts the analytical focus from isolated variables to the relationships between learners and the environments in which they act. In this view, language learning is not merely the acquisition of linguistic forms but a relational process shaped by affordances, understood as opportunities for action as perceived by the learner, and by constraints that limit access to participation and meaningful language use (Soulé et al., 2023). This ecological orientation resonates with Ushioda's (2015) call for context-sensitive approaches that recognize the mutual constitution of person and environment, particularly in relation to motivation and agency. Similarly, Duff (2019) emphasizes the social dimensions of SA, highlighting how interactional competence and identity evolve within, and in response to, communities of practice. Within study abroad research, this ecological perspective has been most clearly articulated in Pérez Vidal's (2014) tripartite framework (Figure 1), which integrates multiple dimensions of the SA environment and highlights the interaction between learner characteristics, learning contexts, and linguistic outcomes. Over the past decade, however, the field has expanded considerably. New areas of inquiry have emerged, including the role of social networks (Paradowski et al., 2024), identity development (Beaven & Conacher, 2021; Benson et al., 2013), English as a lingua franca study abroad (ELFSA) contexts (Borràs, 2024), and forms of internationalization beyond physical mobility (Soulé et al., 2025). As a result, additional influences on language learning during study abroad have received increasing scholarly attention.

In light of these developments, revisiting Pérez Vidal's framework is not intended as a rejection of the model but rather as a continuation of the ecological perspective it introduced. By reconsidering the framework in relation to recent research, the

present paper seeks to extend its explanatory scope and offer a fuller account of the dynamic learner–environment interactions shaping language development in contemporary ISM contexts.

2.4. Overview of the Pérez Vidal's framework

Pérez Vidal's (2014) foundational framework for analysing the factors influencing language development in SA contexts categorises variables into three groups: macro-level, micro-level, and programme-related. This categorisation has served as a valuable tool for organizing a complex field and continues to inform much of the empirical work in SA research.

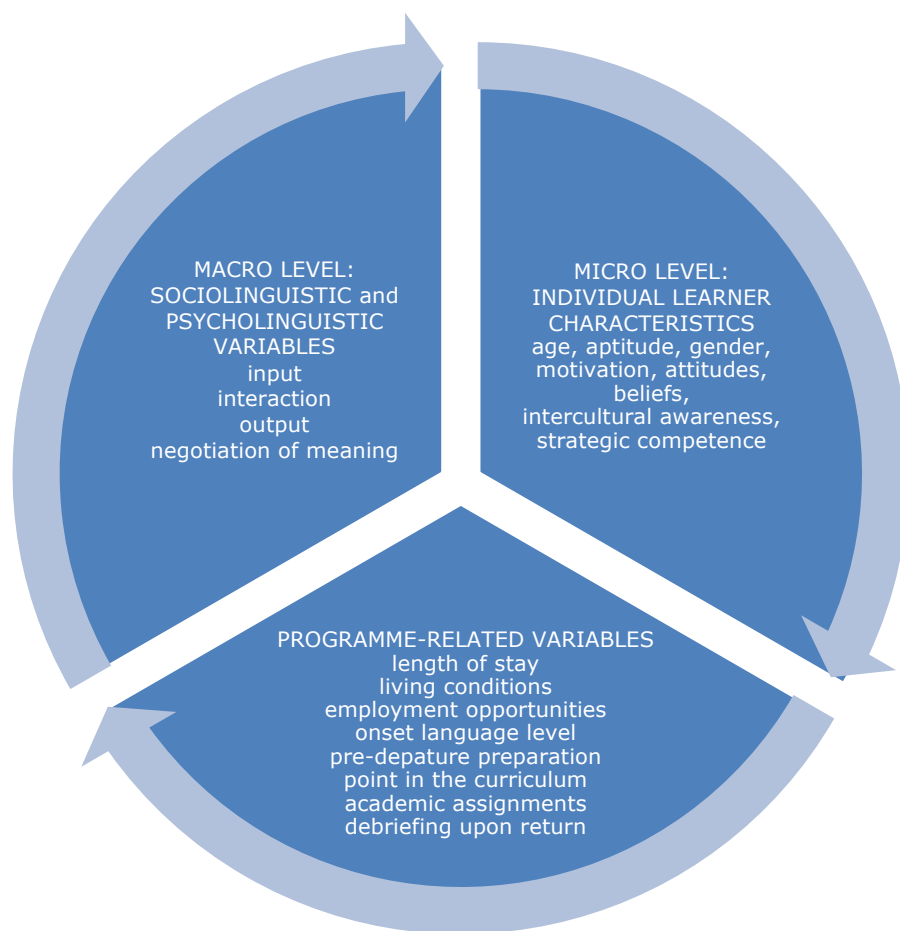


Figure 1 Three groups of contextual factors in ISM that may influence language learning outcomes, adapted from Pérez Vidal (2014, p. 22).

2.4.1. Macro-level variables

These refer to characteristics of the ISM environment that shape learners' communicative affordances, including opportunities for input, interaction, output, and

negotiation of meaning. Grounded in interactionist theories of second language acquisition (Long, 1996; Swain, 1995), this category highlights the importance of communicative engagement in creating conditions for language development . However, not all learners access these affordances equally, as this may be influenced by a wide range of other variables within the framework.

2.4.2. Micro-level variables

Micro-level variables concern individual learner characteristics that mediate how students engage with and benefit from SA experiences. Research has explored a wide range of individual differences, including age, gender, and motivation (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Allen, 2010), learner beliefs (Trenchs-Parera & Juan-Garau, 2014), strategic competence and strategic behaviour (Briggs, 2016; Wang, 2015), and intercultural competence (Sobkowiak, 2019). While findings vary across contexts and studies, this body of work underscores the importance of learner-internal variables in shaping SA outcomes.

2.4.3. Programme-related variables

Programme-related variables refer to the structural and contextual features of ISM programmes that shape learners' access to linguistic input and participation in academic and social life. These factors mediate access to communicative affordances and influence learner engagement abroad. Research has examined a range of programme characteristics, including length of stay (Briggs, 2015; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), accommodation (Kinging, 2013; Kinginger & Wu, 2018), and curricular integration through pre-departure preparation, structured reflection, and post-return debriefing (Allen, 2013; Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014). While findings vary across contexts and programme designs, this body of research highlights the important role of programme-related variables in shaping language learning during ISM.

3. Methodological approach

This paper adopts a conceptual-analytical approach grounded in a critical re-examination of Pérez Vidal's (2014) tripartite framework for SA language learning. The goal is to offer a theoretically and empirically informed synthesis that reflects emerging patterns, conceptual tensions, and underexplored dimensions of language learning during ISM, drawing on an extensive body of interdisciplinary research in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and international education.

The literature was selected purposively, based on the author’s sustained engagement with the field and guided by analytical needs identified during the development of the revised framework. Studies were retrieved through targeted searches in academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, Scopus, publisher archives), using keywords related to key dimensions of SA research (e.g., “language identity in SA,” “mobility programmes and language development,” “social networks abroad”, etc.). Particular attention was given to research published since the introduction of Pérez Vidal’s (2014) framework, as well as to studies that introduce new variables or perspectives relevant to ecological approaches to language learning. The selection therefore focused on contributions that illuminate dimensions of language learning during ISM that have received increased scholarly attention in recent years. While SA research often distinguishes between different regional traditions and programme structures, particularly between North American and European mobility contexts (e.g., Kinginger, 2015; Isabelli-García et al., 2018), the present paper does not seek to compare specific geographical settings. Instead, the aim is to identify influential variables shaping language learning across diverse ISM contexts. For this reason, the literature considered includes studies conducted in a range of contexts without restricting the analysis to particular sending or receiving countries or target languages. While the review is not intended to be exhaustive, the aim is to capture representative developments in the field and to map these contributions onto the original framework in order to propose a theoretically informed revision of its key variables. Table 1 summarises the principal findings of the reviewed studies that informed the revision of Pérez Vidal's (2014) framework. It is intended to provide an overview of the evidence base underpinning the revised framework rather than a comprehensive summary of the individual studies.

Table 1: Key Findings from the Literature Review Informing the Revision of Pérez Vidal's (2014) Framework

Study	Key insight from study
Gil (2025)	Typological similarity does not uniformly facilitate language learning and may in some cases hinder development
Marinov Vranješ & Pavičić Takać (2025)	Perceived typological proximity can increase linguistic confidence and engagement
Marinov et al. (2021); Soulé et al. (2023)	Contextual factors shape language behaviour and interaction, potentially overriding the influence of typological proximity

Study	Key insight from study
Kmiotek-Meier & Powell (2023); Ovchinnikova et al. (2022)	Linguistic proximity influences students' destination choices in mobility contexts
Leonard & Shea (2017)	Higher initial proficiency may support language development
Hessel (2017)	Lower-proficiency learners may benefit more from input exposure
Llanes (2019); Tseng et al. (2021)	Evidence shows no consistent relationship between initial proficiency and language gains
McManus et al. (2020)	The interaction between proficiency and language development remains underexplored
Benson et al. (2013)	Language learning is closely linked to identity development
Beaven & Conacher (2021)	Plurilingual identity reflects dynamic, integrated linguistic repertoires, extending beyond single-language identity models
Mitchell et al. (2021)	Identity dimensions overlap and evolve dynamically in learners' narratives
Marinov et al. (2021); Soulé et al. (2023)	Plurilingual identity is shaped by contextual, relational, and institutional factors
Ożańska-Ponikwia & Dewaele (2012); Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016)	Personality traits influence communicative behaviour and may evolve through SA experiences
Butković et al. (2022)	Personality traits influence willingness to engage in SA
Beattie (2014); Rubaii, Appe & Stamp (2015)	Participation in SA is shaped by programme structure, with compulsory and optional models influencing uptake differently
Kmiotek-Meier & Powell (2022)	Students respond differently to compulsory mobility, reflecting diverse motivations and constraints
Petzold & Peter (2015)	Perceived social norms can make optional mobility function as de facto compulsory participation
Köylü (2021)	English functions as a lingua franca in linguistically diverse SA contexts
Marinov & Pavičić Takač (2019)	Students in ELFSA contexts may have different expectations and levels of engagement with language learning
Heinzmann et al. (2024); Marinov et al. (2021)	ELFSA contexts support plurilingual and intercultural competence development

Study	Key insight from study
Llanes et al. (2016); Borràs (2024)	ELFSA contexts can support linguistic development, including lexical complexity and plurilingual gains
Köylü & Tracy-Ventura (2022)	ELFSA contexts may reduce anxiety and increase engagement
Teichler (2017)	Internationalisation at Home is conceptualised as a form of virtual mobility within higher education
Lee & Song (2019); Reynolds (2022)	Telecollaboration enables international interaction without physical mobility and became a key form of exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic
Gosling & Yang (2015); Karimova et al. (2023)	Empirical studies show that IaH and telecollaboration can support intercultural competence and engagement, while also presenting challenges such as language barriers, uneven participation, and pedagogical mismatches
Soulé et al. (2025)	A synthesis of IaH research highlights a broad range of benefits and recurring challenges, as well as the uneven treatment of language-related outcomes
McManus et al. (2014); Mitchell et al. (2017)	Social relationships and interaction patterns have long been recognised as influencing language development in SA
Senci et al. (2022); Schoe et al. (2022)	Social networks abroad are shaped by homophily, with learners often forming ties with co-nationals or similar peers
Mas-Alcolea & Purroy (2021); Mendoza et al. (2021)	The composition of social networks influences learning opportunities, with both limitations of co-national ties and benefits of diverse networks
Paradowski et al. (2021, 2024)	More recent studies using social network analysis show that network structure and interaction quality, rather than network size alone, predict language development outcomes

4. Findings and discussion: Revisiting and expanding the framework

While Pérez Vidal's tripartite framework has served as a valuable foundation for conceptualizing language development in SA, evolving research and theoretical advances point to the need for a more nuanced, dynamic model. Drawing on ecological perspectives of language learning (van Lier, 2010; Ushioda, 2015), this revised framework repositions and expands key variables to better capture the complexity of contemporary ISM contexts. These conceptual adjustments are shown in Figure 2, with the variable in blue indicating a reclassified element, and those in red representing newly introduced variables. The revision retains the original three categories and adds social networks as a fourth, standalone category positioned centrally within the

framework. An overview of the studies informing these revisions and their respective contributions is provided in Table 1.

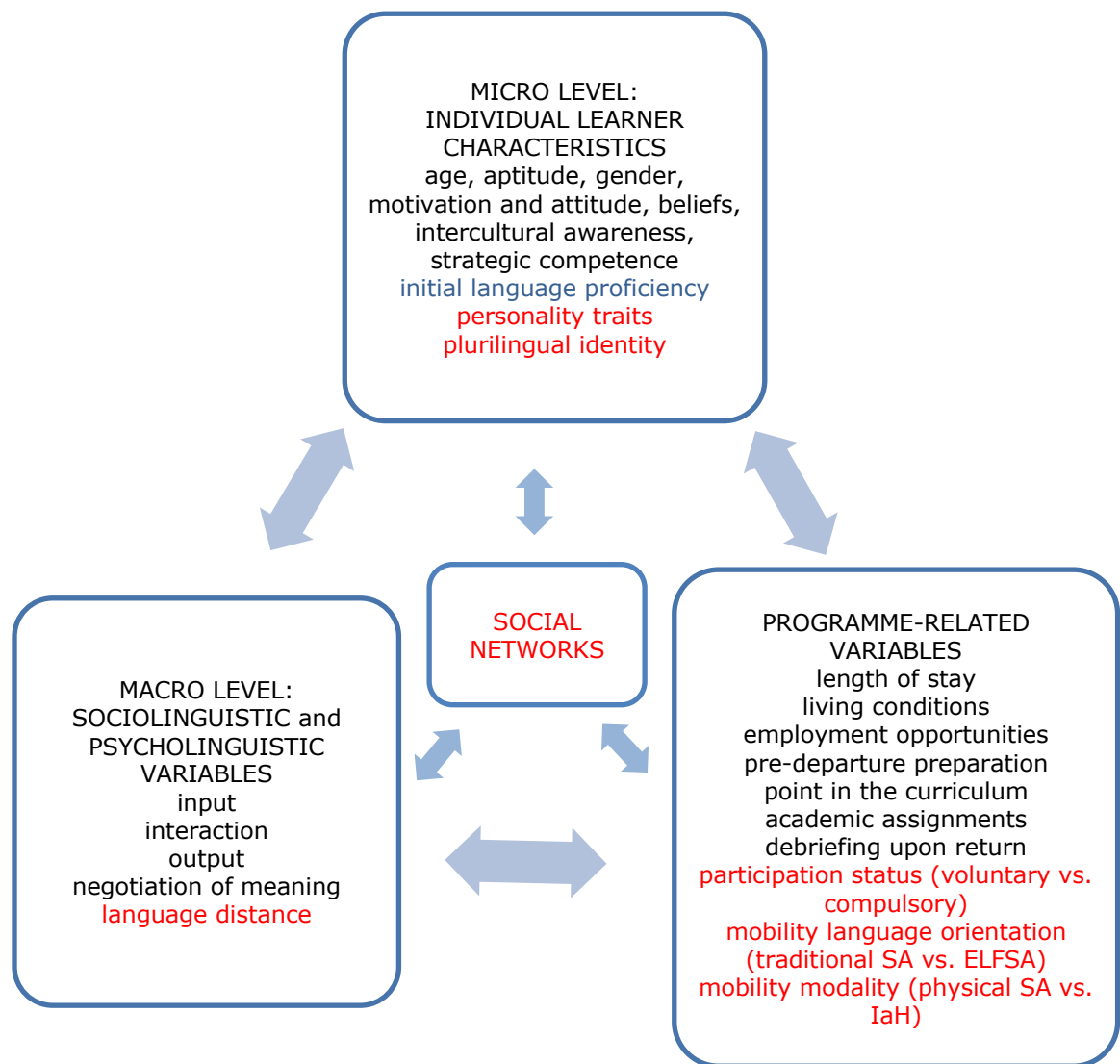


Figure 2 Updated representation of variables that may influence language learning outcomes in ISM contexts, adapted from Pérez Vidal (2014, p. 22)

4.1. Macro-level

Language distance. Grounded in the concept of typological similarity and dissimilarity between learners' known languages and the host language (Gil, 2025), the variable of language distance captures how structural proximity or distance may influence learners' engagement, confidence, or access to affordances during ISM.

While macro-level constructs in SA research have traditionally focused on input, interaction, output, and negotiation of meaning, language distance offers a more nuanced lens for understanding these processes. It influences how learners perceive and process input, participate in interaction, produce output, and engage in communication, intersecting meaningfully with each of the core categories.

Although typological similarity has traditionally been assumed to facilitate L2 acquisition, recent research suggests that its effects are more complex than previously assumed, and that linguistic proximity may not always support, and may sometimes even hinder, language learning (Alexopoulou & Gil, 2026; Gil, 2025). Yet SA research reveals a more complex picture: learners often perceive typological proximity as fostering linguistic and cultural familiarity, which can enhance engagement and self-efficacy (Marinov Vranješ & Pavičić Takač, 2025). However, this perceived advantage does not always translate into communicative ease, as contextual factors, such as sociopolitical dynamics or group-based language preferences, can override typological proximity (Marinov et al., 2021; Soulé et al., 2023), highlighting the subjective and situated nature of learners' responses to language similarity.

The macro-level relevance of language distance is further underscored by studies showing its influence on destination choices. Learners often prefer host countries where the local language is typologically closer to their L1 or other previously acquired languages, seeking to ease communication or enhance the perceived value of the experience (Kmiotek-Meier & Powell, 2023; Ovchinnikova et al., 2022). While English continues to serve as a lingua franca across disciplines (Mitchell & Güvendir, 2021), language-related considerations may also shape mobility decisions, including learners' linguistic profiles, learning goals, and perceived value of different language environments. For this reason, language distance warrants explicit recognition as a macro-level construct within the revised framework.

4.2. Micro-level variables: individual differences

The revised framework introduces three changes to the micro-level category: the reclassification of initial language proficiency and the addition of plurilingual identity and personality traits.

Reclassification of initial language proficiency. Learners enter ISM with varying levels of language proficiency, and this variability has been linked to different developmental outcomes. Some evidence suggests that higher initial proficiency supports better gains (Leonard & Shea, 2017), while other studies report greater gains

among lower-proficiency learners due to their heightened responsiveness to input (Hessel, 2017). Still, some research finds no clear relationship between initial proficiency and outcomes (Llanes, 2019). Tseng et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis supports this variability, showing strong gains across all levels with no consistent advantage. While proficiency explained little variation within individual studies, it accounted for significant variance across studies, underscoring its context-dependent influence. As argued by McManus et al. (2020), the interaction between initial proficiency and the subsequent language gains remains underexplored and warrants further investigation.

Plurilingual identity. Plurilingual identity is introduced as an individual difference variable, building on Benson et al.'s (2013) model of second language identity, which foregrounds language as central to identity development and conceptualises learning outcomes along a continuum from L2 proficiency to linguistic self-concept and personal competence. Beaven and Conacher (2021) propose extending such models to include plurilingual identity, acknowledging that many SA participants possess complex linguistic repertoires, move across diverse language environments, and draw on varied language learning histories in shaping their identities. This perspective aligns with the Council of Europe's (2020) view of plurilingualism, as a unified, dynamic system of linguistic resources. Empirical research supports the complexity of plurilingual identity development. Mitchell et al. (2021) observed overlaps among Benson et al.'s outcome dimensions in learners' narratives, reflecting the fluidity of identity construction. Marinov et al. (2021) and Soulé et al. (2023) further show how plurilingual identity is shaped by contextual and relational factors, including institutional, social, and linguistic hierarchies.

Personality traits. This variable has been explored in relation to SA through several lenses. One line of research examines how certain traits facilitate meaningful L2 use in real-life contexts. Ożańska-Ponikwia and Dewaele (2012) found that individuals high in openness and self-esteem were more likely to seek out communicative opportunities, driven by curiosity and confidence. They also suggest that personality may not only shape language use, but evolve through it. This possibility is echoed by Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016), whose participants frequently reported becoming more emotionally stable and self-confident after SA, despite most traits remaining stable overall. A third research strand explores how personality influences SA intentions. Butković et al. (2022) found that traits such as adventurousness (a facet of openness) and the motivational dimension of cultural intelligence were positively associated with learners' willingness to engage in SA

experiences, highlighting the role of personality-driven curiosity and cross-cultural orientation.

4.3. Programme-related variables

The revised framework introduces three additions to the programme-related category, each reflecting evolving institutional practices and learner pathways: participation status, mobility language orientation, and mobility modality.

Participation status. This variable refers to whether ISM is compulsory or optional within a given curriculum. This distinction may shape students' motivation, expectations, and engagement with linguistic, academic and social opportunities. It is plausible that learners who voluntarily opt into ISM differ from those participating in compulsory programmes in these respects, although this possibility remains largely underexamined in research on ISM.

In some programmes, particularly in philological disciplines, SA is a compulsory component (Beattie, 2014), while in others it is optional and extracurricular. However, availability alone does not guarantee uptake: when SA is optional, institutional provision may not align with student interest, leading to lower participation than expected (Rubaii, Appe & Stamp, 2015). Even where mobility is mandated, as in Luxembourg, student responses vary: some embrace the opportunity, while others express frustration over limited choice and logistical burdens (Kmiotek-Meier & Powell, 2022).

Adding further nuance, perceived social norms often blur the lines between optional and required mobility. Petzold and Peter (2015) found that even when SA is not compulsory, students may act as though it were compulsory, influenced by disciplinary culture, peer networks, and prior exposure to mobility. Notably, perceived normative pressure predicted intention to go abroad more strongly than employability or personal interest. These findings suggest that participation status is shaped not only by curriculum design, but also by social and cultural dynamics. This broader institutional perspective also helps contextualise the rise of ELFSA, particularly in non-language disciplines where ISM may be required or strongly encouraged, even when language learning is not the central objective.

Mobility language orientation. This variable refers to the dominant linguistic orientation of the mobility environment, distinguishing between contexts where learning takes place primarily through the host language (traditional SA) and those where a shared lingua franca, most commonly English (ELFSA), serves as the principal

language of academic and social interaction. Recognising mobility language orientation as an influencing variable helps explain variation in exposure, interaction, affect, engagement, and developmental pathways across different forms of ISM. This variable intersects both programme-related and macro-level categories. At the macro level, it reflects the sociolinguistic conditions of the mobility context, particularly the nature and complexity of language input and interaction available beyond the classroom. At the programme level, students' subject specialisation often shapes the choice of host country and, consequently, the linguistic environment in which mobility takes place. While mobility language orientation therefore spans both levels, its primary source lies in the structural and curricular characteristics of students' degree programmes, which justifies its positioning as a programme-related variable in the revised framework.

Mobility modality. This variable refers to the form through which ISM is experienced, distinguishing between physical mobility and mobility that takes place without physical travel, such as IaH. Recognising mobility modality as an influencing variable acknowledges that these forms of mobility provide different opportunities for language use, intercultural interaction, and learning, which may shape students' experiences and developmental outcomes.

Empirical research highlights both the potential and the challenges of IaH. Karimova et al. (2023) found that linguistically and culturally diverse exchanges can promote linguocultural competence and intercultural awareness, but may also involve initial discomfort and language barriers. Similarly, Gosling and Yang (2015) reported that English-medium collaboration improved classroom interaction and motivation, yet sometimes reinforced participation imbalances and pedagogical mismatches. Expanding the perspective, Soulé et al. (2025) identified common benefits across IaH programmes, including increased intercultural sensitivity, improved collaboration, enhanced digital literacy, and, in some cases, language gains and employability. At the same time, they noted recurring challenges such as technical barriers, intercultural misunderstandings, uneven engagement, and pedagogical difficulties. As reported in Soulé et al.'s (2025) review, language-related outcomes received only limited attention. Among the studies included in the synthesis, only one identified language skills as a learning outcome, whereas a few others discussed challenges associated with differing levels of English proficiency. This fragmented treatment suggests that the role of language in IaH is under-researched. Given the growing use of English-medium instruction and the increasing linguistic diversity of student populations,

further investigation into how language mediates access, engagement, and learning outcomes in IaH settings is both necessary and timely.

4.4. Social networks

A final and conceptually significant addition to the revised framework is the explicit inclusion of social networks as a central variable. This reflects a growing body of empirical research highlighting their central role in shaping language development during SA.

Learners' social ties abroad are shaped by a complex interplay of individual dispositions and contextual conditions. Many report difficulties connecting with host nationals and instead gravitate towards co-nationals or international peers (Senci et al., 2022). This pattern illustrates the principle of homophily, i.e. the preference to associate with others who share similar linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Schoe et al., 2022). While such networks provide important emotional and practical support, overreliance on familiar ties may reduce opportunities to engage with the host language and culture (Mas-Alcolea & Purroy, 2021). At the same time, recent scholarship challenges the assumption that host-national ties are inherently more beneficial. Diverse networks, including co-national and international peers, can also support meaningful interaction and learning (Mendoza et al., 2021). Mendoza et al. (2021) argue that privileging local contacts risks reifying a narrow ideal of SA while overlooking students' agentic, strategic network-building. What ultimately matters is not the category of interlocutor, but the quality, diversity, and meaningfulness of the relationships formed.

While earlier studies recognised the role of social relationships in shaping L2 development (McManus et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017), few operationalised network structures in a dynamic or quantifiable way. Addressing this gap, Paradowski et al. (2021) applied Social Network Analysis (SNA) to examine individual- and group-level interaction patterns among SA learners. Their findings showed that learners with more frequent outgoing target-language interactions made greater progress, while popularity within all-language networks was negatively associated with development. These results suggest that network structure, rather than general sociability, plays a more decisive role in language development. Building on this, Paradowski et al. (2024) conducted a longitudinal study that tracked peer interaction dynamics and linked them to learners' L2 trajectories and found that the quality and mutuality of peer engagement, rather than network size alone, better predicted sustained progress.

Together, these studies highlight the dynamic role of social networks mediating language development during SA. Their inclusion in the revised framework reflects their overarching influence: social networks may shape individual factors such as identity and motivation, are conditioned by programme features like housing and curriculum, and are embedded within broader macro-level linguistic and socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, these variables reciprocally influence the structure, quality, and developmental potential of students' networks.

5. Conclusion and implications

This paper has proposed a revised framework for understanding language learning within ISM, grounded in ecological theory and recent empirical developments. Building on Pérez Vidal's foundational model, the revised framework reinforces its dynamic orientation by reclassifying initial language proficiency and introducing seven additional variables: language distance, personality traits, plurilingual identity, participation status, mobility language orientation, mobility modality and social networks. It also places greater emphasis on the interdependence among all variables. This is particularly evident in the inclusion of social networks as a central component, which underscores a relational view of learning, in which opportunities and constraints emerge through learners' engagement with diverse environments and communities.

Although rooted in SA research, the framework is designed to encompass other forms of internationalised learning, including ELFSA and IaH. Accordingly, the revised framework adopts ISM as its overarching conceptual lense, while retaining the term SA when referring to Pérez Vidal's original framework and the existing empirical literature. While virtual exchange and home-based programmes do not involve geographical relocation, they have been conceptualised under the umbrella of virtual mobility, sharing key features with SA, such as intercultural engagement, language exposure, and identity negotiation. ISM thus offers a more inclusive conceptual lens for analysing today's diversified mobility landscape.

Rather than serving as a universal model, the framework is intended as a flexible tool for researchers and practitioners. It invites continued exploration of how learners engage with diverse linguistic and cultural settings, and how their trajectories are shaped by the dynamic interplay of multiple variables.

From a practical perspective, the framework offers a valuable tool for designing more nuanced SA studies that account for learner diversity, programme structure, and social embeddedness. It may also guide institutional decision-making related to

curriculum design, participant preparation, and support for international mobility. At a policy level, distinguishing between programme types (e.g., traditional SA vs. ELFSA) and participation models (e.g., optional vs. mandatory) can promote more equitable and responsive learning environments by aligning programme design and support with learners' varied linguistic profiles, motivations, and resources.

6. Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. The selection of literature was purposive and guided by the analytical aims of the paper rather than by a systematic review protocol. While efforts were made to include representative and influential contributions, this approach may have introduced selection bias and may not fully capture the breadth of research across all geographical and educational contexts. In addition, the proposed revision is based on a conceptual-analytical synthesis rather than empirical validation. As such, the framework should be understood as a theoretically informed model that invites further empirical testing and refinement across diverse international mobility contexts.

In light of these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge. First, at the methodological level, future research could build on this work by adopting more systematic and transparent approaches to literature selection and synthesis, as well as by empirically testing the proposed framework across diverse contexts. Second, at the level of research topics, several areas warrant further investigation. Participation status remains underexplored in relation to learners' engagement and outcomes. More attention is also needed to how social networks form, evolve, and mediate access to linguistic affordances across different types of programmes. The rise of ELFSA contexts invites investigation into how such environments shape not only linguistic development but also the social, academic, and affective dimensions of mobility. IaH presents a promising research direction, particularly given the lack of systematic attention to the role of language within these programmes. Finally, the framework itself should be seen as dynamic—open to refinement in response to emerging empirical evidence and evolving mobility practices.

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