

The Year Abroad experience from the personal perspective of two UK language undergraduates in Italy: affective challenges, coping strategies and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Abstract

Study Abroad (SA) can be a challenging experience in many ways. Despite the considerable body of research, SA studies have traditionally had a linguistic focus, concentrating on a limited range of SA contexts (2013b) and neglecting the investigation of the affective aspects of SA experiences until recently (Aragão, 2011). By having a holistic and relational approach, I view my participants as 'whole people-in-context' (Coleman, 2013; Ushioda, 2009), moving away from the limiting and disembodied conceptualisation of sojourners, and broadening my focus beyond the linguistic element of SA.

This thesis explores the Year Abroad (YA) experiences of two UK language undergraduates who went to Italy as teaching assistants during the 2019/2020 academic year. The main focus of this qualitative longitudinal case study is on the affective challenges the participants faced during their months in the host country, and the coping strategies they adopted in response to such challenges. A particularly under-researched aspect this thesis investigates is the impact that pre-departure beliefs can have on the way the YA experiences are perceived and the consequent implications this can have for sojourners and institutions. Rich and in-depth data was collected over the course of 14 months via an initial questionnaire, three semi-structured interviews at different stages, and more frequent exchanges via messages or video calls ('the Buddy System'). As my research was caught in the middle of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, its effects are interwoven in this thesis.

My participants' experiences revealed the ongoing development of their beliefs and identity, alongside their troubled language journeys, also providing unique insights into the impact the pandemic had on their YA experience. By looking at the findings through the framework of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and complementing it with a holistic and ecological approach to my participants' accounts, my research offers a new lens for the investigation of SA experiences and proposes a re-conceptualisation of 'culture shock' and a new model of liquid acculturation (Dervin, 2011).

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List of Abbreviations

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institutions

IWLP: Institution-Wide Language Programmes

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

MFL: Modern Foreign Languages

NC: National Curriculum

SA: Study Abroad

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

TA: Teaching Assistant

TL: Target Language

YA: Year Abroad

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis explores the personal experiences of two UK language undergraduates during their Year Abroad (YA) in Italy in the academic year 2019/2020. My focus is on the affective challenges they experienced during their months abroad and the coping strategies they implemented to overcome them. I also look into how pre-departure beliefs and experiences may impact on the sojourners' perceptions and coping mechanism selection during their time abroad. In this chapter I clarify my personal and academic rationale for this research, present its background and my research aims, as well as providing the working definition of Study Abroad (SA) that I use in this thesis. It is important to note that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic seeped through every aspect of my research, and this will be reflected in the unfolding of this thesis. Just as the pandemic became an integral part of my participants' YA, it also represents a leitmotif in this thesis and a thread that connects all of its chapters.

1.1 Research Rationale

When I was 12 my new school offered the option for students to go on a two-week long summer study holiday in the UK. After exhausting my parents with my begging, I convinced them to let me go on my first trip abroad without them. I was shy and did not know any of the other students who came with me to that summer school, but I had always loved English in an inexplicable, all-encompassing way and my shyness took second place when I was given the chance to visit England. I do not remember much about that trip, but I know I tried to spend most of my time with students of other nationalities or the English staff at the school rather than the other Italians. I was determined to practise my English as much as possible, learn about life in England and make the most of every excursion we had, almost disconnecting from anything Italian. One memory I do have of that trip, and one which my parents never fail to remind me of, is that when I came back home I told them that I wanted to go and live in the UK forever. Needless to say, I went on those summer trips every single year; first as a student and then I was asked to work for the UK company organising those trips, which became my summer job from 2012 until 2018. In the meantime, shortly after finishing my BA and exactly ten years after my first visit to England, I fulfilled my dream of moving to the UK.

That very first trip to the UK laid the foundation for the events that led to this research. Indeed, during my three years of BA in Interpreting and Translation, I deliberately never applied for any study abroad opportunities. I had my summer job in England and my belief was that 'if you go on a study abroad, you delay your graduation by one year' and I was eager to move to the UK. This belief was based on what I had heard from older students and seen from some of my classmates returning from study abroad. Not all had to postpone their graduations and most of them – yet not all – were extremely happy with their experience, but I did not want to risk delaying my dream life in the UK. I have never regretted not going on a study abroad as part of my degree, but it meant that I never experienced it from that particular perspective, which later became my research focus.

The specific idea for this thesis developed as a result of my teaching experience as a lector of Italian between 2015 and 2018. My Italian university had a partnership with the University of Hull, and I was sent to teach Italian and Interpreting there for the standard period of three academic years. I had classes with all levels of undergraduates and, as I spoke with the cohorts of students returning from their study abroad, every year I noticed many discrepancies in their overall satisfaction with the experience. Some students described it as an incredible time both for their language learning and their personal development; they seemed more confident, fluent, and had a renewed passion for the language and engagement in class. Others instead had very negative opinions and memories about it and seemed to have lost interest in the language and almost regressed in their proficiency. These different perspectives impacted on the students' interactions inside and outside the classroom and on their overall satisfaction with the course, triggering my idea for this research.

I could not understand what made such a difference in the students' experience, especially since I discovered – with great surprise – that language students had a whole year abroad included in their degree. This dispelled my fear that study abroad would make one 'lose a year' in one's studies and made it even harder for me to understand how an experience abroad in a country where you can practise a language you are studying could be bad. I had always seen my summer study trips as the best weeks of the year; therefore, my prior experiences and beliefs filtered my understanding of the multiplicity of the outcomes of study abroad. On the other hand, even in my idyllic summers in the UK, I had noticed

that some students were less excited than others and some seemed to be there more for the social side of the trip than for the educational one and were not always satisfied. Therefore, although I had never been on a study abroad during my undergraduate degree, I knew that it was an individual experience and a range of levels of satisfaction was to be expected. My personal witnessing of the extremes in the satisfaction levels of students I knew, made me wonder what happened during their time abroad that made it an unsatisfactory, at times even unpleasant, experience. Did they have hindering beliefs about their YA before leaving? Did those impact on their satisfaction? Could I have done something to prevent, or at least limit, my students' negative experiences?

My personal curiosity was then fuelled even more by the surprisingly limited literature available on UK language students' perceptions of their personal SA experiences in Italy. Therefore, my experiences and my personal and professional interests later developed into an academic inquiry and inspired this research, leading me on a challenging but rewarding journey into the study abroad experiences of two UK language undergraduates.

1.2 Background and Research Aims

Study Abroad (SA) is a rapidly growing research area following the constantly increasing number of students going abroad as part of their degrees in the current era of internationalisation and globalisation (Isabelli-García et al., 2018). The main corpus of research on SA investigates the linguistic outcomes of studying abroad (Coleman, 1998; Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2015) but in the last three decades the focus has shifted to a wider range of facets of the experience (Kinger, 2015; Tullock & Ortega, 2017). Individual differences have started to receive more attention (Block, 2007; Coleman, 1998; DeKeyser, 1991) and the students' perspectives have gained more relevance (Mendelson, 2004; Pellegrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998) leading to an increase in qualitative studies. As will be discussed in more detail in the Literature Review, personal and affective aspects of SA began to be addressed more frequently after the 'social turn' in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the 1990s (Block, 2003) and its more recent 'affective turn' (Pavlenko, 2013), but many questions are still unanswered and some aspects of SA warrant further investigation. In particular, Hunley (2010) notes that research about psychological distress and mental health in the SA context has recently started to emerge but is still limited.

Furthermore, although the UK is a popular destination for international student mobility (King et al., 2010; UUKi, 2021), UK mobile students are an under-researched group in the SA literature (Kingtoner, 2013b). The selection of my participants was narrowed down even more by my personal interest in investigating the experiences of UK language students going on their YA to Italy, who are a particularly neglected cohort in SA studies due to the limited number of students of Italian (Webster, 2018). The dearth of studies on this specific subgroup, combined with the still limited research on the affective challenges experienced by students during their SA (Hunley, 2010), seemed extremely promising and personally and professionally fascinating. In my reading I also came across a gap in the literature on the impact that pre-departure beliefs may have on how students perceive their SA experiences and how they decide to cope with them, with most studies focusing on the reverse, noting how SA impact on individuals' beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Block, 2007; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

Furthermore, in the current unsettled socio-political climate in the UK, the students' perspectives and perceptions of the changing SA reality are of fundamental importance to better understand the post-Brexit (and now also 'post'-pandemic) SA scenario. My research was impacted both by the aftermath of Brexit and by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which happened to encompass the second half of my data collection. The pandemic changed the course of my participants' YA experience, as well as that of many other students in the same situation. The paths of my two participants took completely different directions after the announcement of the Italian national lockdown, with one of them deciding to go back home, and the other choosing to stay in Italy. Despite the undeniable negative effects that the pandemic had on most aspects of life for most of the world population, it also made my research extremely timely and insightful on the impact the pandemic and the lockdowns had on the SA experience.

Through my participants' accounts I was finally able to follow what happens during a YA in Italy and gain deeper insights into such an experience (somehow compensating for not having lived it in first person). This thesis presents my research and offers my original contribution to knowledge by proposing a new interdisciplinary framework for the understanding of SA and intercultural

experiences, as well as a methodological initiative to promote a collaborative approach between researcher and participants. Before providing an overview of the chapters to come, I briefly clarify what I mean by the term ‘study abroad’ and how I conceptualise it in this thesis.

1.3 Study Abroad: A Complex Definition

“There is little consensus still on how to best define studying abroad and how to best study its effects.” (McKeown, 2009, p. 106)

Terminology in the SA literature is still far from uniform, with factors such as the length and purpose of the stay influencing the terms used by researchers, leaving the very definition of SA still debated. Kinginger (2015, p. 11) defines SA as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes”, which does not specify the length of the stay or the countries/languages of origin or destination. However, by specifying its purposes as educational, she differentiates it from other migration-related, or touristic student mobility. Coleman (2015, p. 33) draws a broader picture, stating that “*Residence abroad* implies living for an extended period in a foreign country, under many of the same conditions and constraints as local students and residents”. This definition puts no specific limitations on the length of the stay nor the purpose, which is reflected in the choice ‘residence’ rather than ‘study’ abroad. ‘Residence abroad’ is generally used to encompass the various options available to students in UK universities, namely, to go abroad to study, to work or to be a language assistant. Although Coleman (2015, p. 33) states that the term has “become standardised across U.K. academic contexts” – and it is indeed used on most institutional websites –, much of the literature still focuses on the study option, therefore preferring the term SA. I acknowledge the narrower focus of ‘study abroad’, yet because of the predominance of this choice and research focus in the scholarship, I have decided to use SA in this thesis when referring to the literature and studies in the field. Furthermore, as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, because my participants went abroad for the whole academic year, when referring to their specific experiences I shall use the term ‘Year Abroad’ (YA). This hopefully clarifies my terminological decisions; however, it is important to elucidate my conceptualisation of SA or YA.

Although the two definitions provided offer helpful descriptions to understand practical features of SA, they do not fully express the intrinsic complexity of such

experiences. Isabelli-García et al. (2018, p. 449) provide a more holistic idea of the nature of SA by defining it as “a complex social ecosystem with an endless number of independent variables”. This idea of ‘complex social ecosystem’ underpins the interactive nature of SA, seen as a lived experience made up of social encounters in a socio-cultural environment in which the sojourner is immersed, and which may differ from what they are used to. This alone already implies issues of culture, language and an all-round experience from academic, social and personal points of view. The ‘endless number of independent variables’ only add to the complexity of SA as a research context, as they entail the interaction of the ‘social ecosystem’ with the individual’s responses to it. This can turn culture (see section 3.4.1) into ‘culture shock’ or cultural awareness, can see language as a barrier or as motivation, and can perceive the SA experience as overwhelming or as stimulating and exciting (as well as anything in between these extremes). Such differences in perceptions depend on a number of individual factors such as beliefs, identity and affect, amongst others, as well as contextual elements. This network of variables makes up my understanding of the multi-faceted SA experience and led me to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, which allowed me to develop a new framework to better understand the situated complexity of intercultural experiences.

1.4 Overview

In this introductory **Chapter 1** I have presented my background and the rationale for my research, as well as its aims and my conceptualisation of SA. **Chapter 2** sets the scene for my research and provides some contextual background on UK higher education, study abroad in Italy and the impact the pandemic had on these, as well as clarifying some of the key terminology and concepts used in this thesis. **Chapter 3** explores the literature that formed the basis for my case study by focusing on the cognitive, affective, cultural and contextual aspects of SA experiences, it also identifies the gap I tried to bridge and introduces my research questions. **Chapter 4** presents the methodology used to carry out my research, the methodological and contextual challenges faced, and the solutions reached. I also discuss the philosophical underpinnings of my research, some ethical considerations related to it and what I learnt from the pilot study. **Chapter 5** to **Chapter 8** tell the stories of my research participants and present their experiences, which are then discussed in **Chapter 9**, where I also propose a new

framework for study abroad research. **Chapter 10** concludes this thesis by 'answering' my research questions and highlighting the original theoretical and methodological contributions of my research. Here I also acknowledge some of its limitations and offer suggestions for future studies, as well as a final reflection on my journey as a researcher.

Chapter 2 Context

This chapter provides some contextual background on UK Higher Education (HE), which is my participants' starting point, and on the Italian SA context, where my research was focused. A final section addresses more specifically the role that the pandemic had on my research context and the broader UK HE system.

2.1 UK Higher Education

Within the current globalisation trends and the increasing marketisation of education, internationalisation has become a high priority for the UK HE agenda (De Vita & Case, 2003; Molesworth et al., 2009). Student mobility is a fundamental element for the international profile of HE institutions and between 2007 and 2019 the global number of students going on SA more than doubled (OECD, 2021). Zooming in on the UK, according to the latest Universities UK international report (UUKi, 2021), the number of UK students embarking on SA projects has increased by 39.8% between the 2015/2016 academic year and the 2018/2019 one. This trend has been temporarily disrupted in 2020 by the pandemic, but having an international profile and marketising the UK institutional offer towards student mobility remains essential in the highly competitive HE sector, especially after Brexit (McLeay et al., 2020). It is worth noting that despite the positive trend, the UK outward mobility is still limited compared to the inward mobility that sees the UK as the second most popular destination in the world, after the US (King et al., 2010; UUKi, 2021). This is reflected in the relatively small attention to UK SA students, compared to the extensive research on the UK as a SA destination. In particular, Kinginger (2013b) calls for more research on non-US students and less studied languages (i.e. not French, Spanish or German), which is what my research focuses on.

2.1.1 Length and Purpose of SA

Student mobility is an asset for HE institutions (HEI) and it can not only impact on the institutional ranking but also be a significant source of financial profit (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). As well attracting international students, HEI in the UK also promote outward mobility by offering funding through various programmes (e.g. Erasmus+, British Council Language Teaching Assistantships) and degrees, which include a compulsory period abroad – especially for Modern Foreign

Language (MFL) students (Coleman, 1998). Coleman (1997, p. 6) states that “within Europe the UK has the longest experience of incorporating residence abroad in language degree programmes”, and because SA has been a compulsory and integral component of most MFL degrees in the UK for years, evaluation has been more systematic compared to other countries where SA is often optional (Coleman, 1998). However, as noted by Willis et al. (1977), until 1971 no studies had been carried out specifically investigating British degree-level language students, reinforcing the rationale for focusing on UK undergraduates in my research.

Stays abroad can range from a few weeks to several months depending on the institutions, the programmes and the student choices. Shorter stays of four or fewer weeks are becoming more popular, yet longer stays of 14 weeks or more are still the most common option in the UK (UUKi, 2018, 2021). In some cases SA can last a whole academic year, conventionally called ‘the year abroad’ (YA), which is “a peculiarly British phenomenon” (Alred & Byram, 2002: 339). The YA usually takes place in the third year of the MFL degree and, depending on how many languages they study and their institutional regulations, MFL students may decide to go on SA in one, two or three countries. In the first case, students usually stay abroad for a whole academic year; in the second, they may split their stay into two semesters (one in each country) or in a shorter stay in one country and one academic year in the other. When students are learning three foreign languages they may also decide to visit a third country (where the third of their studied languages is spoken) for a few weeks in summer.

The length, destination and focus of students’ SA also depend on whether they choose to go abroad to study at a university in the host country, to be a language teaching assistant (TA) in a school, or if they decide to apply for a work-placement. The teaching assistantship programmes date back to 1905 when the British Council started this kind of exchange with France and, until the establishment of the Erasmus scheme in 1987, it was the most popular option for UK language students (Mitchell et al., 2015). The Erasmus programme, which was expanded into Erasmus+ in 2014, provides funding for student mobility and collaborative opportunities amongst partner institutions (European Commission, 2018). Erasmus students have been widely researched in the SA literature (Howard, 2021) and whilst work placements have always tended to be the least-

chosen option, Erasmus+ and study exchanges have become the main choice for UK students since the early 1990s, overtaking the popular language assistantships (Mitchell et al., 2015). The latest UUKi (2021) report shows a growing trend in the numbers of UK students going to study at a university abroad (77.7% in 2019/2020 compared to 74.5% in 2013/14), with only 19.7% going on work placements in 2019/2020 – the academic year under study –, and the remaining 2.6% refers to volunteering. Unfortunately the report does not differentiate between teaching assistantships and other forms of work placements, but the stark difference between studying and working abroad is likely to be part of the rationale behind the limited research available on the latter. In my planning and recruitment I was open to all options (see section 4.3.1), but my two participants turned out to both fall into the teaching assistantship category. For this reason, in this chapter I shall focus my attention on that area of research more than the other two.

2.1.2 Who Goes on SA?

SA is a standard feature of MFL degrees in the UK, therefore it is not surprising that language students show a high, and relatively stable, level of mobility (UUKi, 2015). However, despite the overall increase in the UK outward mobility mentioned earlier, the percentage of mobile language students has been falling in recent years from 38% in 2012/2013 (UUKi, 2015), to 23.6% in 2018/2019 (UUKi, 2020). This implies that the growth in outward mobility likely reflects the increase in the numbers of non-language students going abroad. Furthermore, MFL degrees in the UK HE have seen a dramatic and rather systematic decline in the past two decades, with institutions closing their MFL departments at a worrying rate (Polisca et al., 2019). The reasons for this decrease seem to be influenced by policy and pedagogical changes at school level but they are still cause of disagreement amongst researchers (Coleman, 2009; Coleman et al., 2007; Dobson, 2018; Macaro, 2008). Although my focus is on university language students, the educational system in the UK across all levels is inevitably intertwined; therefore, I briefly explain some of the key changes in the school curriculum that have been suggested as contributing factors to the university MFL decline.

In 1991 the UK published the first version of the National Curriculum (NC) for MFL, moving from the traditional grammar-focused syllabi to more

communicative teaching, recommending the predominant use of the target language in the classroom (Dobson, 2018). Different revisions of the NC were implemented over the years and in 1996 the study of languages was made compulsory until the age of 16. This changed in 2003, when languages were made optional at the Key Stage 4 (for pupils aged between 14 and 16), and a decline in the enrolments in languages started to be reported (Dobson, 2018; Hagger-Vaughan, 2016). Coleman et al. (2007) acknowledge that motivation to study languages in the UK had always been fluctuating but they suggest that the governmental decision to make the study of languages optional “damaged the perceived status of languages” and “led to a dramatic decline in the take-up of languages post-14” (Coleman et al., 2007, p. 249). On the other hand, Macaro (2008) argues that the introduction of the ‘Languages for All’ policy, which made MFL study compulsory until the age of 16 may have forced pupils to study something they may not enjoy or find relevant. He also notes that the language options available (mostly French and German) were starting to lose their internationally recognised status, which may have contributed to the lower interest in taking up languages (and the increase in the applications for Spanish).

The actual reasons for the gradual decline in the offer of MFL degrees are likely to be a combination of factors, not only related to the optionality of MFL at school level. For example, the increase in the Institution-Wide Language Programmes (IWLP) running parallel to MFL degrees in many institutions may have been a contributing factor. These programmes offer language modules which “may or may not carry academic credit and often serve the non-specialist undergraduates and sometimes postgraduates” (Álvarez et al., 2018, p. 8), allowing them to study one or more languages without enrolling on a MFL degree. Indeed, the decline seems to refer more specifically at single honours degrees, where students study only one language, and which decreased by 30% between 2012 and 2018 (Webster, 2018). The introduction and expansion of IWLP may be part of the reason for such a decrease and for the increase in the UK outward mobility (UUKi, 2015). Furthermore, the negative statistics on MFL applications often hide the parallel increase in the number of applicants for non-European languages (Webster, 2018) and the increasing range of non-European languages offered (UUKi, 2021), which may become even more prominent after Brexit (Dearing, 2022).

2.1.3 Pre-departure Preparation

In the 1990s not all HEI offered pre-departure preparation and Coleman (1997) criticised the absence of research on the effectiveness of preparation courses to reduce negative experiences in the host country. Nowadays, before selecting their option for their stay(s) abroad (i.e. study, work, teaching), students are generally offered induction courses or meetings to discuss the possibilities available. Later they receive “a few hours of orientation prior to departure, focusing on logistics (e.g., travel arrangements, advice for packing) and a brief introduction to the host culture” (Jackson, 2008, p. 222). Awareness on the importance of preparing students for their stays abroad has grown since Coleman’s paper. Courses, workshops and online materials have been developed to introduce students to a range of possible intercultural experiences; nonetheless, research on their effects is still limited (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015). Furthermore, institutional approaches to interculturality have been criticised for their essentialist philosophical underpinnings that may in fact undermine the students’ ability to cope in the host country (Holliday, 2018a). Overall, there have been developments in the orientation courses for SA offered by UK HEI, yet more research is required to better understand what students really need and to improve the pre-departure preparation that Jackson (2008, p. 222) defined as “woefully inadequate”.

2.1.4 Why UK Students of Italian?

My personal interest in the experiences of students of Italian was certainly the catalyst for my choice; however, the extremely limited research available on this specific group further supported my selection (one exception is Gallucci, 2011). The dearth of SA studies set in Italy is particularly surprising given that Italy has been stable in the top ten (usually between 6th and 7th place) of the most popular SA destinations for UK students for several years (UUKi, 2018, 2021). Although Italian is offered in some UK schools, French, Spanish and German account for around 90% of the student MFL choices at school level (Dobson, 2018). These trends are reflected also at university level, where French, Spanish and German stably make up the top three most offered languages in the UK HE provision (Álvarez et al., 2018; Critchley et al., 2021; Polisca et al., 2019). These were regularly followed by Italian but in 2020/2021 Chinese overtook it and gained the fourth place (Critchley et al., 2021). Although I could not retrieve any specific

statistics on the number of students enrolled on Italian modules, between 2012 and 2018 the rate of accepted applications for Italian decreased by 38%, more than French and German (30% decline) (Webster, 2018). Furthermore, from my teaching assistantship at the University of Leeds and even more from my three years of experience at the University of Hull (which does not offer languages anymore), I have noticed a sharp difference in numbers of enrolled students between the top four most popular languages and Italian. Nevertheless, its position as the fifth most offered language in the UK HE makes it a prominent area to research. By focusing on UK MFL students of Italian, I aimed to expand our understanding of the YA experience from the perspective of this relevant, yet under-researched cohort.

2.1.5 Brexit, British Council, Erasmus+ and Turing

As mentioned earlier, the majority of student mobility takes place through the Erasmus+ scheme, and in the 35 years since its establishment, more than three million students have taken part in it (Howard, 2021). However, on 23rd June 2016 the UK voted to leave the EU and after a number of extensions, this exit became official at 11pm on 31st January 2020. By leaving the EU, the UK also renounced its participation in the Erasmus+ scheme, which will become final in May 2023 (Dearing, 2022). Since Brexit was announced, UK HEI have been developing contingency plans with their European partners to minimise the negative effects of the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus+ scheme (Dearing, 2022). Therefore, despite the concerns related to the uncertain landscape of SA after Brexit, the UK has been implementing new strategies (e.g. the Widening Participation in UK Outward Student Mobility project, the Turing scheme) to try and increase the number of UK students going abroad and promote student mobility (UniversitiesUK, 2018), or at least minimise the losses post-Brexit. At the same time, within the period of uncertainty around the Erasmus+ agreements and the establishment of Turing in 2021, the British Council – which is operationally independent – has reported an increase in the applications for teaching assistantships (Dearing, 2022). This may change now that the Turing programme has been launched but, overall, the British Council has not been as impacted by Brexit as the Erasmus+ programmes. The Turing scheme has been devised to replace Erasmus+, and I shall not go into much detail on this aspect of SA, but the opinions on it are still mixed, especially since it may highlight and worsen the

elitism of student mobility (Dearing, 2022; Guibert & Rayón, 2021). The main post-Brexit changes in the British Council agreements and in most international exchange programmes (including Turing) are related to the regulations for work and study visas, which increased the SA costs and paperwork. These not only tested the international relations between partner institutions, but they are also making SA prohibitive for some, leading to further elitism in SA, which is a topic worthy of mention.

2.1.6 Elitism in SA

Coleman (2013, p. 27) describes SA students as “typically wealthier, whiter, more female, and better educated than non-SA groups in both the USA and Europe”. The elitism of SA is not new nor a consequence of Brexit, although leaving the EU has certainly highlighted this aspect of SA. Besides, elitism in international exchanges is not only socio-political and economic but also geographical, leading to inconsistencies in the literature (Badwan, 2015; Kinginger, 2013b, 2015; Ryazanova, 2019) and to cultural hegemony (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2012). Although terms such as ‘international student migration’ have in many instances been replaced by ‘student mobility’ (King et al., 2010), students going abroad are often categorised as being part of a ‘migratory elite’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), ‘elite travellers’ (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020) or ‘elite movers’ (Badwan, 2021). Murphy-Lejeune (2002) describes mobile students as a new type of migrant, ‘the new strangers’, “in between the tourist’s transient passage and the migrant’s long-term stay in terms of length of stay” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 5). However, King et al. (2010, p. 6) explain that “[m]obility implies a shorter time-frame for the movement, and a high probability of return” and is usually used for stays of one year or less, which makes it a frequent choice in SA terminology. Similarly, ‘sojourner’ is a term which is becoming increasingly more frequent in SA research and it refers to individuals on short – or at least not permanent – stays abroad, differentiating them from immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers (Stuart & Ward, 2014). However, Kinginger (2015) notes that the boundaries between SA and migration research are blurred and some less socially and economically privileged countries are included in the broader SLA or migration-related literature rather than the SA one. Therefore, terminology in the SA scholarship is not only inconsistent but also imbalanced (Kinger, 2015). Whilst I acknowledge the under-representation of many student populations and the importance of

investigating under-researched minorities in the SA field, I need to foreground that my participants are white, female and UK nationals undertaking an undergraduate degree in an English university, resonating with Coleman's (2013) above-mentioned description of the typical SA population. They still represent an under-researched sub-group in the SA literature, as explained in this chapter, but I deemed it more appropriate to use the terms 'mobility' and 'SA' as the socio-political connotations and implications of 'migration' and 'migrant' do not apply to my specific research participants and go beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.1.7 A Note on Terminology

At this point, further clarification on my terminological choices is needed. I decided to use the term 'sojourner' to refer to my participants as it does not have a clear educational nuance, which is inherent in 'study' abroad programmes. It allowed me to move beyond the student-related identity of my participants and its broader meaning also reflected some of the philosophical underpinnings of my research. These are explained in more detail in section 4.1, but it is important to clarify my standpoint on the subject before moving forward in the thesis. In brief, I distance myself from the linguistic focus that has characterised the origins of SA research and I echo Coleman's (2013, p. 24) statement that "to define sojourners principally as 'learners', let alone the even narrower 'language learners', is to restrict the perspective to a single lens, which can only result in distortion". In order to avoid a skewed or distorted perspective on my participants, I followed Coleman's (2013) suggestion to look at them as 'whole people' rather than only looking at them as students or learners of Italian. In particular, as will be better explained in section 3.2.2.4, I subscribe to the relational view of 'person-in-context' proposed by Ushioda (2009) and view my participants and their experiences in a holistic and situated way. For these reasons, I decided to use the term 'student' when referring to the specific educational aspects of SA, whilst I use 'sojourner' when referring to the broader understanding of the individuals going abroad, transcending their student or language learner identity.

This choice also raises the question about my use of the term 'study abroad' itself. As mentioned in the Introduction, although my participants did not go to Italy to attend university courses, their time there was still part of their institution-led YA programme and integral part of their degree. For this reason, I decided to use the conventional term 'year abroad' (YA) in this thesis instead of the more general

'sojourn'. I am aware that although 'YA' does not include the word 'study', it does have a specific educational connotation, but I hope I have clarified my holistic and situated understanding of it.

2.2 Study Abroad in Italy

In this section I discuss what happens when sojourners arrive in Italy for their YA, tailoring my focus on my specific research context and my participants' choice to take part in the British Council teaching assistantship programme. In the academic year in which my research was carried out, 2019/2020, Italy was the sixth most popular destination for UK outward student mobility (UUKi, 2021). However, this accounted for only 4.2% of the UK mobile students that year (ibid.). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, in 2019/2020, only 19.7% of the total number of UK mobile students went abroad for a work placement or a teaching assistantship. This means that the percentage of UK students who went to Italy to teach is extremely low – although not clearly stated in the UUKi or OECD reports. Considering that currently the British Council is offering approximately 40 posts in Italy (British Council, 2022), it is likely that numbers were similar in the year under study.

All students going to Italy for a prolonged stay need to obtain a tax code card (similar to the National Insurance Number in the UK), which is usually one of the first encounters they have with Italian bureaucracy, and it can be challenging (see Chapter 5). However, when my participants went to Italy, the UK had not officially left the EU yet, therefore their experience was probably easier and more straightforward than it is currently. Indeed, from 2021 UK students without a valid EU passport are required to obtain a Long Stay Visa (Study), which incurs additional costs and involves more bureaucratic processes (British Council, 2022). This contributes to making SA prohibitive for some and more onerous (both in effort and money).

2.2.1 The British Council in Italy

Looking specifically at the British Council teaching assistantship programme in Italy, the available posts are distributed in the different regions of the country and are mostly in secondary schools, although some primary school options may be available. Students can express a regional preference when applying for the assistantship, but it may not be possible to assign them to their first choice of

region. According to the latest updates on the British Council website, the regions that tend to be the most popular first choice, and the most competitive, are: Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Lombardia and Toscana (British Council, 2022). The map in Figure 1 offers an overview of the regional divisions in Italy and I have circled the two regions my participants selected as their first choice, and to which they were assigned.



Figure 1 – Map of Italy and Participants' Destinations

I will present my participants' destinations in more detail in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 but it can be helpful to see where they are positioned geographically in the country: a small city in Liguria and a town in Marche. The yellow square identifies Rome, which is where the 2019/2020 TA cohort had their induction course. After they arrive in Italy, all TAs (not only UK students) are invited to an induction course, or informative meeting, organised by the Ministry for Education in Italy (MIUR). On that occasion, they receive further guidance on their assistantship posts, and they can meet other TAs in the country. I highlight this on the map also because one of the few face-to-face exchanges I had with one of the participants took place there (see also Chapter 8).

According to the information available to applicants, TAs can be assigned to up to three schools in their destination and are supposed to work around 12h a week.

They are each assigned an Italian mentor teacher who may support them during their YA, parallel to their UK institution support services. Unlike those going to Italy to study, who may apply for student accommodation, TAs usually need to find independent solutions, although the British Council and their individual institution may give them some suggestions for temporary or permanent options (British Council, 2019).

The most common types of accommodation are student residences or shared housing, homestays with local families and independent accommodation, and SA research has investigated their different impact on language gains (Mitchell et al., 2015). Although one's choice may influence the opportunities of interaction with locals or fluent speakers of the target language, findings on the relation between accommodation type and language development are mixed and seem to be influenced by multiple factors (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998; see also section 3.4.2.1). Furthermore, Mitchell et al. (2015) report different tendencies in accommodation choice in different countries, with students preferring to live in shared accommodation with other internationals rather than with locals or L2-speakers in France, more often than in Spain. This shows more imbalances in SA research as attention to accommodation type has been limited to a small number of destinations (Kinging, 2013a), leaving Italy and many other countries in need of further investigation.

Now that the contexts of the UK HE and of Italy as a YA destination have been presented, I conclude with a section on the pervasive impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on my research context and my participants' experiences.

2.3 The Pandemic and Its Implications on My Research Context

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on student mobility, as well as affecting national and global economies and politics. The SARS-CoV-2 virus (cause of the Covid-19 disease) was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and it soon spread to most of the rest of the world, with the World Health Organisation (2020) declaring it a worldwide pandemic on 11th March 2020. As of 1st September 2022 there have been more than 6.4million Covid-19-related deaths and more than 600million cases of infection in the world (World Health Organization (WHO), 2022). The pandemic affected not only the health sector, but it had repercussions on economic, political and social aspects of life and

everybody was impacted by it to a greater or lesser extent. In an attempt to minimise the spread of the virus, countries closed most schools and public spaces, and implemented lockdowns, social distancing measures and extreme restrictions and reductions in national and international travel. This had a pervasive effect on everybody's life, but it also directly impacted on those students who were studying abroad when the pandemic started and lockdowns were announced. In most cases, students abroad were recalled to their home countries, and home institutions implemented virtual teaching (Ammigan et al., 2022). For those students who were abroad when the national lockdowns were announced, the SA or YA changed completely, and it may have been even more of a shock for them than for the students and people who were living their usual lives. The latest OECD report (2021, p. 213) states that only at HE level, institutional closures may have affected "more than 3.9 million international and foreign students studying in OECD countries". Although global mobility was part of the cause of the extreme spread of Covid-19 (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020), the impact the pandemic has had on students, educators and institutions goes beyond the health-related, financial and socio-political challenges, having also pedagogical repercussions (Ammigan et al., 2022).

On the one hand, by abruptly segregating teachers and learners to virtual modalities, the pandemic tested the institutional pedagogical and technological adaptability and revealed some of their limitations. On the other, some of the online or blended teaching strategies implemented during the pandemic may also be carried over after the return to face-to-face teaching (Critchley et al., 2021), leading de Wit and Altbach (2021) to think that SA may become increasingly digitised as a result of the pandemic. The University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) Winter Plenary in January 2022 saw a general agreement on the increasing importance of technology and digitisation for the future of SA, but not intending to replace the immersion experiences, rather to improve and complement the institutional provisions, leading to a diversification in the pedagogy (Dearing, 2022).

To better understand the specific context my participants were immersed in at the time of the pandemic, it is helpful to zoom in on the Italian experience of and response to the spread of Covid-19. Italy declared a national public health emergency on 31st January 2020, gradually implementing intra- and extra-

national mobility restrictions. School closures were announced in late February and took effect on 4th March, whilst the national lockdown started on 9th March (Goumenou et al., 2020). Italy was one of the most seriously affected countries, initially reaching the second highest number of Covid-related deaths after China (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020) and showing a “frightening speed” of infection (Freedman, 2020, p. 48). The extremely high numbers of infected people increased beyond the capacity of the national health services, pushing them to the verge of collapse (Goumenou et al., 2020). When Italy started implementing strategies to fight the spread of the virus, the UK government was still delaying its response, denying the urgency of the problem. The national lockdown was only declared on 23rd March 2020 and the UK’s slow reaction to the pandemic has been criticised and accused of being part of the reason why the country suffered so many deaths (Freedman, 2020). In this chaotic concurrence of events, my two participants found themselves between a rock and a hard place, having to decide between the certain Italian lockdown and the uncertain situation in the UK. Thanks to my longitudinal approach, I was able to witness my participants’ experiences during these unsettled times as they shared their perceptions and perspectives about them with me, offering timely and unique insights into this particular context. Their specific experiences and the reasons that led them to take different decisions are discussed in Chapter 5 to Chapter 8. Now that my research context has been presented and clarified, I move on to discuss the literature that guided my research, the gaps I identified and the research questions I developed.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

In this chapter I provide an overview of the core literature that guided my inquiry and identify the gap that I have tried to bridge. In order to make this chapter as clear and engaging as possible, I have divided it into five sections after an initial introduction of the main developments in SA research. Each section focuses on an aspect of the SA experience that was relevant in my case study: cognitive, cultural, affective, contextual, and sociolinguistic. Sub-sections present the specific concepts I shall engage with in my thesis, including beliefs, identity, emotions, culture and cognitive dissonance theory. I also discuss the impact that the pandemic had on my research and the broader SA field and present my research questions.

3.1 Developments in Study Abroad Research

Interest in the SA context started to increase around the 1960s, parallel to the development of research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Freed, 1998; Howard, 2021), and studies initially focused on assessing – mostly with quantitative methods – different aspects of language learning (Tullock, 2018), for example fluency (Freed, 1995; Willis et al., 1977), listening skills (Carroll, 1967) and L2 grammar acquisition (DeKeyser, 1991). Several researchers have concluded that, based on the mixed findings, language gains cannot be guaranteed as a direct consequence of simply going on SA (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; DeKeyser, 1991; Wilkinson, 1998). However, after reviewing the literature on SA, Kinginger (2013b, p. 3) argues that most studies show that SA has “the potential to enhance the students’ language ability in every domain”, and that the individual differences of the participants seem to play a big part in the extent to which they take advantage of such potential.

The social turn in SLA research in the 1990s (Block, 2003) saw an increased focus on the individual, social and contextual factors involved in the process of language acquisition. This also influenced studies in the SA context, which began to investigate the impact that individual differences may have on the outcomes of SA (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016; Coleman, 1998). Several studies began to focus on the students’ perspective (Mendelson, 2004; Pellegrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998) and specific issues such as beliefs about learning (Horwitz, 1999), identity (Benson et al., 2013; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2004; Tullock,

2018), psychological distress (Hunley, 2010), 'culture shock' (Yang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2008), and cultural adaptation (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016). Coleman (2013, p. 25) summarises the developments in SA research stating that "individual trajectories are in fact the essence of recent study abroad research, in which the focus has shifted from quantitative to qualitative, from product to process, from a search for generalizability to a recognition of complexity and variation".

Following the current research trends focused on individual trajectories and the complex relationships among the "endless number of independent variables" (Isabelli-García et al., 2018, p. 449) involved in the SA context, I investigated my participants' perceptions of their YA experience. In particular, I looked at their personal journeys from a holistic point of view, seeing them as 'whole people' (Coleman, 2013) rather than reducing them to 'learners' or focusing only on their linguistic outcomes. My research addressed their overall experience, including the cognitive, affective, cultural and contextual elements of their YA and their evolution over time. In the following section, I introduce the cognitive aspect of SA, discussing the concepts of beliefs and identity and how I conceptualise them.

3.2 Cognitive Aspect

The first concept I present in this section is that of 'beliefs', discussing their debated definition and nature, and their implications for SA research. Beliefs are the building blocks for most of this chapter and essential elements in my research. Once my conceptualisation of beliefs is clarified, I move on to introduce the concept of identity. Although I argue that identity is a multi-faceted construct cutting across the cognitive, affective, cultural and contextual aspects of SA discussed in this chapter, I decided to foreground it here to make further mentions of it clearer in later sections.

3.2.1 Beliefs

The complex nature of beliefs has long been the centre of debate amongst researchers, often leading to disagreement on terminological and epistemological descriptions of what constitutes 'beliefs'. Barcelos (2015) and Borg (2011) provide two helpful definitions that reflect this complexity, but it is worth comparing them to notice the differences in their perspective.

Barcelos (2015, p. 305) states that beliefs are “social and individual, shared, diverse and uniform; and constitute a complex dynamic system that is interrelated, embedded, nonlinear, multidimensional and multi-layered”. Beliefs are, therefore, seen as complex constructs that characterise individuals but also group them together through shared beliefs.

Borg (2011, p. 370) describes beliefs as “propositions individuals consider to be true and which are often tacit, have a strong evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action, and are resistant to change”. Here Borg reiterates the idea that beliefs are multi-faceted and made up of different components, amongst which he includes the affective dimension, which is particularly relevant to my research focus.

Although both authors agree that beliefs characterise and differentiate individuals, Borg sees them as change-resistant constructs and his idea of (semi)fixed beliefs clashes with the dynamism expressed in Barcelos’s definition. This static-dynamic dichotomy is at the very heart of the debate about the nature of beliefs. However, the opposing views are not as clear-cut as it may seem, and in section 3.2.1.2 I discuss the main currents of thought on the topic and state my standpoint. Before moving on to that, I briefly clarify the belief-related terminology I use in this thesis, what kinds of beliefs research has focused on in the SA context and which ones I have investigated in my study.

3.2.1.1 Terminological Choice – Learner Beliefs vs Self-efficacy

The focus on linguistic outcomes characterised the first decades of SA research and, even after the social turn in the field of SLA and the increased interest in investigating beliefs, most SA research has continued to use a linguistic lens for its analysis. For this reason, several studies (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Mercer, 2011; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017) have focused on the beliefs the SA participants had about their linguistic abilities and about themselves as language learners. Terms used in these cases are ‘language learning beliefs’, ‘beliefs about language learning’, ‘learner beliefs’ or ‘self-beliefs’, and they can mostly be seen as referring to a language-specific use of Bandura’s (1986) concept of ‘self-efficacy’. Bandura (1986, p. 391) defined self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances”. In other

words, self-efficacy refers to one's beliefs and expectations to be successful at a certain task. This term was coined at the end of the 1970s within the psychological field and has a broader spectrum of meanings, encompassing – but not limited to – learners' beliefs about their linguistic capabilities. It has been used in this more specific sense in several studies in the SA literature, yet terminology is not consistent. According to Bandura (1977), one's self-efficacy beliefs are based on four sources of information: past experiences (performance accomplishments), external examples and models (vicarious experiences), physiological and emotional states, and verbal persuasion. These four factors influence one's self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn have been shown to have an impact on: task engagement (Bandura, 1986), L2 learning motivation in SA research (Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018) and agency (see section 3.2.2.3), amongst others.

The focus of my research is broader than self-efficacy beliefs, investigating the participants' beliefs about themselves – not just as language learners –, about Italy, the host community, and the host culture and any other pre-departure beliefs they would share. For this reason, I initially had not planned to address the concept of self-efficacy specifically; however, it became a relevant factor from the data, and it will be discussed again throughout this chapter. For the most part of this thesis, I shall use the broader term 'beliefs' to refer to the multiplicity of beliefs I investigated, clarifying contextually any specific subject matter to which I may be referring. I shall use the term 'self-efficacy' when discussing beliefs about one's capabilities to carry out a particular task (or when individual studies specifically used the term in that sense). When referring to beliefs related to language learning and more general learning I shall use the terms 'language learning beliefs' and 'learner beliefs' respectively as these are more commonly used in SA research.

3.2.1.2 Static, Dynamic (or Both)

Moving back to the static-dynamic dilemma about the nature of beliefs, Wesely (2012) identifies three main strands of thought about learner beliefs. The first sees beliefs as a trait: static, unchanging, strongly related to the individual characteristics and not influenced by the environment. A major representative of this school of thought was Horwitz (1988), who investigated the possible effects that the beliefs held by language students may have on their language

achievement. She developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a 34-item questionnaire which assessed language learning beliefs according to five main categories identified as the most commonly shared beliefs amongst language learners. These were: “1) difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and 5) motivations and expectations” (Horwitz, 1988, p. 284). This initial idea of beliefs being fixed and immutable led Horwitz to identify and classify beliefs with the intent to create generalisable categories. Despite the critique to Horwitz’s (1988) model and its validity (Kuntz, 1996), her five categories and inventory have often been used in research since, even in more qualitative and recent research (see Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017).

The second strand considers beliefs as changeable in nature and particularly influenced by contextual and situational factors. Beliefs are, thus, seen as a potentially mutable ‘state’ rather than a fixed ‘trait’. Taking this even further, the third strand sees beliefs as ‘dynamic’ and ‘complex’ and highlights the impact that the interactions between the individuals and their surrounding environment have on their beliefs. Scholars within this school of thought have suggested a number of connections between beliefs and other factors relevant to my research. Lyons (2009) argues that group dynamics can impact on the individual’s self-beliefs and language learning, and so do their power relations with the host community (also reported by Peirce, 1995). A noticeable finding in Ushioda’s (2001) study on learners of French, is the impact that positive past learning experiences had on the learners’ motivation and language learning achievements. The findings mentioned in these studies highlight the effects that the host community, social relationships, and past experiences can have on someone’s self-beliefs and motivation, and – I argue – on their beliefs in a broader sense. Another important representative of this third strand of thought about learner beliefs is the above-mentioned Barcelos (2003, p. 196) who argues that “beliefs and actions interconnect and interrelate with each other” and should be researched as interdependent and situated constructs.

This final view is the one I subscribe to as I see beliefs as influencing the way we see the world and, at the same time, influenced by it in a mutual interaction and constant redefinition. Consequently, in my worldview, the individual and the

context are both active agents involved in the iterative and interactive evolution of the individual's beliefs system and their actions based on it. However, I also agree with the idea that some beliefs are more resistant to change than others, as suggested in the psychological field by Rokeach (1970), who divides beliefs into core and peripheral; the former being the most deeply rooted and the most connected to one's idea of self, and therefore also the most difficult to change. More recently, Phipps and Borg (2009) have applied such differentiation to their research in language teaching cognition and suggest that core and peripheral beliefs may affect teachers' practices in different ways. This not only supports the idea that beliefs may be mutable but also that they can influence individuals' actions (see section 3.2.1.3).

Two studies that showed clear evidence of mutability in beliefs in the SA context are Tanaka and Ellis's (2003) and Amuzie and Winke's (2009). The former is an exploratory quantitative study in which the authors investigate the changes in learner beliefs and in the participants' proficiency after their SA and look at the potential relationship between these two factors. Their participants were 166 Japanese students majoring in English, who enrolled on a 15-week SA programme in the USA. All data was collected through the means of a questionnaire on learner beliefs – based on previous studies, including Horwitz's (1988) BALLI questionnaire – and the TOEFL exam. Both data collections were repeated, once before the SA and once just a few days before the students returned to Japan. Although the choice of using quantitative methods to investigate learner beliefs may be debatable (see section 3.2.1.3) and has been advised against (Ellis, 2008; Kalaja et al., 2017), the findings were still revealing. Changes in learner beliefs were not significantly related to proficiency gains or losses; however, there were significant changes in learner beliefs, particularly related to self-efficacy and confidence. This final result not only provides evidence against the static conceptualisation of learner beliefs, but – from the perspective of my research – it also shows the potential effects that a SA experience may have on beliefs.

The second study worth mentioning, by Amuzie and Winke (2009), uses a mixed-methods approach, combining a questionnaire – partly influenced by Horwitz's (1988) BALLI survey – and one-to-one interviews. In this study, the researchers directly investigate the impact that SA experiences may have on learner beliefs.

Their participants were 70 students from a range of language backgrounds (mostly Korean and Chinese) enrolled in two universities in the US. They were selected only if they had been in the US for less than two years and the authors grouped them according to whether they had been there for more or less than six months. Findings seemed to indicate a change in the participants' beliefs about the importance of learner autonomy and the role of teachers in their learning. The authors also suggest that longer stays may have stronger impacts on students' beliefs, supporting previous studies (Dwyer, 2004; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and reinforcing my rationale for a longitudinal research approach.

These two studies are only selected examples that support the dynamic and changing nature of beliefs, but it is important to reiterate that beliefs are complex constructs also influenced by contextual elements. One should therefore refrain from applying "simplistic models of cause-and-effect and change/stability dichotomies in terms of belief development" (Mercer, 2011: 343).

3.2.1.3 Tacit, Overlapping and Related to Action

A further level of complexity in researching and accessing beliefs lies in their potentially 'tacit' nature. This is highlighted in Borg's (2011) definition quoted in section 3.2.1, and it implies that belief-holders may be unaware of their own beliefs, and some tools – such as questionnaires – may not allow researchers to fully access them (Ellis, 2008; Kalaja et al., 2017). These beliefs have also been defined as 'implicit', as opposed to 'explicit' beliefs, where one is aware of the latter and "can articulate [them] reasonably effectively" (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 189). Furthermore, research on beliefs seems to suggest that one person may hold different beliefs that overlap or, in some instances, even contradict each other (Mercer, 2011; Pajares, 1992; Schutz, 1970; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). This also implies that researchers may not be able to investigate specific areas of beliefs in clear isolation from others, which further motivates my holistic approach to my participants and their YA journey.

Another factor to consider when researching beliefs is their relation to action. Rokeach (1970, p. 113) states that "beliefs are predispositions to action", and Borg's work (2003, 2006, 2011) also highlights this connection and the importance of understanding that beliefs may (and do) influence one's behaviour, attitudes and reactions. Ellis (2008) reports similar findings of learner beliefs

affecting the learners' actions (e.g. selection of learning strategies) but he also notes the impact that learner beliefs can have on the learners' emotional states (e.g. confidence, anxiety). The interaction between cognitive (beliefs) and affective (emotions) factors is particularly relevant in SA research and is discussed in section 3.2.2 as the unfamiliar context increases the complexity of this already intricate network of variables. Furthermore, Basturkmen (2012), in her review of the research in the field of teacher beliefs, suggests that the connection between beliefs and actions is mutual and interactive. She states that one's "beliefs drive actions but experiences and reflection on actions can lead to changes in or additions to beliefs themselves" (Basturkmen, 2012, p. 283). The iterative nature of this process also suggests that different beliefs held before going abroad may lead to different actions in the SA context and impact on one's perceptions about the experience, as well as potentially changing one's beliefs and emotional states. In order to better understand the sojourners' perspectives on their SA, it is important to investigate their pre-departure (or prior) beliefs and the way these may impact on their overall perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their experience abroad.

3.2.1.4 Prior Beliefs

As is clear from the previous sections, the interest in beliefs in SA research is not new, and several scholars have suggested that students' beliefs may change as a result of the SA experience (see Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Block, 2007; Dwyer, 2004; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Kinginger, 2013b; Mercer, 2011; Pyper & Slagter, 2015; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Findings on the nature of these changes have been varied, positive in some studies (e.g. Pyper & Slagter, 2015; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) and negative in others (e.g. Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014), indicating a range of possible outcomes and a multiplicity of variables involved, supporting the idea of beliefs as dynamic constructs. However, little attention has been given to the opposite process, investigating the impact that pre-departure beliefs may have on the ways sojourners perceive and experience their stay abroad.

Zaykovskaya et al. (2017) addresses said issue in a longitudinal case study on one male American student who went on SA in Russia for six weeks as part of his degree in Russian and History. The participant, with pseudonym Alyosha, was interviewed multiple times, both before and after his SA, and further data was

collected during his stay abroad through social media and written notes (e.g. journal entries and poems). All the data was coded based on the five BALLI categories and a sixth one, added by the researchers to better suit the specific context of the SA. This sixth category focused on the student's prior beliefs about the host country, its people and its culture. Although Zaykovskaya et al.'s (2017) main focus is on language learning beliefs, this addition moves beyond the focus on language learning of the BALLI categories and addresses topics of fundamental importance for researching the SA context. This final category provided interesting insights and a glimpse into broader aspects of the belief system of the participant. For its relevance to the SA context, I decided to use this sixth category as a basis for some of the questions in my data collection. These are discussed in section 4.3.2 where I also address some of their philosophical implications.

From the very beginning, Zaykovskaya et al.'s (2017) participant appeared to hold mostly positive beliefs about his language abilities, and his self-efficacy beliefs were also informed by past experiences, despite not having been a language student. Furthermore, he seemed very committed to taking advantage of any opportunity he had to practise the language. On the one hand, he believed that the SA would help him improve his Russian; on the other, he had very realistic (some may say 'low') expectations about the linguistic improvement likely to be achieved in such a specific context. He knew he would not achieve native-level competence within six weeks, but he did expect to improve his fluency enough to "be able to survive" (Zaykovskaya et al., 2017, p. 117) and he purposely put himself in the position to test such expectation. These realistic expectations and positive beliefs held prior to departure, contributed to a positive perception of the overall SA experience, which the student considered as being successful. It should be noted that the study does not clarify the meaning attributed to 'success' and seems to mostly relate it to linguistic achievements. The participant also firmly believed that 'culture shock' (see section 3.3.2) was "inevitable and impossible to prepare for" (ibid.), and, although this may sound like a disempowering belief, when he experienced a series of stressful and frustrating situations, the belief (and expectation) that they were supposed to occur helped him overcome them. According to Schunk and Pajares (2002) a higher and more positive level of self-efficacy in one's learning capacities seems to help learners

to study harder and resist more when facing problems, eventually succeeding at higher levels. This may be a possible explanation for the 'success' of Alyosha's experience, but more research is needed, particularly in the SA context, to investigate how the negative or positive individual learner beliefs (and beliefs more in general) can impact on one's experience abroad. My research has tried to contribute to this by exploring the relationship between prior beliefs and the sojourners' perception of their YA experience, and by investigating my participants' view of 'success'.

Furthermore, life events – including past failures and accomplishments – influence one's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977), which in turn impact on one's resilience to difficulties (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). On the one hand, this means that the SA experience has the potential to impact on and change the sojourners' self-efficacy beliefs held before their stay abroad, as suggested by Cubillos and Ilvento (2012). On the other, investigating pre-departure beliefs may provide researchers with insights about the kinds of prior beliefs that more positively impact on sojourners' self-efficacy and their ability to cope with affective challenges. By investigating prior beliefs and carrying out a longitudinal case study in the SA context, my research aimed to witness the development or changes in my participants' beliefs, potentially including self-efficacy, carrying forward our knowledge on the topic within the SA context.

Zaykovskaya et al.'s (2017) study also corroborates Borg's (2011) idea of a connection between beliefs and action-taking, as Alyosha's prior beliefs strongly influenced his actions and the way in which he reacted to the various experiences in the foreign country. According to Zaykovskaya et al. (2017), the SA experience resulted in no noticeable changes in Alyosha's learner beliefs, which may depend on a number of reasons, such as the strength of the beliefs he held prior to the SA, his level of awareness about his beliefs, the short duration of the stay or other contextual factors (e.g. time spent with locals, the range of contexts where he could speak Russian). It is plausible, though, that a larger sample and a wider range of prior beliefs may show changes or may reveal different relationships between prior beliefs and the perception of the SA experience. Rather than considering the relationship between SA and beliefs as univocal and causal, it would seem more appropriate to consider it to be mutually influential.

Moving from pre-departure beliefs to the end goals of SA experiences, one final set of beliefs I discuss before introducing the concept of identity is that of sojourners' idea of success in their SA.

3.2.1.5 Success on SA

Although there is no agreed definition of what success on SA is, institutions often suggest (or even expect) specific outcomes for SA experiences, which may not fully reflect every individual's idea of success. In 2004, Teichler (p. 402) highlighted this external imposition of what SA success is, stating that “[a]ccording to the European Commission, the most important criterion for the success of student mobility is the recognition of study achievements of the study period abroad by the home institution”. Given that SA is often a compulsory, or at least optional, part of university MFL degrees, the focus on the language learning objectives evident in the majority of studies on SA is understandable (DeKeyser, 2007; Freed, 1995). More recently research has started to investigate a wider range of factors potentially contributing to SA success going beyond language skills, for example pre-departure learner beliefs (Zaykovskaya et al., 2017), personal development and socialisation (Van Maele et al., 2016), or the ability to adjust to a different culture and environment (Harrison & Brower, 2011). Nevertheless, more attention should be paid to students' perspectives on their own idea of success or, in DeKeyser's words (2007, p. 221), “[w]e need to get into the student's head rather than conduct black-box research that links student or program characteristics with outcomes”. Coleman (2013) directly addresses and summarises the complexity of SA objectives and reiterates the importance of going beyond the educational outcomes of SA and looking at the multiplicity of the personal ones as well.

“Firstly, the study abroad experience never has just one single outcome or objective. Secondly, objectives – what you hope to gain – are unlikely to correspond exactly to outcomes – the changes which actually take place. Thirdly, the narrowly educational objectives and outcomes will not map neatly on to learners' *personal* objectives, which will include fun, tourism and novelty, or *personal* outcomes which include aspects of identity.” (Coleman, 2013, pp. 24, emphasis in original)

Despite the difficulty of defining success and outcomes in SA research, a helpful way to conceptualise it is by seeing SA success as a set of beliefs about what would make one feel accomplished or satisfied at the end of their time spent in

the host country. In line with this, due to the potentially tacit, mutable and overlapping nature of beliefs (see section 3.2), it is arguable that the individual's end goal and vision of success for their SA may not be clear to them, it may change over time (even during one's SA), or it may clash with other beliefs. Parallel to my attention to my participants' prior beliefs and the impact these may have on their perceived YA experiences, I decided to explore also their beliefs at the end of their YA. This would allow me to expand our knowledge on the topic from the neglected sojourners' personal point of view and witness any belief developments over time, also in relation to the factors my participants considered important for the success of their YA. Coleman's (2013) extract also connects the idea of success with one's identity, which is the focus of the following section.

Now that the key characteristics of beliefs, my conceptualisation of them and my research focus on the topic have been clarified, I move on to introduce the concept of identity, cutting across all the four SA aspects I discuss in this chapter and which is beneficial for a better understanding of my research.

3.2.2 Identity

Identity has become a gradually more researched element in the SA literature over the past two decades (Tulloch, 2018) but its definition is complex and still debated, especially in relation to SLA. I had initially included the concept of identity only marginally as 'self-beliefs', under the umbrella theme of 'beliefs'. However, during the data analysis I soon realised it was in fact an extremely relevant factor in my research, impacting on and being impacted by the SA experiences my participants were living. I therefore decided to discuss it in more depth, and particularly within the specific context of SA research. Block (2007) addresses the concept of identity from different perspectives and in different contexts, including the SA, and he defines it in a broad, overarching way stating that:

"Identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future. Individuals are shaped by their sociohistories but they also shape their sociohistories as life goes on. The entire process is conflictive as opposed to harmonious and individuals often feel ambivalent." (Block, 2007, p. 27)

Identity – similarly to the above-mentioned definition of a belief – is seen as an iterative construct, impacting on and impacted by life events and social

interactions in a mutual fashion. This social and conflictive perspective of identity is shared also by Benson et al. (2013), who define identity as:

“[A] dialectical relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ aspects of the self, involving our own sense of who we are, the ways in which we represent ourselves, and how we are represented and positioned by others”. (Benson et al., 2013, p. 2)

Identity is therefore viewed as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of both internal and external factors, and their interaction – or negotiation, as in Block’s (2007) definition – shapes one’s self-perception, sometimes also leading to conflict within the self. The division between ‘inner and outer aspects of the self’ and the mutual impact between individuals and their socio-histories resonate with Blommaert’s (2006, p. 238) differentiation between “‘achieved’ or ‘inhabited’ identity – the identity people themselves articulate or claim – and ‘ascribed’ or ‘attributed’ identity – the identity given to someone by someone else”. This implies that the way we see ourselves and want to be seen by others does not always correspond to the way we are actually perceived and identified. Indeed, alongside our self-beliefs and our self-definitions, “we are socially pressurised to conform in order to avoid being stigmatised as ‘weird’, ‘odd’ or ‘strange’” (Badwan, 2021, p. 148). Therefore, inner and outer pressures can not only impact on one’s sense of identity, but they might also highlight and exacerbate the distinction between Self and Other. This is particularly challenging for sojourners who may feel compelled to project the identity they feel ‘pressurised’ into having, unable to express their own.

SA experiences and the changes and unfamiliarity that they involve, can therefore destabilise one’s understanding of language (Badwan, 2020) as well as one’s identity (Block, 2002) and impede sojourners to express themselves fully. The involvement of a second language has led scholars in the SA field to investigate more specifically the language-related identity of students abroad, their L2 identity (Benson et al., 2013; Block, 2007), plurilingual identity (Cots et al., 2021) and the fluid nature of identity (Badwan, 2021). Therefore, despite being potentially destabilising, the SA context can also provide opportunities for the expansion and re-definition of one’s identity. On this matter, Benson et al. (2013, p. 2) argue that “[w]e have multiple identities, and knowledge of a second language adds to the possibilities for being, or being seen as, a different person in different contexts”. This expressive potential seemed to emerge very strongly

from my data, especially from Lucia's experience in her evolving perception of self from child to adult parallel to her linguistic development (see section 8.4). By looking at my participants from a holistic, situated and relational point of view, I did not limit my attention to language-related identity, and I allowed any aspect of my participants' identity to emerge from the data, also looking at the contextual and social elements involved.

3.2.2.1 Presentation and Preservation of Identity

The potential discrepancy between one's achieved and attributed identity (or identities) in a SA context has been addressed by Pellegrino Aveni (2005) who discusses four factors involved in the construction and protection of one's identity in an L2 context. Two factors are related to self-presentation and social hierarchy – control and status – and two to self-preservation and social distance – validation and safety. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) gathered data through narrative journals, interviews and questionnaires from 76 students and graduates from American universities who went to Russia on a study abroad programme. The participants stayed in Russia between four months and a whole academic year and provided data about their experiences related to their language use inside and outside the classroom. Although the students were not asked directly about their self-perceptions or identities, the data provided rich insights into their perspective about language learning in an L2 context and led the author to devise the four factors about identity presentation and preservation.

Pellegrino Aveni (2005) reports that some of her participants felt like children (also in Smolcic, 2013) or that they were treated like children (threatening their *status*), which was in contrast with their sense of self and their identity in their first language. Their foreigner identity did not make their real self feel *validated* and this, combined with the feeling of not being in *control* of their environment, seemed to lead to lower linguistic performances. Moreover, the factor of *safety* was also relevant as students in some cases chose to isolate themselves or stay quiet to avoid distress or (psychological) harm. This model seemed to apply to my participants' experiences as well, as will become evident from Chapter 5 to Chapter 8. Furthermore, the attention to the preservation of identity already introduces the idea of coping strategies used on SA, which is discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2.

To clarify my standpoint and my conceptualisation of identity: I believe that one's identity could be compared to a glass prism with a variable number of sides, each representing one of the factors involved in the construction of one's identity. These sides can increase in number and change size and orientation in response to both internal and external forces. Each side can only be seen when one points a light on it yet inevitably this refracts some light on the rest of the prism as well, making it hard to isolate a specific aspect. The complex nature of people's identity and the variables added to it by the study of a second language in a foreign country make researching identity in a SA context even more important.

The pervasiveness of identity in SA contexts and SA research is evident in the numerous examples of ethnocentrism and the feelings of being a foreigner, as well as the sojourners' agency in projecting their identity. These are discussed in the two sub-sections below before I address the role motivation played in the identity development of my participants.

3.2.2.2 Ethnocentrism

According to Block (2007, p. 170), when "a student's sense of self is thrown into crisis" during their SA, instead of increasing intercultural awareness, the event may trigger and promote ethnocentrism. This was noticed primarily in US students, which may be due to their potentially fewer previous experiences abroad compared to their European counterparts, or because Europeans experience travelling and study abroad as Europeans rather than as specific nationals of their country (Block, 2007). On the subject, Kinginger (2013a, pp. 346-347) states that "regardless of their nationality, when some students encounter challenges to the habitus associated with their national identity, their reaction is to withdraw from the negotiation of difference". In other words, when one's sense of self, or identity-related beliefs, are challenged or 'thrown into crisis', sojourners may retreat into their safe and familiar national identity and give up any potential attempts at negotiating and reconsidering the differences in beliefs they encountered (see also section 3.3.4 on cognitive dissonance). Essentially, sojourners filter the host country's cultural practices through their sociocultural background and beliefs – 'habitus' in Bourdieu's (1977) terms –, and because some beliefs, especially those related to one's identity, may be harder to change than others (Borg, 2011; Rokeach, 1970), the students may refer back to those instead of facing the conflict with the new ones. National identity and

ethnocentrism were not a major topic in my research but one of my participants' experiences provided some insights into the subject that are worthy of mention (see Chapter 8).

The length of SA may be a contributing factor to higher or lower levels of ethnocentrism. On this matter, Kinginger (2013b, p. 347) suggests that shorter SA may not give students time to "overcome the tendency to interpret cultural practices of their hosts in terms of their own sociocultural history". Dwyer (2004) also reports that longer periods abroad (or shorter but highly educationally planned ones) seem to have more and longer-term impact on students' outcomes in a wide range of areas. Similarly, Block (2007) and Murphy-Lejeune (2002) hypothesise that identity developments may not last long after the students' return to the home country but longer stays may promote long-term changes in the sense of self of SA students. On the other hand, Tarrant et al. (2014) found increased global awareness in students after a 4-week course, suggesting that the length of the stay may not be the only factor that leads to changes or development in a SA experience. Further SA research encompassing the theme of beliefs would therefore benefit from more longitudinal studies and my research has tried to respond and contribute to this.

3.2.2.3 Foreigner Status and Agency

Closely related to national identity, students can often be identified, or identify, as foreigners, as reported by Iino (2006) and Kinginger (2013b). Sojourners can be seen as foreigners by their host family and the locals, which can already filter the sojourners' identity and prevent them from being, or at least feeling like, themselves. In this case, the ascribed identity differs from one's achieved identity, according to Blommaert's (2006) terminology. On the other hand, some sojourners may deliberately choose to take on the role of foreigner in some situations where they may feel more freedom, or tolerance towards them. This is reported in Iino's (2006) study where some of the American participants on SA in Japan consciously chose to act like a "gaijin" (a foreigner) to be excused for their mistakes or their manners. The author commented that it seemed "to be a strategy whereby the care-receiver surrenders power to the careproviders" (Iino, 2006, p. 160). However, by giving some of their power away, they gained an element of control over the situation, which could be related to one of Pellegrino Aveni's (2005) identity preservation factors. This strategy also resonates with

Benson et al.'s (2013) idea that there is still some degree of agency in choosing which identity to project outward:

“Language competence is a pre-requisite for the projection of identities in a second language, but more importantly students’ acquisition and use of pragmatic competence partly depends on the kinds of identities they want to project and the responses they receive to them.” (Benson et al., 2013, p. 183)

The individual choices of each sojourner about the identity they want to project in their SA may therefore have an impact both on how they are (or would like to be) perceived by others and on the way they perceive themselves. This decision-making could be also referred to as agency, which Duff and Doherty (2015, p. 414) define as “people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation”. Thus, agency can be seen as an individual’s force that may push against or adhere to external pressures, such as societal conventions, cultural norms, and social interactions. Marginson (2014, p. 7) argues that “[a]ll international students cross the border to become different, whether through learning, through graduating with a degree, through immersion in the linguistic setting, or simply through growing up”. This not only reiterates the importance of acknowledging the agency of SA students, but it also highlights the transformative potential SA experiences have. At the same time, just as one’s identity can develop and change as a consequence of the interactions with other people, cultures and other external factors, so can one’s agency. From this point of view, Cots et al. (2021) suggest that the contextual elements can be seen as agents themselves, affecting the individual’s agency. Due to the pandemic, I was unable to gather as much contextual data as I had planned and hoped for (see section 4.6); nevertheless, the agentic role of the context seemed to indirectly emerge from my participants’ accounts, as will be discussed in Chapter 9.

3.2.2.4 Motivation

One last concept related to identity is motivation, which is a further topic that I had not initially planned to address specifically but which became relevant to my research during the data analysis. For the purposes of this thesis I shall not discuss motivation in too much detail (see Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2013, for a thorough review of the different theoretical conceptualisations of motivation); however, my participants’ motivations to go on a YA and to learn Italian became

more and more relevant during my analysis and inevitably intertwined with their overall experience. I discuss motivation in relation to identity as one of my participants (Lucia) had an incredibly strong identity-related motivation, aiming 'to become Italian' during her YA. Details about her motivation and the evolution of this objective are discussed in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, but I deemed it important to introduce the topic to aid clarity in the following chapters. A helpful way to describe motivation is provided by Ushioda (2001) who explains that in qualitative research motivation is investigated "in terms of what patterns of thinking and belief underlie such [learning-related] activity and shape students' engagement in the learning process" (Ushioda, 2001, p. 96). I therefore consider motivation as a set of beliefs and thoughts, which may also guide actions, and which overlap with the broader beliefs system of the individual. In the SA context, motivation has been investigated mostly in relation to SLA (DeKeyser, 1991; Isabelli, 2006; Polanyi, 1995), but recent studies are also connecting motivation with intercultural competence (Anderson & Lawton, 2015) or more holistic aspects of SA such as ideological becoming (Harvey, 2016, 2017), as well as acknowledging its contextual components (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Ushioda, 2009). Two particular aspects from motivation research that helped my analysis and deepened my understanding of my findings are:

1) As well as being linked to language learning and learning behaviours, motivation is also related to "the affective characteristics of the learner" (Dörnyei, 2009a, p. 231); and Wesely (2012, p. 100) notes that "motivation and anxiety, have often been placed in causal relationships with learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in the literature". This resonates with several of the topics my research investigated, although I argue that their relationship is not causal (nor linear) but rather mutual and dynamic.

2) According to Ushioda (2009), research on motivation should move from linearity to relationality. She posits that "in much existing research on language motivation, context or culture is located externally, as something pre-existing, a stable independent background variable, outside the individual" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 218). To move away from this understanding of context (or culture) as passive, immobile and external to the individual, she encourages researchers to see the learners as real people who are socially, culturally and historically situated in contexts that can influence them and in turn be influenced by them. In this

'person-in-context' approach, the individual is seen as a "self-reflective intentional agent, inherently part of and shaping her [*sic*] own context" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 218), which combines research about motivation with a more holistic focus on individuals as 'whole people', rather than being limited to their L2-related selves and identity. Not only was this perspective extremely influential in my research because it acknowledges the active role of the context, but it also highlights the importance of the individual's agency and voice in the co-creation of their context and reality.

Now that the cognitive elements have been discussed, I turn to the cultural aspect of SA, introducing the concept of culture and its implications in SA research and then focusing on three key areas that were particularly relevant in my case study: 'culture shock', 'acculturation', and cognitive dissonance theory.

3.3 Cultural Aspect

'Culture' is another controversial term, and it warrants clarification. According to Fay (1996, p. 55), culture can be defined as "a complex set of shared beliefs, values, and concepts which enables a group to make sense of its life and which provides it with directions for how to live". As seen in the previous sections, the nature of beliefs was debated and initially considered fixed. The same applies to culture as it was conventionally seen as a closed, fixed and coherent entity, whereas researchers such as Fay (1996) and Holliday (2017) argue that it is instead an open system, which can be influenced by other cultures, and in which people may have partly divergent beliefs. Holliday (1999, 2017, 2018b) highlights that much research investigates cultural differences through 'large' culture lenses, which relate to "the essential differences between ethnic, national or international entities" (Holliday, 1999, p. 240). This focus on large bounded systems based on nationality and generally stereotypical factors, leads not only to an essentialist and overgeneralising view of culture but also to the risk of seeing culture as negative, hindering communication and understanding. Holliday (1999) therefore suggests a 'small culture' approach to better understand and appreciate the complexity of such a construct. 'Small cultures' are open and flexible in nature and include any social grouping regardless of the large culture to which they are conventionally assigned. In my research, 'culture' is seen as a set of 'small cultures', all interrelated and mutually influencing each other, in a process of constant redefinition. This is not to refute the impact that national

cultures can have on individuals and their sense of identity, rather to acknowledge that one's 'culture' is a much more complex construct. Besides one's nationality, culture is also made up by many other factors such as religion, gender, social status and ethnicity to mention a few (Badwan & Hall, 2020), as well as the shared views within smaller 'cohesive social groupings' (Holliday, 1999). Thus, I consider the 'small culture' approach as more apt to acknowledge and research such diversity.

Cultural aspects of SA are particularly important for my research because sometimes sojourners may perceive different cultural practices as more problematic than the linguistic barriers. One clear example of this is Wilkinson's (1998) study, in which US students hosted by French families used the house phone to call other US friends on SA in the same area to arrange a time and place to meet. However, traditionally from a French perspective, that was a waste of money as they would typically go directly to their friends' houses and would meet without pre-arrangements (which instead was frowned upon in the US). This misunderstanding of a cultural practice "plag[ued] even the most basic exchanges and ultimately le[d] to negative stereotyping" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 30), which would have been avoided if the students had been aware, or informed, of the local perspective and had more understanding of the cultural differences between their home and host countries. Providing such insider support and perspectives is part of my methodology, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

To summarise, in this thesis the concepts of 'culture' and 'cultural differences' are not used in an essentialist way (Holliday, 2017) as generalised and stereotypical assumptions (e.g. 'Italians are...' or 'British are...'). On the contrary, they are considered as personal understandings and perceptions of different practices, from different ways to arrange meetings or cross the streets, to discrepancies in the way people express disagreement or address certain topics of conversation. From this perspective, interculturality is interpreted as "the ability to make sense of intercultural experience in terms of one's own cultural background" (Holliday, 2016a, p. 319) and "a reflexive awareness of Self and Other in a crossing of boundaries" (Holliday, 2018a, p. 6). In other words, developing interculturality means to develop the understanding of one's positionality in the world, going beyond the 'large culture' mentality of seeing 'us' and 'them', and to move beyond

these differential biases. At the same time, I acknowledge that “we can all employ conflicting discourses of culture at the same time” (Holliday, 2016a, p. 318) and in my research journey I had to reflexively recognise the nuances of my thinking. In particular, I learnt over time that the “blurred lines between conventional generalisations and harmful essentialist statements” (Collins & Armenta Delgado, 2019, p. 542) are harder to distinguish than one may think, and the boundaries often come down to “a matter of degree rather than categorical embargo” (Phillips, 2010, p. 58).

Essentialist views of culture can have implications on how intercultural experiences, such as the SA, are perceived, and below I discuss some of the main issues within SA research that are related to such views, before turning to the concept of ‘culture shock’.

3.3.1 Implications of Essentialism in SA Research

I have mentioned on a few occasions that the interest in the SA context has been rising parallel to the increasing globalisation and internationalisation of education. Nonetheless, these concepts have been problematised as, behind the façade of promoting mobility and transcending borders, they have in fact produced new borders and new social divisions (Badwan, 2021; Collins, 2018; Harvey, 2016; Phillips, 2010). Both ‘globalisation’ and ‘internationalisation’ often imply essentialist values, reinforcing the distinction between ‘national’ and ‘international’ and promoting national cultures and ‘large culture’ discourses (Holliday, 1999). In the SA context, this has led to the conceptualisation of international students from a deficit and disembodied perspective, as a “reduced Other” (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2014, p. 10), and as “rational and choice-exercising customers” yet “devoid of context and disembodied” (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2012, p. 416). Using ‘the intercultural’ and ‘interculturality’ superficially, for marketing and commercial purposes, often deprives them of their meaning and has led to the disembodiment of SA (Sidhu & Dall’Alba, 2012). Embodied factors (e.g. gender, race, skin colour, accent) are frequently neglected in the marketing of international education, yet they are very real components of the SA experience for sojourners and can further highlight dichotomic and essentialist discourses of Self vs Other, or insider vs outsider, amongst others. Collins’s (2018) idea of ‘interculturality from below’, offers a critical and reflexive approach in which “social actors navigate, negotiate and contest institutional discourses” (ibid., p.

179), opposing the functional top-down strategy of ‘interculturality from above’ that imposes a marketised and hollow view of interculturality. Both approaches to interculturality co-exist and the latter may be still prevalent, yet the agency involved in the former is also reflected in current research trends, focusing on giving voice to the agentic researched (Badwan & Simpson, 2019; Harvey, 2017; Marginson, 2014; Ryazanova, 2019), or co-researchers (Hanks, 2021), and their perspectives. By acknowledging the agency and voice of my participants as well as the situated nature of their experiences abroad, I have tried to follow and contribute to the attempts in research at contrasting the essentialist discourses of culture and the disembodiment of SA sojourners.

3.3.2 ‘Culture Shock’

‘Culture shock’ is a cultural and affective component of SA with a vast literature addressing the topic from a multiplicity of points of view and from several different philosophical standpoints (Difruscio & Rennick, 2013; Furnham, 2019; Martin, 1984; Pedersen, 1995). For the purposes of this thesis, I shall limit the discussion of ‘culture shock’ to its more widely diffused frameworks, focusing on a more recent re-conceptualisation of the topic that informed my research, and then clarifying my standpoint.

The term ‘culture shock’ is still contested among researchers and has essentialist philosophical underpinnings that do not align with my conceptualisation of culture and which I discuss in more detail in section 3.3.3. However, it is generally believed to have been coined by Oberg (1954) – although this has been refuted by some (see Dutton, 2011) – who defined it as “an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad” (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). This clinical vision of ‘culture shock’ seen as an ailment with “its own symptoms, cause, and cure” (ibid.) was later criticised and replaced by a less inherently negative conceptualisation of it, which saw cross-cultural contacts as opportunities for social skills and culture learning (Bochner, 1986). Pedersen (1995) labelled these two currents of thought the ‘medical model’ and the ‘educational (or growth) model’, and he defined ‘culture shock’ as “an internalized construct or perspective developed in reaction or response to the new or unfamiliar situation” (ibid.: vii). This view broadens the idea of ‘culture shock’ not only beyond its negative, pathological conceptualisation but also beyond its boundaries of being something specifically related to being ‘transplanted abroad’

as proposed by Oberg (1960). Pedersen (1995) reports that research studies carried out after Oberg's (1954, 1960) paper, suggest that 'culture shock' occurs in any unfamiliar situation, including for example a change in job or relationship, regardless of going abroad. This is not meant to belittle the relevance of 'culture shock' in a SA context, rather it aims to underline its pervasiveness in such an environment, which can be seen as a highly unfamiliar setting, full of potential triggers for 'culture shock'.

In the field of SLA, Gass and Selinker (2013, p. 237) defined 'culture shock' as "anxiety relating to disorientation from exposure to a new culture" and, although the idea of disorientation seems to indicate something temporary or "a transitional stage" (Coleman, 1997, p. 9), students seem to be affected in different ways and for different amounts of time. How 'culture shock' works and how one can overcome it – or be 'cured' from it (from Oberg's clinical perspective) – has been at the heart of the research on the topic, and a few models of adjustment to the host culture have been proposed to frame 'culture shock' within a number of stages that culminate in cultural adaptation. Although the specific phases of 'culture shock' and cultural adaptation proposed over the past decades are still debated (Viol & Klasen, 2021), the division in stages seems to be widely accepted (Dutton, 2011), usually describing the process as a U curve or a W curve if including 'reverse culture shock' (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Another conceptual framework that is diffused amongst researchers and is relevant to my research is the model of 'acculturation', which sees 'culture shock' as a process of intercultural adaptation influenced by affective, behavioural and cognitive factors (Ward, 2001). This re-conceptualisation of 'culture shock' is presented in section 3.3.3, after an overview of the stages of the traditional 'culture shock', together with the main criticism of this framework.

3.3.2.1 The Stages of 'Culture Shock'

Oberg (1954) proposed a 4-stage model, made up of honeymoon, aggression/hostility, recovery, and adjustment/acceptance stages. According to this model, when entering a new cultural context, one is initially exhilarated by the novelty of the experience (honeymoon stage), then the lack of shared, familiar cues may lead to disorientation and discomfort, triggering hostile attitudes towards the host nationals (hostility stage). At this point one may tend to bond more with co-nationals, romanticise one's home country, and develop

stereotyped views about one's hosts, in a sort of "regression" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). This is a period of crisis, or 'culture shock', that one has to overcome in order to reach cultural adaptation. If one manages to learn to get by and build some confidence in spite of the difficulties, the recovery from such crisis begins (recovery stage), one's sense of humour may take over the hostility, and eventually, the acceptance of the differences between home and host culture leads to cultural adaptation (acceptance stage).

This model has been criticised by different scholars for several reasons (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Krzaklewska & Skórska, 2013; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Pedersen, 1995; Ward et al., 1998), the main ones being:

- its clinical and fatalistic view of 'culture shock' seen as an inevitable disease, which has since been replaced by a more adaptive and educational conceptualisation of it;
- its linearity in the adaptation process, which is seen as more erratic and also impacted by personal variables;
- the different rate of adaptation and individual starting points, as these may lead to differences in the U-curve evolution;
- the initial 'honeymoon' stage, which has mostly been based on anecdotal and recalled data and has been confuted by several studies;
- the achievability of the final stage of complete cultural adaptation has also been questioned.

Despite the criticism and the essentialist implications of this conceptualisation, later models seemed to stem from Oberg's phases as a variation on the general theme of a U-curve process of cultural adaptation including some kind of initial excitement, a crisis and a recovery (e.g. Adler, 1975; Pedersen, 1995). In her integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation, Kim (2001, 2012) tried to combine different theoretical constructs to develop a more cohesive framework. Although she integrated the U-curve process within this, associating it with short-term adaptation, Kim's (2001, 2012) 'stress-adaptation-growth dynamic' model moved away from the criticised linearity of previous frameworks and proposed a cyclical view of cross-cultural adaptation. This resonated also with Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) work, which was particularly relevant for my research.

In a longitudinal case study looking at students on YA in European destinations, the different level of proficiency and previous experiences abroad led Murphy-Lejeune (2002) to re-imagine the U-curve framework. She distanced herself from the traditional conceptualisation of 'culture shock', using words such as 'surprise' or 'discovery' to replace the idea of 'shock', and describing the experience in more positive terms based on her participants' accounts. She suggests that one's 'discovery' follows a more irregular pattern than previous models and is made up of a series of curves, or waves, in which "(t)he ups and downs are a function of outside events or incidents and demonstrate the fluctuation, the ebb and flow between strangeness and familiarity" (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 134). This new conceptualisation of 'culture shock' proposes the iterative nature of the process and it also takes into consideration the different starting points of the individual SA students. Depending on how novel the experience felt to them, Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) participants described a more or less euphoric initial stage, with those who had more experience in travelling abroad and higher levels of proficiency reporting only two main phases in their stay abroad and not including any elated beginning. Because of their previous experiences, they only described an initial period of stress and disorientation followed by a more positive and constructive phase of discovery of the new culture, increased confidence, self-expression, and interpersonal connections. These two steps seemed to recur multiple times over the course of their stay, and the author also mentions a potential third step in which the students reflected on their progress and personal development. Reflecting on one's experiences, thoughts and actions may be a contributing factor to belief changes, as has been suggested in studies on teacher beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012; Osterman, 1990; Tillema, 2000). The role of reflection seemed relevant also in my research and the wave-like framework proposed by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) was the one that seemed to better reflect the experiences of my participants as will be discussed in Chapter 5 to Chapter 9.

Reverse, or re-entry, 'culture shock' has been described as the 'culture shock' sojourners perceive when returning to their home country and environment once they need to settle back in their 'normal' lives (Martin, 1984; Presbitero, 2016). Investigating the potential 'reverse culture shock' in my participants was considered as a possible follow-up in my data collection but eventually I decided to exclude it from my research plan due to time and resources constraints.

Furthermore, it became unfeasible after the pandemic, as the students returned to a life that was far from their pre-departure 'normality'. For these reasons, I shall not discuss the topic in more detail; however, future research should investigate the relation between prior beliefs and the effects of 'reverse culture shock' in the SA context.

3.3.2.2 Terminology of 'Culture Shock'

Seeing 'culture shock' as a sequence of stages is still diffused in current research (Cupsa, 2018); nonetheless, over the past few decades, the term has not been left unchallenged, with Murphy-Lejeune (2002) criticising it for its inadequacy to describe a complex experience that is not inherently negative and is "not always cultural, or at least not exclusively cultural" (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 130). Similarly, Fitzpatrick (2017) denounces the cultural determinism that characterises the scholarship on 'culture shock' and recommends viewing culture in context and in a less essentialist way. Viewing culture as dynamic and co-constructed by macro-factors (e.g. social norms or economic influences) and micro-factors (e.g. the individuals' personal background and their actions and agency within their environment) leads to an everchanging context that develops through the interplay between the physical and sociocultural setting of a SA and the individual's involvement. Such a complex construct would be limited and oversimplified if seen through the large-culture lenses that tend to prevail in the research about 'culture shock'. This is the conceptualisation I subscribe to in this thesis: seeing 'culture shock' as a process of moving from unfamiliar to familiar in a dynamic reality in which both the sojourners and the context (seen in a more holistic way than only cultural) have agentic roles in the co-creation of the SA experience and are therefore both mutually involved in the process of familiarisation and adaptation that takes place during the stay abroad. For these reasons, in this thesis I shall refrain from using the term 'culture shock', with the exception of direct references to its traditional conceptualisation.

Whether U-shaped, W-shaped, cyclical or wave-like, a division in stages can provide a helpful model for the understanding of intercultural encounters. However, different theories have been developed over the past few decades, replacing 'culture shock' both terminologically and conceptually. A particularly relevant re-conceptualisation of it is presented in the following section.

3.3.3 'Acculturation'

As previously mentioned, the clinical (and somehow fatalistic) notion of 'culture shock' was criticised for several reasons and replaced by more dynamic conceptualisations of it around the 1980s (Zhou et al., 2008). These theories stopped seeing 'culture shock' as an inevitable ailment and re-framed it more as a learning experience and a process, in which the cross-cultural travellers had an active role instead of being seen as passive 'patients' in need of a cure. In order to better represent this dynamism and the individuals' participation in the process, terms such as 'acculturation' and 'adaptation' started to be used more frequently. Furnham (2019, p. 1835) defines 'acculturation' as "a process of change in attitudes, beliefs, identities and values that individuals experience over-time when they come into continuous and prolonged contact with people from a different culture". 'Acculturation' is thus seen as a conceptual model that refers to the adjustment of an individual to a new socio-cultural environment, involving changes in the individual and their belief and value systems, as well as in their attitudes. The pertinence of this concept within the SA literature and in relation to my research is evident from this definition, which also seems to reiterate the potential change-inducing effects of SA for the individuals who experience it. A much earlier definition explicitly referred to another important aspect of 'acculturation', which sees contacts between cross-cultural groups as impacting on "the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield et al., 1936, p. 149). This makes 'acculturation' a two-way process that may affect not only the sojourners at collective and individual level, but also the host nationals they come into contact with, mutually influencing each other. The perspective of the host nationals and the relationship between the two involved parties have been under-researched (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002) and, although the pandemic limited my access to first-hand data from the host part, my participants' reports of their interactions provide clear evidence of this mutual impact.

3.3.3.1 My 'Liquid' Approach to Acculturation

Before moving on to presenting one of the models of 'acculturation', my use of such a term warrants clarification. I am aware of the lack of conformity in terminology and the critique of 'acculturation' theories in which the term 'acculturation' may be seen as ethnocentric (Bochner, 1986; Rudmin, 2009) and the "concept of culture is often used in uncritical, systematic, and reified ways"

(Dervin, 2011, p. 39). I agree that 'acculturation' and its traditional conceptualisation are based on essentialist, or at least neo-essentialist (Holliday, 2011), premises, looking at cultures as potentially crossable, yet still bounded, systems. I overcame this philosophical and conceptual clash by adopting what Dervin (2011) calls a 'liquid' approach to acculturation and intercultural discourses. He borrows the term from Bauman's (2000) work on the differentiation between Modernity and Postmodernity, where he describes modern society as 'liquid' in order to highlight its fluid and mutable nature, in contrast with the traditional 'solid', or fixed, conceptualisations of it. I have already explained my small-culture perspective and my attempt in this research to distance myself from large-culture approaches, yet the literature on 'acculturation' is a minefield of essentialist and neo-essentialist notions. Dervin's (2011) 'liquid' approach applies a more 'small culture-like' perspective to 'acculturation' and allowed me to re-conceptualise it, not as the integration between two cultures seen as distinct, generalised and 'solid' constructs, rather as a mutual interaction between sets of 'small cultures', seen as flexible and evolving. Using Chirkov's (2009, p. 97) words, I tried to "look at acculturation through the prism of the interpretative social sciences and focus on the dynamics of the changes in the intersubjective meanings of various culturally constructed realities and study individuals' intrasubjective meanings that immigrants [*sojourners, in my case*] assign to their actions in a new country". By shifting the paradigm behind the conceptualisation of 'acculturation', I managed to make sense of it and apply it to my research without philosophical contradictions. At the same time, as recommended by Dervin (2011), throughout my research I reflected on and acknowledged my potential biases and I admit that on certain occasions I reverted to some more stereotypical, large-culture connotations of culture. In some cases I was able to re-frame my statements, in others I only realised my slips in hindsight during my data analysis. Although I initially felt ashamed to inadvertently perpetuate stereotypical views of culture, by noticing and reflecting on my deep-rooted biases, I was able to bring them to the surface and face them. I therefore had first-hand evidence that we can hold contrasting, and at times tacit, beliefs and that "we can all employ conflicting discourses of culture at the same time" (Holliday, 2016a, p. 318). Nonetheless, in hindsight I consider these reflexive and reflective practices as an integral part of my research journey and beneficial to my development as a researcher.

In any later reference to ‘acculturation’ (or ‘intercultural adaptation’) in this thesis, I shall imply my ‘liquid’ conceptualisation of it (Dervin, 2011), unless discussing others’ perspectives or its traditional views. Before I move on to address the model of acculturation that I drew upon in my research, it is important to foreground another construct that relates to the idea of liquidity and of moving beyond bounded conceptualisations of culture, and which I applied to the acculturation framework I developed (see Chapter 9): the Third Space.

3.3.3.2 Third Space

According to Bhabha (1994), the Third Space is where, by speaking, individuals not only position themselves as speakers but also as social actors. In other words, what individuals say goes beyond the spoken words, because through their utterances they automatically position themselves within the social structure, based on their social, historical and power relations within it and, at the same time, moving beyond these. Bhabha (1994), from his post-colonial perspective, questions the essentialist categorisations of identity and culture and conceptualises a hybrid space, where the lines between colonised and coloniser are blurred and the real meaning of culture can be expressed. Applying the Third Space theory to intercultural studies, Kramsch (1993, 2009) developed the concept of ‘third culture’, which is to be understood “as a symbolic PROCESS of meaning-making that sees beyond the dualities of national languages (L1–L2) and national cultures (C1-C2)” (Kramsch, 2011, pp. 355, emphasis in original). This concept of hybridity moves beyond and refutes the essentialist views of language and culture so learners – and I extend this to sojourners as well – are not expected to take on the target culture, language and customs, rather to negotiate their differences and find a safe space to “express their own meanings without being hostage to the meanings of either their own or the target speech communities” (Kramsch, 1993, pp. 13-14). The construct of Third Space and its implications for my acculturation framework will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Moving back to the concept of ‘culture shock’, although its re-conceptualisations led to the development of numerous theories (Zhou et al., 2008), for the purposes of this discussion, in the next section I shall only focus on one that was particularly relevant for my research – the ABC model of acculturation (Ward, 2001) – and the three theories this was based on.

3.3.3.3 ABC Model of Acculturation

By borrowing from three existing theories, Ward (2001) proposed the ABC model of acculturation in which intercultural adaptation is understood to be made up of affective, behavioural, and cognitive components. An overview of the three original theories is presented below to provide more clarity and background information:

Stress and Coping (Affect)

This approach sees stressful life events (such as a SA experience and intercultural encounters more broadly) as the triggers for distress and a risk for one's psychological well-being. Therefore, it promotes the development of resilience and coping strategies (including establishing social support systems) to aid stress management (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The attention to the psychological and affective element of cross-cultural experiences and the focus on coping strategies is particularly relevant to my research and will be discussed further in this chapter, also in relation to cognitive dissonance theory (see section 3.3.4).

Culture Learning (Behaviour)

In this model, intercultural contacts are seen as a catalyst and an opportunity for adaptation, which can be achieved by learning socio-cultural skills and behaviours that may facilitate the interactions with the host nationals (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This theory led to the promotion of practical training to prepare sojourners, with particular focus on the social behaviours that would help them in their interactions and intercultural experience.

Social Identification (Cognition)

The role of identity within the context of acculturation has been investigated by numerous scholars and varied models have been proposed. The initial uni-dimensional model (Olmedo, 1979), in which the sojourner needed to adapt to and identify with the host culture (assimilation), was criticised and accused of ethnocentrism (Bochner, 1986), and a bi-dimensional model of acculturation was suggested. According to this model, sojourners could achieve a bi-cultural (or multi-cultural) identity without having to detach from their own culture (Bochner, 1982, 1986). Despite its establishment within the psychological field in the US, Ward (2001) observes that this model failed to provide a systematic definition of

biculturalism. This was due to the unclear distinction and measurement of the individuals' degree of identification with the two cultures. A more complex model was suggested by Berry (1997) who proposed four categories to conceptualise the level of identification with one's home culture (cultural maintenance) and the host culture (contact and participation):

- assimilation (high identification with the host culture, low with the home one),
- integration (high identification with both cultures),
- separation (high identification with the home culture but low with the host one),
- marginalisation (low identification with either culture).

The uni-dimensional, bi-dimensional and orthogonal models show an increased focus on the complex interplay between home and host cultures, which in turn can be affected by several factors, including but not limited to age, length and type of sojourn, and previous intercultural experiences (Ward, 2001). The impact that the encounter with the host community can have on the sojourners' identity is emphasised also in the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981). This derives from the social psychology field and highlights the role that the sojourners' personal and socio-cultural identity and beliefs can have on the interactions with (and perceptions about) the host culture and nationals. These theories are only a few of the ones developed and applied to the concept of acculturation but they already show the complexity of the multiple factors involved in it. The mutual interaction between internal and external factors in the process of acculturation and the effects this can have on one's identity, led Ward (2001) to develop a more comprehensive framework to research acculturation. In this model the unfamiliar intercultural context (e.g. SA) triggers some degree of stress in the sojourner, who should aim to develop "stress-coping strategies and culturally relevant social-skills" (Zhou et al., 2008: 69) to promote psychological and socio-cultural adjustment.

Recently in the SA literature, Beaven and Spencer-Oatey (2016) have used the ABC of acculturation model (Ward, 2001) in their longitudinal multiple case study to map the cultural adaptation patterns of 21 Italian Erasmus students going on SA in 2009/2010. Beaven and Spencer-Oatey's (2016) article focuses on one of the students, Angela, who went to Scotland as part of her BA in MFL studying English and Spanish, and it was a particularly relevant study for my research as

they share many similarities both in focus and methodology. The researchers combined a range of data collection tools: a pre-departure and a post-return interview, monthly Skype calls and weekly diary tables rating the different areas of their lives on a scale from 1 to 5. Their use of multiple methods is a first similarity with my research (mine are discussed in section 4.3), and although they did not specifically focus on prior beliefs, the pre-departure interview may have revealed some of them. They investigated both the social/personal aspects of the lives of the participants and the more academic ones, which gives this study a relatively holistic perspective – although language was still part of their main focus. Through thematic analysis and the use of graphs based on the diary tables, the study tried to track the evolution of the cultural adaptation of the participants. This encompassed affective challenges (e.g. issues and misunderstandings with her flatmate, difficulties making local friends or ‘being herself’ in a foreign language, anxiety) and coping strategies (e.g. talking about problems, making friends with other Erasmus students, reflecting, and acknowledging that anxiety was a shared issue), showing similar experiences to those shared by my participants. The key findings of this case study were that cultural adaptation varies not only between individuals but also between areas of life where students may adapt at different rates, and that the linguistic aspect impacts on all elements of the ABC model – linguistic difficulties created stress (Affective), led to different actions according to the progress in her proficiency (Behavioural) and made it difficult for Angela to express herself and her identity (Cognitive). Furthermore, this study reports numerous ups and downs in the different life domains of the student and over the course of her SA, further supporting Murphy-Lejeune’s (2002) wave-model. The authors acknowledge the role context may play, yet my research took this further, by considering it as an agentic force in the YA experiences of my participants. Finally, Beaven and Spencer-Oatey (2016) do not clarify their perspective on the large-culture approach inherent in the ABC model, whereas I continue to see it as liquid (Dervin, 2011) and based on an even more holistic view of my participants.

In this section I have presented the tenets of the ABC model of Acculturation, with acculturation seen as a learning process rather than a disease-like ‘culture shock’, and understood from a liquid perspective. From the point of view of this model, sojourners should aim to develop affective coping strategies, knowledge

of the socio-cultural appropriate behaviours to facilitate interactions. A further factor that is seen as beneficial is the cognitive element of being aware of the potential effects of the bias of one's perceptions of oneself (as an individual or part of a community) and others, which also allows for a less essentialist interpretation of the model. The variables involved in this ABC model of acculturation are therefore both individual (e.g. personality, language competence, social support available) and contextual (e.g. host/home country, cultural factors, intercultural biases). By investigating my participants' affective challenges and prior beliefs in their SA experience, my research provides new insight into the affective and cognitive aspects of the acculturation process. Furthermore, by carrying out a longitudinal study with data collection stages staggered over the course of the YA period, I have tried to keep track of the development of the participants' coping strategies and socio-cultural behavioural changes, also addressing the third element of the ABC model from a longitudinal perspective.

During my analysis, the ABC model served as a helpful basis for my understanding of my participants' YA experiences, yet I eventually re-framed it through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory, which is the final concept I discuss in this Cultural section.

3.3.4 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The model of acculturation described above strongly resonates with the tenets of cognitive dissonance theory, combining cognitive, affective and cultural elements. Although I had not initially planned to use it, Festinger's (1957) concept of cognitive dissonance became extremely helpful in the framing and understanding of my findings, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9. Festinger (1957, p. 3) defines 'cognition' as "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior". According to this theory, when an individual's cognitions clash with each other, with one's behaviour or with the environment, this mismatch creates a conflict or discomfort, which Festinger (1957) called 'cognitive dissonance'. This resonates with the above-mentioned possibility of individuals holding overlapping and contrasting beliefs (see section 3.2.1.3). However, it also means that a clash between one's beliefs system and the perceived beliefs or behaviours in an unfamiliar environment – such as the SA – may trigger cognitive dissonance. This supports

the argument that beliefs are context-specific constructs (Barcelos, 2003; Basturkmen, 2012; Pajares, 1992) and should be researched within the environment they are being investigated, which strengthens my rationale for a longitudinal case study and my attention to prior beliefs and their development over the course of the YA experience.

Festinger's (1957) original cognitive dissonance theory has been researched and applied both inside and outside the field of social psychology (Cooper, 2007) and several revisions have been proposed over the years (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones, 2019; Maertz et al., 2009; Steele, 1988; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). These differ mainly in their theoretical interpretations of the source of cognitive dissonance and some of the main examples reported by Harmon-Jones (2019) and Maertz et al. (2009) are:

- the self-consistency theory, according to which dissonance is caused by a clash between one's behaviour and one's self-concept;
- the self-affirmation theory, which sees dissonance as triggered by a conflict between one's behaviour and one's sense of integrity and morality;
- and the New Look version of the theory, that considers one's feelings of responsibility for foreseeable negative consequences of one's behaviour as the root of the perceived cognitive dissonance.

Although these revisions disagree on its causes, scholars agree that cognitive dissonance produces some form of discomfort in the individual, who will feel a psychological need to reduce such dissonance (Cooper, 2007; Harmon-Jones, 2019). This resonates with my interest in coping strategies (see section 3.4.2), yet – despite its influence in a range of fields – cognitive dissonance theory has received very little attention within SA research (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Festinger (1957, p. 15) explains that “two cognitive elements may be dissonant for a person living in one culture and not for a person living in another, or for a person with one set of experiences and not for a person with another”. This is extremely important in the SA context and for my research specifically as it implies that sojourners may not only perceive some conflict or discomfort in relation to their hosts and host country, but their individual prior beliefs and ‘set of experiences’ can have an impact on their perceptions of the dissonance or consonance in their SA. Each SA experience is therefore unique, both because of the individual journey every student goes through during their time abroad, and

because of the cognitive, affective and behavioural 'luggage' they arrive with, and which affects their perceptions of and (re)actions within the SA environment.

The core dissonance-reduction strategies suggested by Festinger (1957) were to change one's cognition or behaviour, reject its dissonant elements or reduce their perceived importance, increase the consonant ones (or their importance), or add new cognitions in favour of the chosen belief or behaviour. Despite the several revisions, much of the original theory is still considered at the base of current applications (Cooper, 2007; Harmon-Jones, 2019; Vaidis & Bran, 2019) also with regard to the methods of dissonance reduction. Maertz et al. (2009) expanded the list of methods and applied them to the context of expatriate adjustment, proposing six ways to reduce dissonance, which have been used in research since. Mitchell and Paras (2018, p. 328) summarise these methods as:

“(1) *Values/beliefs/attitudes/norms (VABN) modification*: A change in VABN to make the inconsistent behaviour consonant again;

(2) *Perception modification*: Adding, selectively remembering, or distorting cognitions to reduce dissonance;

(3) *Self-affirmation*: Accessing positive cognitions about the self in order to protect the self-concept against threats posed by the inconsistency;

(4) *Rationalisation*: Adding cognitions about situational factors to explain or excuse the inconsistency;

(5) *Confession-redemption*: Accepting responsibility for acting inconsistently with a VABN and relieving discomfort by confessing wrong-doing or promising not to do the behaviour again;

(6) *Host VABN rejection*: A rejection in the host VABN.”

Although the focus on coping strategies has been limited in SA research, and cognitive dissonance theory has rarely been applied to such context, it has been suggested that the strategies applied by individuals experiencing dissonance during their SA “can either promote or prevent the growth of intercultural competence” (Mitchell & Paras, 2018, p. 323). In addition, Krzaklewska and Skórska (2013, p. 5) point out that some degree of stress – or cognitive dissonance in my conceptualisation of it – can be positive and promote adaptation as the “absence of stress can be connected with lower motivation to coping with

new requirements and tasks”. This further suggests a connection between emotion (stress), cognition (lower motivation) and actions (coping mechanisms). As already discussed, I also argue that context and prior beliefs are important factors in one’s SA experience and in the perception of cognitive dissonance. By not limiting my focus to specific affective challenges or coping strategies and instead allowing my participants to share any aspect of their SA freely, I gathered more holistic insights into their all-round experience abroad and their perceived levels of stress (or cognitive dissonance), which I contextually analysed in relation to their coping mechanism and perceived adaptation.

One final clarification on my use of cognitive dissonance theory is needed before concluding this Cultural section. Based on my holistic approach, conceptualising cognitive dissonance as solely related to one’s cognition seems limiting and almost contradictory, given my research focus on ‘affective’ challenges. As I discuss in the following section, I believe that cognition and emotion are inherently interconnected and cannot be researched individually. Furthermore, “cognition is a node in an ecological network comprising mind–body–world” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 143), which connects not only cognition and emotion but also behaviours (expressions of the body) and the contextual elements, in an ecological holistic approach (Bird et al., 2021; Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017). From an ecological perspective, individuals are seen as organisms, which are influenced by, and at the same time influence, the ecosystem they live in. This helped me re-frame my understanding of the process of acculturation (discussed in more depth in Chapter 9) but it also has implications on my conceptualisation of cognitive dissonance. Indeed, I do not consider cognition in isolation, rather as part of a network of cognition and emotion, both immersed in and interconnected with their context. Therefore, my understanding of cognitive dissonance may resonate more with a socio-cognitive position (Atkinson, 2011), which deviates from the traditional conceptualisation (Festinger, 1957) and is more in line with my holistic and ‘person-in-context’ (Ushioda, 2009) approach.

In this section I have presented and clarified the concepts of culture, ‘culture shock’, acculturation, cognitive dissonance and my standpoint on the subjects. I now move on to discuss the affective aspect of SA, introducing the concept of emotions and applying it to the two key areas of the section: affective challenges and coping strategies.

3.4 Affective Aspect

Emotions are defined as “the psychological outcome of dynamic interactions between different layers of internal and external systems – physiological, cognitive, behavioural and social” (So, 2005, pp. 43-44). A similar complexity can be noticed between emotions and beliefs as both are seen as dynamic, influenced by a number of variables (internal and external) and both have an impact on behaviours. Similarly to beliefs, emotions are complex constructs and SA research has only recently started to address them (Aragão, 2011; Gallucci, 2011). Kalaja and Barcelos (2007) suggest that learner beliefs – and I argue also beliefs in general – are not only complex and dynamic but also intrinsically related to contextual, social and affective factors. This is also acknowledged by Mercer (2011, p. 343) who notes that beliefs have “emotional connotations” and that the dynamism and change of beliefs may be related to their affective component as well as contextual factors. This relationship between emotions and the degree of resistance of beliefs is also suggested by Frijda and Mesquita (2000) and by Barcelos (2015), who argues that the relationship between beliefs and emotions is “dynamic, interactive and reciprocal” (Barcelos, 2015, p. 314).

The increasingly more recognised role of emotions in SA research reflects the broader shift in SLA, which – after the ‘social turn’ in the 1990s mentioned in section 3.1 – is currently undergoing what Pavlenko (2013) defines as the ‘affective turn’. Its categorisation as a paradigmatic turn has been debated but scholars seem to agree that it addresses “the widespread lack of attention to emotion and its imbalanced relationship with cognition” in SLA research (Prior, 2019, p. 516). Exploring what emotions are (rather than only what they do) (Pavlenko, 2013) and how individuals express them differently according to social, cultural, historical and contextual factors has expanded the limited research focus that had characterised SLA studies. Emotions and cognition are now seen as mutually and dynamically interconnected, and together they also “mediate learning” (Swain, 2013, p. 196), making both elements significant in SLA and SA research. In this section I focus on the concept of emotions but in section 3.6 I shall address in more detail the relationship between emotions, cognition and language, and the sociolinguistic aspect of SA experiences.

The conceptualisation of emotions, sometimes referred to as part of the umbrella term ‘affect’, has led to disagreement amongst scholars (Savicki, 2013). Some

believe that emotions should be differentiated and researched individually (Lazarus, 2006), others see a potential hierarchy of emotions, where mainly positive, or mainly negative, emotions are grouped together and researched collectively (Watson et al., 1988). My view of emotions is that they may be cognitively understood and described as separate, but because of the complexity of their interconnections, the individuals' perceptions of emotions may be a simplification of a bigger affective network. For this reason, the focus of this thesis is on the affective challenges as perceived and described by my participants, whilst still acknowledging that their identifications may be underpinning a combination of emotions, rather than single ones.

One study that addresses YA students' emotions and which is particularly relevant to my research is Gallucci's (2011) doctoral project. Using a combination of ethnographically informed methods (i.e. semi-structured and unstructured interviews, also based on pictures, videos, and diary entries), this multiple case study explores the YA experiences and emotive language of three UK language undergraduates on their Erasmus in Italy. It was carried out over the course of nine months in 2006/2007 and it suggests that sojourners' use of emotive language may depend on how they perceive the context(s) and the intercultural differences they experience abroad. The findings also support the idea of a dynamic L2 identity that may have to be re-negotiated depending on individual and contextual factors, such as the emotional investment sojourners have in the language and their expected progress, as well as their perceived relationship with their SA context(s). This is the only other study I have found specifically focused on UK language students in an Italian YA context, and its attention to the students' emotions and lived experiences abroad also resonated with my research. However, despite the similarities and overlaps, Gallucci's (2011) study addresses the participants as language learners, or students, and focuses on their experiences and emotions from a linguistic perspective, investigating the emotive lexicon they used and the development of their L2 identities. Similarly, although it acknowledges the connection between contextual elements and the sojourners' identity re-negotiation, the author still seems to conceptualise 'context' as the passive setting in which the students' linguistic experiences take place. Furthermore, despite discussing topics such as intercultural awareness and competence, the author does not clarify her definition of culture and seems

to have a neo-essentialist view of it, acknowledging diversity, yet promulgating boundaries between 'cultures'. Gallucci's (2011) attention to the students' emotions, their re-negotiation of identity and how this may be impacted by the students' learning environments and social networks supports the dynamic conceptualisation of one's identity and the need for more attention to affective and contextual elements of SA. In my research I bring this forward and move beyond her linguistic focus, also acknowledging the agentic role of context from an ecological perspective.

Due to the very close interaction between affective and contextual factors, the next section addresses both in relation to the SA context and my research focus.

3.4.1 Affective Challenges in the SA Context

The effects of contextual factors on beliefs and emotions are particularly relevant to SA research as students abroad are immersed in a new environment and culture(s), which may cause some level of distress (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Yang et al., 2018). Ward et al. (2001, p. 16) state that "interacting with culturally different individuals or functioning in unfamiliar physical and social settings is inherently stressful with outcomes ranging from mild discomfort to severe, debilitating anxiety". Thus, the inherent unfamiliarity of a SA experience can trigger stress (also conceptualised as cognitive dissonance, see section 3.3.4) in different degrees and forms. Homesickness (Hannigan, 1997), anxiety (Bown, 2009; Dewaele et al., 2008; Savicki & Price, 2017), loneliness (Hunley, 2010), sadness (Savicki & Price, 2017), and sensory and cognitive overload (Goldstein, 2017) are only a few of the affective challenges reported in the SA literature. Bown and White (2010) and Pavlenko (2013) note that research on emotions has tended to focus on a limited spectrum of mostly negative emotions, and few studies have addressed their dynamic and situated nature. This also implies that some kinds of emotions, emotional changes over time, and their interconnection with contextual and situational factors, may have been overlooked. My research addressed these neglected aspects thanks to its longitudinal nature and the absence of restrictions, or a specific focus, on the affective elements of the data, which were analysed in relation to the context in which they emerged.

The following subsections address in more detail some of the main affective challenges reported in the SA research impacting on sojourners' well-being and

experiences, namely stress, anxiety and loneliness, homesickness, and sexual harassment.

3.4.1.1 Stress, Anxiety and Loneliness

Language learning has the potential to be stressful and anxiety-inducing in its own right (Horwitz, 2016) and the SA environment only adds external and contextual variables and stressors on top of the language learning ones. On this matter, Bown (2009) reports that all of her 20 participants studying Russian as a foreign language in their Midwestern US university, felt anxious, frustrated or discouraged about their language learning, despite not being abroad. Part of the rationale behind these findings may be the self-instructed nature of the module the students took part in; however, language learning was recognised to be one of the triggers for their distress. The anxiety that can be induced by the linguistic element of SA, is only one example of the plethora of affective components encompassed within such experience. A further element is addressed by Hunley (2010) who investigated the impact that loneliness and stress can have on the individual's overall well-being during a SA experience. She looked at a group of US college students attending a SA programme in Italy, and her findings showed that higher degrees of psychological distress and loneliness were related to lower levels of mental health and student well-being. Although this study had some limitations (e.g. questionnaires used to explore emotions; a bounded setting, as the students lived together in a campus detached from the locals), its findings reveal the potential negative impact that loneliness and stress can have on students on SA and their overall experience.

3.4.1.2 Homesickness

Homesickness is another frequent affective challenge in SA students (Furnham, 1997), and it can have emotional, physical, cognitive, and social effects on individuals (Stroebe et al., 2015). In the SA context, homesickness has been related to lack of language proficiency, isolation in the new environment, age (or one's developmental stage), separation anxiety, and unrealistic pre-departure expectations amongst others (Hannigan, 1997). Kinginger (2008) mentions that two of the 24 American students in her longitudinal study on language learning in the SA context, reported feelings of homesickness and loneliness throughout their SA in France. Both participants wrote in their journals about how they missed

their families and boyfriends and described their fear of missing out on their lives at home. The two students responded to their feelings of homesickness by isolating themselves and keeping frequent contacts with their families and friends; one detaching from the SA environment and the other taking the SA as an opportunity to travel with other Americans. Similarly, Coleman (2015) notes how homesickness, anxiety and fatigue may be related to stronger networks with one's home support systems and to more limited contacts with the host community. Coping strategies are addressed in more depth in section 3.4.2.

3.4.1.3 Sexual Harassment

Block (2007, p. 165) states that sexual harassment can “constrain the potential for the development of TL-mediated subject positions [*i.e. identities*]” and has generally been reported by female students abroad. Although not all female sojourners experience sexual harassment, it is a common feature of SA accounts and has been shown to lead to isolation, avoidance of men and/or going out, changes in behaviours, appearance, mistrust in the locals, and lower performances in linguistic tests (also related to the more limited opportunities to practise the target language) (Block, 2007; Isabelli, 2006; Polanyi, 1995; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Twombly, 1995). One key issue that seems to arise from the literature is that sojourners may not have the same understanding of when comments or behaviours cross the line and become sexual harassment in the host country, which leads to misunderstandings and a variety of reactions depending on the individuals and on the contexts. Although sexual harassment was not a major factor in my research, it is worth mentioning it because it is – unfortunately – a relatively common experience for students, and it seemed to have influenced my participants' prior beliefs.

As already mentioned in some of the examples above, the presence of stress and a certain degree of discomfort in a SA context leads students to develop coping strategies in response to the affective challenges they are faced with. The following section focuses on the literature on such coping mechanisms with particular attention to studies carried out within the SA context.

3.4.2 Coping Strategies

In the psychological field, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) define ‘coping’ as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external

and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". This definition was carefully developed to replace traditional ones that viewed coping as a trait rather than a process, and the authors purposefully refer to the efforts one has to consciously make in order to cope with stressors, distinguishing coping mechanisms from automatic and instinctual responses. Coping is also contextually situated as one's resources may depend on a combination of factors, both internal and external, at any given time; similarly, one's perception of 'demands' or stressors may vary according to such factors. This is particularly relevant in the SA context, where the numerous unfamiliar elements of the experience push the students' coping limits to overwhelming levels, creating stress (i.e. cognitive dissonance).

Although research on coping strategies is still limited (Mitchell & Paras, 2018), some recurring mechanisms reported in the SA literature seemed relevant to my research. Some examples are: isolation (Kinginger, 2008), self-regulation (Bown & White, 2010; Ward, 2001), reflective practices (Savicki & Price, 2017), avoidance (Jackson, 2006; Pellegrino Aveni, 2006), and positive self-talk (Pellegrino Aveni, 2006). The transplant of one's home traditions or habits into the SA routine has been shown to help decrease stress and homesickness levels as well, as it provides a familiar element within an unfamiliar environment (Hannigan, 1997; Pruitt, 1978). Engagement with social support networks is another extremely common coping strategy in SA research, it was already mentioned within the stress and coping approach (see section 3.3.3.3) and has been reported to be a helpful coping strategy for homesickness (Hannigan, 1997) and to promote overall well-being (Tanaka et al., 1997). These mechanisms resonate with the dissonance-reducing methods suggested by Maertz et al. (2009): attitude changes (e.g. isolation, avoidance), self-affirmation (e.g. positive self-talk), support seeking, rationalisation and explanation of inconsistencies (e.g. reflective practices, self-regulation), rejection or justification of the host country's culture, values, behaviours and attitudes (e.g. transplant of habits).

Social support systems are particularly important in current times, where social media are a common tool to keep in touch, especially when physically distant. However, the effects of social media used as a coping strategy to reduce homesickness and loneliness during SA seem to be mixed. Depending on their use of social media, sojourners may use them to improve their well-being and

feel less lonely and homesick, but in some cases social media use may have the opposite effect and instil feelings of fear of missing out (FoMO) (Hetz et al., 2015). FoMO is defined as “apprehension or concern of being disconnected, absent or missing an experience which others (i.e., peers, friends, family) might receive or enjoy” (Dhir et al., 2018, p. 143). This focus on what one is missing in their home country can consequently increase homesickness and distance the sojourner from the SA environment. Conversely, in some cases sojourners have used social media to practise their language (Back, 2013) and engage with the host community (Mitchell, 2012), and even tried to instil FoMO in their peers by posting about their SA (Hetz et al., 2015).

A particular situation in which part of these support systems is removed during the SA is when sojourners go on a work placement, a teaching assistantship and/or a homestay. They are faced with the extra challenge of not having their peers as a form of support and as familiar points of reference in an unfamiliar environment. My call for participants was intended for students going abroad to study at a university but it was also open to students going on work placements and taking on teaching assistantships (see section 4.3.1). My two participants both belonged to the latter category, which limited their contacts with their peers, but one of them also spent most of her YA living with a host family; therefore, before moving to the Contextual section of this chapter, I address this particular circumstance in the following sub-section.

3.4.2.1 Homestays

Spending one’s SA in a homestay has often been considered to be the optimal way to promote language learning and intercultural awareness; however, the alleged benefits of living with a host family have been questioned over the years (Diao et al., 2011; Rivers, 1998; Vande Berg, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). Despite some support to the advantages of homestays with regard to social and linguistic improvements (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004), Jackson (2017, p. 76) warns that “placement in a homestay situation does not guarantee that the experience will be positive and lead to enhanced intercultural communicative competence and a broader sense of self”. Similarly, Vande Berg (2009, p. 19) reports that in his large-scale four-year study on intercultural and second language learning, “students in homestays gained more than students at home only when they spent a large amount of their free time with homestay members”. On this matter,

Pellegrino Aveni (2005) highlights the important role of family hosts, who can act as support or hindrance to the students' language learning and practice.

As already mentioned, language and identity are closely related especially when sojourners try to express themselves (both linguistically and identity-wise) and host families, or even strangers on the streets, can in some cases take up the role of teachers, correcting SA students even outside of the classroom context. This can be appreciated, by sojourners who accept to put on their metaphorical student hat, or resented, by those who do not and would like to be seen as 'themselves'. This resonates with Pellegrino Aveni's (2005) sense of validation and status and has an impact on the sojourners' sense of identity. A further example of extreme attention to language, to the detriment of identity expression is Wilkinson's (1998) study, in which the French host families focused more on the linguistic accuracy of their American guests than their meaning. The reason behind this behaviour was unclear – although a hypothesis may be the way French are brought up with attention to grammar (Block, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998) – nonetheless it impacted on the sojourners' SA experiences. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) on this regard also discusses the difference between gentle and harsh corrections, as having respectively potentially more positive and negative effects on the students' willingness to speak in the TL.

Going beyond the language barrier, Iino (2006) posits that sojourners in homestays may find it hard to understand how to behave with the host family as they do not have a role model to imitate, such as other students in a school setting, which can in itself be a more familiar context. This poses a further challenge to the adjustment and discovery of one's role within the host family. On the other hand, Iino (2006) suggests that the 'mortality' of the relationship with the hosts helps both hosts and guests to have more tolerance due to the limited period of time of the cohabitation. In his ethnographic study on linguistic and cultural learning of American students in Japanese homestays, he noted that "both Japanese families and American students lived an 'unusual' or at least a 'different' life from their daily lives before and after the program" (Iino, 2006, p. 159).

The multiplicity of factors involved in homestays and the potential ambivalence that both hosts and guests may experience make this setting a particularly complex one to research. My longitudinal case study provides some examples of

the challenges derived from the relationships with host families (and host nationals in general) and their development over time (see Chapter 8), contributing to the expansion of the literature on the topic. Because of the extreme relevance of context in my research approach, before I sum up the main ideas discussed in this literature review and present my research questions, I discuss the contextual aspect of SA, and in particular the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on SA studies and on my research in particular.

3.5 Contextual Aspect

The impact of the historical period in which research is carried out is often underestimated in SA literature, yet it is an important contextual variable (Coleman, 2013), and it became even more significant in 2020. Both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic affected and changed the SA reality, adding further layers of complexity to it and making it necessary for researchers to adapt and re-adjust to the changes. This makes my research even more timely as it provides new and unique insight into the SA experience in Italy during the life-changing times of lockdown and the pandemic.

Besides the economic and social turmoil, the Covid-19 pandemic has been defined as the cause of “the largest disruption of education systems in human history” (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021, p. 133). This includes the researchers’ lives and work as well (Jackman et al., 2021; Paula, 2020), and in this thesis I have tried to be as reflexive and transparent as possible on the challenges and changes I had to face whilst carrying out my research. The mental health and living conditions of students all over the world have become important research topics in the last couple of years, and studies that focused on the students who were on their SA when the pandemic started seem to suggest that the affective challenges faced by this group of students were heightened compared to their peers at home (Ma & Miller, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2021). Although a small number of studies have tried to find silver linings in the pandemic, for example seeing it as an opportunity to develop and diffuse digital learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), most research has focused on its negative outcomes (Pedersen et al., 2021). My focus on the overall YA experience and the open and friendly rapport with my participants allowed for both positive and negative sides of lockdown and the Covid-19 outbreak to emerge from the data, offering a unique perspective on their experiences during most of 2020.

One particularly relevant longitudinal study carried out during the pandemic is Pedersen et al.'s (2021), which was originally aimed at investigating alcohol and substance use in the SA context but had to be adjusted to the new circumstances when the pandemic was announced by the authorities. The authors re-focused the open-ended questions in their three pre-scheduled online surveys to address the pandemic outbreak and the students' perceptions about it. The respondents were 593 American students who were in 12 different SA destinations when the pandemic started (and amongst them 182 had spent the first weeks of their SA in Italy). Some of the affective challenges reported by the participants in the study were likely shared also by students who were not abroad but whose academic year was interrupted abruptly. Some examples include: financial and academic worries, anger and frustration, adjusting to online learning and the national restrictions, social isolation, feelings of uncertainty about the future and fear of infection (and some of these were shared also worldwide outside the academic context). However, some challenges seemed to be specifically related to the SA experience, which made it a unique context to research during the outbreak and evolution of the pandemic. Feelings of loss were particularly diffused, for example having missed out on their SA experience, losing newly formed friendships, or not having the time to form some, as well as feeling stressed to be back home and frustrated at the lost sense of freedom. Alongside the traumatic experiences, which may have potentially long-lasting effects according to the authors, some positive aspects were discussed as well, including feelings of personal growth, gratitude for the experiences and memories made during their time abroad (although shorter than planned), and increased perspective and resourcefulness. This study represents only a small sample of all the students who were abroad worldwide at the outbreak of the pandemic, yet it already reflects the extremely wide range of effects that this had on the SA experience and the students' well-being.

Another relevant study investigating the mental health conditions of SA students during the pandemic focused on Chinese overseas students and their controversial double bind situation (Ma & Miller, 2021). When the pandemic was announced in their SA destinations they were recommended to go back home like the other SA students all over the world, and at the same time pushed to stay abroad to limit the risks of spreading the virus in the already highly affected China.

This multiplicity of socio-cultural and political contrasting forces led to increased anxiety and mental health issues in the students. None of the participants in Pedersen et al.'s (2021) study stayed in their SA destination once the pandemic and national lockdowns were announced and the participants in Ma and Miller's (2021) study who stayed abroad may not have made such a decision willingly. This does not mean that no student opted to stay abroad, but it questions how many students deliberately chose to stay like one of my participants did. On this matter, one respondent in Pedersen et al.'s (2021, p. 83) study reports: "I even had a few friends stay abroad because they believed the country they were in was safer than the U.S.". Similar considerations may have led other SA students around the world to choose to remain in their host country, yet the feelings of lack of safety (in the home and/or host country) likely impacted on the students' mental health. Nevertheless, to my knowledge no other research has provided insight into the experiences of UK YA sojourners spending lockdown (and the first six post-lockdown months) in their host country, which makes my participant a unique case in the current SA research literature. My findings will therefore expand our limited knowledge on the affective challenges experienced during the pandemic by UK sojourners on YA in Italy, providing data on an under-researched destination and group of participants.

Before I conclude this chapter, I devote the following section to the sociolinguistic aspect of SA and the significance that language had in my research and for my participants' lives in Italy.

3.6 Sociolinguistic Aspect

As introduced in section 3.2.2, limitations in proficiency in the target language may lead to a divergence between the achieved and attributed identity of sojourners. In addition to this, by not being able to express themselves and their identity, sojourners may "lose voice and face when dealing with difficult situations that require negotiation or debate" (Badwan, 2020, p. 345). This strong connection between language, voice and identity emerged also from my data and seemed to resonate with some of the principles of the sociolinguistics of mobility. Indeed, when sojourners move through time and space, they bring with them much more than their linguistic and cultural knowledge, they also carry their identities and their voice. However, all of these change in the different contexts they experience (not only meant in geographical terms but also cultural, socio-

political and historical) and depending on a multiplicity of social, cultural, personal, and contextual affordances. This ecological approach takes on Badwan's (2021) perspective also developed from her critical analysis of Blommaert's (2010) and Canagarajah's (2013) scalar views of the sociolinguistics of mobility. I shall not discuss these in too much detail as it goes beyond the scope of this thesis but I provide a brief overview of the key tenets of these models to clarify the significance that language had in my research.

In Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistic scales, speakers positioned themselves on a higher or lower sociolinguistic scale – or could move from one scale to the other – according to their linguistic repertoires. In this very normative view, 'non-standard' forms of a language would be less valuable and on a lower scale compared to their conventionally 'standard' counterparts, which would automatically position most non-native speakers (and SA sojourners) on a lower scale. This model has been challenged because it saw communication as controlled by rigid and prescriptive power relationships and inequality, and considered some linguistic repertoires as more valuable and on a 'higher scale' than others based on linguistic norms (Badwan, 2015; 2021). Canagarajah (2013) acknowledged the usefulness of the concept of sociolinguistic scales but argued that it did not take into account individuals' agency and their ability to negotiate meanings moving across scales regardless of the normative hierarchy that characterised Blommaert's (2010) model. Despite the more dynamic approach, Badwan (2021) criticises Canagarajah's (2013) model for assuming equal individual agency in all sojourners (or movers more in general), without considering their particular affordances and the impact of social and contextual factors. Her ecological approach tries to account for the complexity and multiplicity of factors involved in the sociolinguistics of mobility and aligns with my holistic and ecological perspective on the YA experience (see also section 3.3.4).

Although I did not set out to research the linguistic aspect of SA, the situated and mutual interaction between language, identity, emotions and voice in my participants' YA permeated my data and represents a glimpse of the complexity and multiplicity of the factors that I believe make up intercultural experiences. Chapters 6 and 8 provide several examples of my participants' affective challenges and coping strategies, including their negotiations of meaning and their affordances in different situations. Even without focusing on language

directly in my research, it was an inextricable part of June and Lucia's experiences and a surprisingly frequent topic of conversation and reflection in our exchanges. I hope this section will be helpful to better understand and contextualise the complex role of language within my participants' lives abroad and how it interacted with contextual, emotional and personal factors.

Below I summarise the main points discussed in this literature review to clarify the research gap that I have tried to bridge, and I present the four key questions that guided my research.

3.7 Chapter Summary and Research Questions (RQs)

Research has long focused on the linguistic aspects of SA, yet more attention is needed on the individuals' perceptions of their experiences (DeKeyser, 1991; Kinginger, 2013b). It has been argued that beliefs and emotions are intrinsically related (Barcelos, 2015; Mercer, 2011; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) and negative beliefs may lead to negative perceptions of the SA experience (Wilkinson, 1998), just as negative emotions can have a negative impact on the well-being and experience of the students abroad (Hunley, 2010). Furthermore, since beliefs are related to actions and behaviours (Borg, 2011; Festinger, 1957), students' attitudes towards the host country, culture and people may differ depending on the beliefs they hold, and consequently impact on their overall perceptions about their SA experience. Thus, by investigating the beliefs that sojourners hold before they settle in the host country, my research may contribute to expanding our currently limited understanding of the ways in which these prior beliefs can impact on the experience abroad as perceived by the sojourners (Zaykovskaya et al., 2017). My first research question, divided into two sub-questions, addresses this potential connection:

1a) What are sojourners' prior beliefs on the YA?

1b) How do these beliefs impact on their experience?

My attention to the affective component of SA aims to shed light on this growing area of interest, still in its infancy in the SA context (Hunley, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008). By not limiting my focus to specific emotions but allowing the affective data to develop naturally over the course of my participants' YA, I aim to promote the

emergence of a wider range of emotions, contributing to the limited literature on the subject (Bown & White, 2010).

2) What affective challenges do sojourners face during their YA?

Coping strategies reflect the sojourners' beliefs and attitudes and can help them deal with the challenges they are faced with in the host country. By looking at prior beliefs I aim to bridge the gap on this aspect of SA (Zaykovskaya et al., 2017) and expand our understanding of the role that these beliefs play in the SA experience, especially exploring how they may impact on the coping strategies adopted by sojourners. In particular, by applying the theoretical lens of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones, 2019) to my findings, I aim to bring this socio-psychological framework in the SA research context, where it has rarely been used (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Furthermore, by carrying out a longitudinal study, I will be able to follow the ways in which the participants' emotions and coping strategies develop over the course of their YA, which has received limited attention in the literature (Bown & White, 2010).

3) How are the sojourners' prior beliefs on the YA related to the way they deal with these challenges?

Finally, my focus on UK students of Italian will explore an under-researched setting and sojourner sub-group (Gallucci, 2011; Kinginger, 2013b; Willis et al., 1977) and expand our understanding on what these sojourners perceive as contributing to the success (or lack-there-of) of their YA experience from a holistic point of view (Coleman, 2013).

4) What makes the Year Abroad (YA) (un)successful from the sojourners' perspective?

Now that my research questions have been presented, I move on to introduce and discuss the methodological approach and choices I have applied in my research.

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

In this chapter I turn to my methodological choices, starting with a clarification of the philosophical underpinnings of this research, my positionality, and how these have influenced my methodology. The second section presents my research design and the rationale behind my choices, followed by a detailed explanation of my data generation tools, my pilot study and my analysis. In this chapter I also introduce my participants and discuss the ethical and methodological challenges I faced, and how the pandemic impacted on my data collection.

4.1 Philosophical Underpinnings of This Research

My research aims to explore my participants' personal experiences during their YA in Italy by investigating their perspectives and perceptions about them. The rationale for my research focus has been explained in the Introduction, but in order to understand my methodological choices, it is important to clarify the research paradigm I subscribe to as it influences the way I understand reality and, therefore, it influenced how I approached my research and interpreted the data. The term 'paradigm' was popularised by Kuhn (1962), father of the concept of 'paradigm shift' in scientific progress, but its definition is still controversial. The meaning I attribute to 'research paradigm' in this thesis is expressed by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 107) who defined it as "a set of basic beliefs" which "represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts". In other words, in this section I explain my beliefs about what the nature of reality is (ontology) and how it can be understood (epistemology). I subscribe to what is generally defined as the interpretive, or constructivist, paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) as I believe that reality is socially constructed, and every individual interprets the world and gives meaning to it in a subjective way.

A decision that was influenced by my philosophical stance as well as by my research aims was the selection of a qualitative approach. Qualitative and quantitative research are generally associated with a more interpretive and a positivistic philosophy respectively and are often considered as incompatible. However, this dichotomic perspective has been criticised as both the approaches and the philosophies are more similar to the extremes on a continuum, rather

than opposites, and categorical interpretations of them may lead to oversimplifications (Holliday, 2016b; Richards, 2003). Researchers should decide which approach to adopt not based “on ideological commitment to one methodological paradigm or another” but “on the nature of what we are trying to describe, on the likely accuracy of our descriptions, on our purposes, and on the resources available to us” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 163). I adopted a qualitative approach as it would help me to explore the sojourners’ experiences in their specific setting (Holliday, 2016b) “and understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events, or objects” (Hennink et al., 2011: 8-9). Although I do not deny the value of quantitative research (and I do use some quantifiers in this thesis), a qualitative approach seemed more in line with my aim to investigate in depth my participants’ experiences and perceptions, as well as with my interpretivist-constructivist view of reality. My philosophical stance not only had implications for my methodological choices but also for my positionality as a researcher, which I discuss in the following section.

4.1.1 Researcher’s Positionality

I do not believe it is possible to separate the researcher from the researched, and my position when investigating my participants’ YA experiences was both that of an insider and of an outsider (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Each perspective had advantages and disadvantages and my “inbetweenner” position (Milligan, 2016) evolved throughout the research process and changed according to how the relationship with each participant developed (Mann, 2016).

I was an insider because I was a student in a foreign country, I had been a language student and I had some insight into the YA in Italy because of my ex-students’ accounts. I also knew I was likely going to be of a similar age compared to the students, which may have made me more approachable and potentially more attuned to their stage of life. My insider views meant that I had more knowledge than a complete outsider but also that I could risk lacking perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To limit giving for granted aspects of the data or research context that were more familiar to me, I tried to embed a reflexive practice in my data collection and analysis and be as self-aware as possible of my assumptions and how these were impacting on my understanding. I never aimed to be objective or claimed I was detached from my research data, but reflexivity is part of social research and can help making deep-rooted

assumptions rise to the surface. As Greenbank (2003, p. 798) states: “the real issue is not whether researchers attempt to be value-neutral or not. What is important is that they adopt a reflexive approach that is clearly articulated in their writing”. As well as my conscious attempts to be reflexive, my supervision meetings and my discussions with other postgraduate researchers (and my Italian friends) were very helpful to reveal some of my preconceptions and the elements I was giving for granted or I was blinded to, and I have included reflexive commentaries in my analysis and in this thesis to increase my transparency.

However, I was also an outsider because the students I contacted did not know me at the beginning of the research, and I have never personally experienced a SA as part of my higher education. Furthermore, I was still ‘the researcher’, and therefore in a position of power (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) despite my attempts to keep the exchanges with my participants friendly. According to Mann (2016) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), being an outsider can sometimes help respondents to speak more freely; at the same time, because they did not know me, students may have also felt less inclined to speak to me or may have perceived me as someone who would not understand their point of view. For this reason, in my introductory email to the potential participants (see Appendix B) I briefly introduced myself as a ‘first year PhD student’ and I stressed the fact that I wanted to explore their ‘personal point of view’ and ‘give a voice to the student perspective’. I did not want to be perceived as a superior researcher who wanted to study them, placing myself on a higher hierarchical position of power, and I also wanted to make this research of mutual benefit (see also section 4.3.4). From the start I tried to be as friendly as possible, yet without exaggerating and risking to reach the opposite extreme of over-rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I explain in more detail how I balanced my relationship with the participants in sections 4.3.1 and 4.6.

Especially because I was investigating intercultural experiences, even though I was partly an outsider, it was important for me to remember that “researchers are implicated in subjectively co-constructing meaning with the people they research” (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020, p. 623). I was aware that my participants and I would be co-creating the reality I was investigating and that I would be filtering it through my worldview and my “subjective understanding” (Schutz, 1967: 20). Therefore, I embraced this collaborative experience, especially since “data about

the intercultural cannot be made sense of by researchers who were not intersubjectively involved in its collection and are therefore themselves part of the data” (Holliday & Macdonald, 2020, p. 628). I was not a passive collector of data, agreeing with everything and never engaging personally with the topics of discussion. Although I never imposed my opinions on my participants and in most conversations we seemed to have similar beliefs, I always expressed my true thoughts and I actively participated in the data generation. This ‘intersubjective involvement’ was particularly evident in some of the exchanges with Lucia, in which she asked for my opinion and it differed from hers, for example when she said that she believed that one could gauge the social status of a person by looking at their clothes (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019). Although I understood what she meant and I knew some people might agree with her (e.g. my younger self), I also explained my point of view, and how – based on my experience – I had found clothes not to be a reliable way to assess one’s social status. Neither of us changed their opinion but our disagreement led to further interesting conversations and I believe it enriched both of us (and the data), reinforcing my rationale for a collaborative approach. By being transparent about my positionality and by foregrounding my philosophical standpoint, I acknowledge my involvement in the data generation and analysis, which is reflected in my writing. I am also aware of the questions this raises about the trustworthiness of my research; therefore, I discuss this before presenting my research design.

4.1.1.1 Trustworthiness

I use the term ‘trustworthiness’ (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as this is commonly used to refer to rigour in qualitative research, rather than its quantitative counterpart of ‘validity’. Internal and external validity are important criteria to assess the quality of research but they derive from a positivistic standpoint and are widely debated (Richards, 2003). In my research I decided to use the alternative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for qualitative research. These have not been left unchallenged (Morse, 2015); nonetheless, I found them useful to reflect on my research.

Internal validity, the extent to which research actually tests/studies what it intends to, is replaced by credibility, which does not seek a definitive ‘truth’ but rather looks at the trustworthiness and believability of the research (Shenton, 2004). In order to enhance trustworthiness in my research I followed some of the

suggestions provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The longitudinal nature of my study (see section 4.2) ensured I had a *prolonged engagement* with the research context and participants; I provide *'thick' descriptions* (Geertz, 1973) of my methodology and thought processes, also reflecting on my evolving relationship with the participants (Mann, 2016); and through *member checking* I validated, or negotiated, my interpretation of their accounts (see section 4.4).

External validity, or generalisability, refers to the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Creswell (2007: 40) on the topic argues that “to level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our study”. This is particularly important in my research as SA experiences are very personal and one’s journey cannot be replicated, neither by others nor by the same person, as it intrinsically involves a degree of change in the individual. Therefore, rather than aiming at generalisable findings, I have been as detailed as possible in the description of my methods and context, to enhance the transferability of those features of my research.

4.2 A Longitudinal Case Study

Qualitative research allows for a variety of methodologies, which sometimes overlap and have unclear boundaries between one and the other (Richards, 2003). My research aims and philosophical stance guided my methodological decisions, therefore when I embarked in my PhD journey I knew I wanted to understand the participants’ views and follow their experiences over the months they would spend in Italy. For this reason, my first requirement was a methodology that would allow for an in-depth qualitative longitudinal approach. Two key purposes of longitudinal research are “to capture through long-term immersion the depth and breadth of the participants’ life experiences, and to capture participant change (if any) through long-term comparative observations of their perceptions and actions” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 16). Based on these criteria, ethnography, narrative inquiry and case study were the three main options I considered, although the first challenge was to navigate the lack of standard definitions for all of these, even in their classification as methods, methodologies or research designs (Clandinin et al., 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Lieblich et al., 1998; Mackey & Gass, 2005). I eventually opted for a qualitative longitudinal case study (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013), but some elements of the other two approaches informed and are still present in my research.

In my decision-making process I considered the advantages and disadvantages of each option and chose the one that seemed more feasible and appropriate for my circumstances. Ethnographic research seemed fitting for my purposes as it is “emic, detailed, holistic, and situated in context with a focus on exploring how complex factors interact” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 169). However, it also generally focuses on entire cultural or social groups (Creswell, 2007) and it involves a prolonged ‘immersion’ in the research context to collect rich first-hand data. Due to practical, financial and geographical reasons this was not feasible, even with only two participants. Narrative inquiry also seemed appealing at first because of its attention to temporality, spatiality and sociality (Clandinin et al., 2007) and its focus on “lived experience – that is, in lives and how they are lived” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. xxii). Nonetheless, the lack of a “unanimous agreement on what counts as narrative and what does not” (Badwan, 2015, p. 76) served as a deterrent in my final decision. Labov’s (1972) traditional narrative structure seemed very de-contextualised and focused only on past experiences. Although I wanted to understand June and Lucia’s stories from their perspective, the Labovian approach did not seem to be in line with my situated and holistic view of my participants’ experiences. Furthermore, I was not sure about the kind of data I would be gathering and I did not want to enforce a particular a priori focus. On the other hand, the more social approach to narrative inquiry and the concept of ‘small stories’ (Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2007) seemed appealing in their idea of giving voice to “underrepresented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, but [...] also [...] allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381). However, the lack of clarity and unanimity in what differentiates a small story from a biographical exposition (Badwan, 2015) further blurred the boundaries of narrative inquiry and led me to eventually opt for a case study as I felt it best suited my purposes for the following reasons. First of all, case studies aim at in-depth analysis and exploration of phenomena within their context, and seek to understand them from the participants’ perspectives (Merriam, 2009). The overlaps and similarities with ethnographic and narrative research are clear, yet with a case study I felt I had more methodological flexibility and it did not imply extended fieldwork which would have had practical complications for me. Furthermore, case study is a popular methodology in SA research (Howard,

2021) and, based on the call for more longitudinal studies in the SA field (Kinginger, 2013b) and my personal interest in exploring the YA experiences of my participants, I designed my research as a qualitative longitudinal case study.

In hindsight, some researchers may consider part of my data as examples of 'small stories' (Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2007) and my research could easily fall into what Polkinghorne (1995) calls 'analysis of narratives', which refers to an approach to narrative inquiry where the data consists of stories – in my case my participants' accounts of their YA experiences – and which is later analysed 'paradigmatically' (generally thematically). Looking back at my data and my writing style, I cannot deny that my finished thesis has a notably 'narrative flavour' and it could also be described as a narrative case study. However, because of the lack of conformity in what constitutes narrative inquiry, I would refrain from defining my research as a fully-fledged example of it and I prefer to describe it as a case study informed by narrative and ethnographic approaches.

The definition of 'case study' is still debated as it is applied in both quantitative and qualitative studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2014), and has several categorisations based on its purpose, outcomes or focus (Cohen et al., 2018). The definition that I thought best represented my research aims is Stake's (1995: xi), who defined case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case". The 'case' does not have to be one single person or phenomenon, rather it refers to the unit of analysis. Hood (2009) notes that the bounded nature of case study is a key principle of this research approach and "the boundaries of the case are firmly linked to the researcher's interests" (ibid., p. 69). My unit of analysis was "the YA experience in Italy" and within it, I also analysed its components, i.e. the individual sojourners. The attention to bounded cases "can reveal important developmental patterns or perspectives that might be lost or obscured in a larger-scale study of populations or in larger sample sizes" (Duff, 2012, p. 98). Furthermore, case studies acknowledge the dynamism and uniqueness of research contexts and they "investigate and report the real-life, complex, dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 376). Therefore, a case study, as well as allowing a range of methods and philosophical standpoints, seemed to align with my research aims and my holistic and situated approach.

This does not mean that case study research has no limitations. Its main disadvantages are generally attributed to the lack of generalisability (Cohen et al., 2018) – also because participants may not have been selected randomly (Mackey & Gass, 2005) –, and to the researchers' bias and lack of information about their engagement with the data (Duff, 2014). Based on my positionality and philosophical standpoint, these disadvantages did not seem limiting for my aims and were outweighed by the advantages of case study research. Firstly, as explained earlier, I did not aim at generalisable findings, which may not even be achievable from an interpretive perspective (Schofield, 2002), rather I intended to reach a deeper understanding of the idiosyncratic experiences of my participants. Secondly, from my perspective, researchers' bias is inevitable, but also inherent in social research and cannot (and should not) be considered as a disadvantage. Finally, through reflexivity and transparency about my involvement in the co-creation of the data and my interpretations of it I have also tried to keep clear track of my engagement with it.

Now that the rationale for my case study approach has been clarified, I move on to discuss in more detail the data generation tools I chose as most appropriate to address my aims and research questions, and I introduce my participants.

4.3 Data Generation Tools

Case studies allow for a multiplicity of data generation tools and by carrying out longitudinal research and combining different instruments I aimed to gain “access to different temporalities, interweaving past and future and working across varied horizons and tempos of time” (Neale, 2019, p. 108). Because I wanted to explore my participants' experiences abroad and their perceptions about them over the several months they had in Italy, I opted for a combination of instruments that could help me understand their pre-departure beliefs and then keep track of their experiences and the potential changes in their perceptions and beliefs during their YA. I designed my case study to include the following instruments:

- 1) An online questionnaire, which gathered data about the participants' prior experiences abroad and thoughts/beliefs about the YA, Italy, 'Italian culture' and Italians (see section 4.3.2).
- 2) Three interviews at different stages of the YA, to keep track of the participants' experiences and perceptions about them every three to four months (see section 4.3.3).

3) The 'Buddy System', consisting of more regular exchanges (every four to six weeks) between the participants and me via text messages, which referred to culture-related issues they encountered and real examples of their experiences (see section 4.3.4).

I had initially planned to carry out the third interview, or have a buddy meeting, in person in the final month of my participants' YA in order to gather more contextual understanding of the participants' environments. However, this had to be adjusted to the new circumstances brought about by the pandemic and I instead asked my participants to share with me pictures that they considered representative of their YA. These will not be discussed in this thesis due to wordcount limitations and because the pictures emphasised aspects of the participants' lives that interview and text messaging data already address. However, the pictures added extra depth and flavour to the spoken or written data, I have presented some of them at a conference, and I hope to give them more space in a future publication.

Before I address each of the data generation tools specifically, I foreground my participant recruitment strategy and briefly introduce my participants as this may help to better contextualise the rest of the chapter.

4.3.1 Participants

The participants were chosen on the basis of the research gap I aimed to bridge, therefore, in order to be eligible, volunteers had to be:

- students of languages,
- studying Italian (at any level of proficiency) as part of their degree at a UK university,
- and going abroad in Italy in the academic year 2019/2020.

I was expecting to recruit students going abroad to study at university as that is the most common option amongst SA students (UUKi, 2021), but I left the criteria open to students going on work placements or teaching assistantships as the SA literature in the Italian context is limited on all types of SA.

When tutors ask their own students to take part in their research "while students are formally free to withhold consent, the psychological and emotional reality is that freedom is compromised" (Homan, 2001: 336). For this reason, I decided to

recruit students who did not know me and whom I had not taught in order to ensure participation was voluntary. In February 2019 I identified a potential cohort of students in a university in the north of England who fitted my criteria. The students of Italian in this institution, if beginners when they enrol on their degree, are required to go to Italy for a whole year rather than for only one semester as in many other universities. This was an ideal condition as it would allow me to track their experiences over their months abroad and, by contacting the participants at different stages throughout their stay, I could witness and record (amongst other things) the potential changes in their perceptions and beliefs. However, as the pool of participants also included advanced students, I was ready to carry out my research on shorter SA stays as well, if needed.

Students were invited to participate in my research through an introductory email (Appendix B) which included a link to the online questionnaire (preceded by the consent form, see Appendix C). The students who completed the questionnaire had the option to have no further involvement in my research, to participate in three interviews, to join the Buddy System or to take part in both the interviews and the Buddy System, as shown in Figure 2:

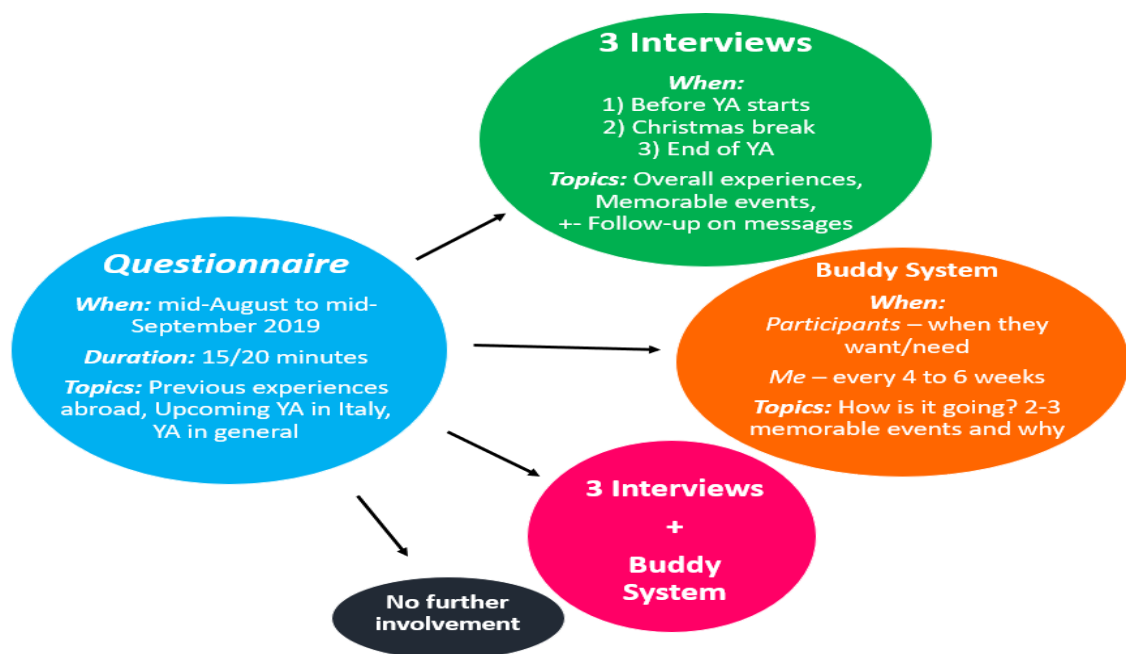


Figure 2 – Data Collection Steps: Students’ Options After Questionnaire

Out of 32 possible students on the selected course, I was hoping to recruit at least three or four participants, but I knew this was not guaranteed and I was prepared for lower numbers. Zaykovskaya et al. (2017) based their study around

one student only, therefore as long as one student volunteered, it would have still been enough to provide in-depth insight into a new perspective and context, contributing to the growing research on SA. I also had in plan a “maximal variation sampling” strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011: 174) in case of higher numbers, but eventually only two students volunteered making any sampling unnecessary. The two participants completed the questionnaire and agreed to take part in all components of my research (interviews and Buddy System). Having only two volunteers was not an issue, as explained; however, it raised the risks involved with dropouts. Because I wanted to explore my participants’ pre-departure beliefs I could not prolong my recruitment beyond late September as most YA stays would have started by then. Therefore, I started my data collection with the two volunteers from the cohort I had identified but I had a plan B in case any of them had withdrawn. Fortunately, neither of my participants dropped out (especially since the following cohort in 2020/2021 did not go on SA) and I was able to accompany them in their YA experience from start to finish.

My two participants were both female and they both applied to be Teaching Assistants (TAs) for the British Council in their YA in Italy, which came as a surprise to me but was in itself a first interesting ‘finding’. More details on the two participants are discussed in their individual cases in Chapter 5 to Chapter 8 but Table 1 provides a very brief summary of the basic information on June and Lucia (pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves):

Table 1 – Participant Information

Pseudonym	June	Lucia
Age	20	26
Degree Subject	French and Italian (Joint honours)	Italian (Single honours)
YA destination	Small city in Liguria	Town in Marche
Accommodation	Alone in an apartment	With an Italian host family
Assigned High School(s)	1) Artistic & Musical 2) Technical	1) Technical
Length of stay	Mid-September 2019 – Early March 2020	End of September 2019 – End of November 2020

Although recruiting two participants was a lower number than I had hoped for initially, the rapport we managed to build and the richness of the information they shared with me was likely also because of – or rather thanks to – the smaller

'sample', which allowed me to devote more time to each of them and to our relationship. Establishing trust and mutual respect between researcher and participants is extremely important in ethical, qualitative research and the quality of this rapport can also impact on the quality of the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The relationship between me and my two participants was even more essential in my longitudinal research as I saw it as an opportunity to 'walk alongside' them for a period of their lives (Neale, 2019; Neale & Flowerdew, 2003) and I wanted to make this as positive an experience as possible both for them and me. I wanted my participants to feel at ease when talking with me and I considered our amicable and open interactions as an advantage in my research. Developing a close, friendly relationship with my participants seemed to increase the empathy and trust between us and it may have helped them to feel more at ease to open up and share their personal experiences (Weller, 2017), which were my research focus. However, maintaining a balance between a friendly relationship with my participants and my researcher integrity was one of the challenges in my research and I discuss how I addressed it in section 4.6.

Now that my recruitment strategy and my participants have been introduced, I discuss in more detail the three data generation tools I have implemented in my research, starting with the pre-departure questionnaire. However, it is worth remembering that due to the pandemic my research timeline changed. My proposed timeframe for data collection was between mid-August 2019 and June 2020 but it had to be extended to August 2020 for June and to November 2020 for Lucia. Similarly, the frequency of our communications also changed as I explain in section 4.4 (see also Appendix H for a more detailed data collection timeline). Despite the disruption of my plans and my participants' YA, by extending my data collection over a period of 11 and 14 months, I was able to witness the progression of my participants' experiences and contribute to the limited literature available on longitudinal studies about my specific research context, as well as gaining insight into the impact of the pandemic on YA experiences.

4.3.2 Questionnaire

The first instrument in my data collection was a short questionnaire (see Appendix D) designed to take 15-20 minutes to complete and preceded by a consent form (see Appendix C). The questionnaire started off by collecting some basic

background information (i.e. age, gender, languages studied, first language, YA destination) and the rest of my questions were all open-ended and tailored to ask students about: their previous experiences abroad, their upcoming YA in Italy, Italy as a country, its people and its culture, and their thoughts about the YA experience in general. Although questionnaires are often associated with quantitative methods, I do not consider my choice as an attempt at integrating the two approaches (Bryman, 2006). I also acknowledge that accessing beliefs can be challenging, especially as sometimes people are not consciously aware of their beliefs (Borg, 2011) and questionnaires may not be the best way to elicit them (Ellis, 2008; Kalaja et al., 2017). However, I decided to use a questionnaire as a practical solution. It reached all participants at once in a period when they were probably on holiday or busy preparing for their upcoming YA (mid-August to mid-September 2019). Ethically, this seemed a better way to avoid taking too much of their time. Furthermore, a short online questionnaire was deemed to be less daunting than an interview with a 'stranger' and it would have allowed me to have some information on the respondents' previous experiences and beliefs, which would have been essential for my participant selection, had large numbers volunteered.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Horwitz's (1988) BALLI questionnaire or its categories are frequently used in research related to beliefs. However, despite having been widely used in the scholarship on SA, there are two main reasons why this questionnaire was not adequate for the purposes of my research:

- 1) It addresses students' beliefs 'About Language Learning', whereas I was more interested in the sojourners' personal prior beliefs on the YA and their specific experiences in Italy.
- 2) It is a positivist tool with Likert-scale closed questions, which would not have provided the depth of insight I was looking for.

For these reasons and given the new perspective my research was taking on prior beliefs, I decided to design my own questionnaire based on my research questions and on the extra category introduced by Zaykovskaya et al. (2017), i.e. asking about prior beliefs about the host country, its people and its 'culture'. I used open-ended questions to encourage longer answers, which I used as starting points in my first interview. By asking potential participants about their past experiences, I was aiming to gain more insight into their background and

possible factors that may have influenced their beliefs on the YA. The questions about the YA in Italy and the YA in general were aimed at gaining a better understanding of their pre-departure beliefs and of any discrepancy between their beliefs about the YA as an experience and those specifically about their upcoming Italian YA. In hindsight, my question about their expectations about “the Italian culture” may have unintentionally underpinned an essentialist view of culture, even though I tried to limit that by using inverted commas. I also clarified my views in our first interview, where I explained that I did not think of culture in categorical terms. Although both my participants seemed to understand and agree with my explanation, I did not interject if they addressed culture from an essentialist perspective, instead I looked at the nuances in it and the different culture-related discourses they used (Collins & Armenta Delgado, 2019; Holliday, 2016a). This can be seen an example of my participation in the co-creation of reality but also of my attempt not to impose my words or philosophy on my participants.

4.3.3 Interviews

“[I]nterviews are particularly well suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 116)

Interviews seemed to be the optimal tool to address sojourners’ perceptions and beliefs as they allow researchers to have “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984: 102) with the participants and discuss topics in detail, which would not be possible through a questionnaire or observations. I decided to use semi-structured interviews because they follow an interview schedule with the main points a researcher wants to cover, but also allow for some flexibility and provide “room for negotiation, discussion and expansion of the interviewee’s responses” (Mann, 2016: 91). The schedule of the questions (see Appendix E) reflects what I believed to be the most logical succession of topics, but the order in which they were asked/answered differed depending on the interview and the flow of the individual conversation. I tried to let the interviewees speak as freely as possible without interruptions or prompts, until their point of “spontaneity exhaustion” (Tomlinson, 1989: 172). Similarly, I tried to keep my questions as open-ended as possible as they “facilitate the giving of opinion and allow the respondents opportunities to develop their responses in ways which the

interviewer might not have foreseen” (Campbell et al., 2004, p. 99). Furthermore, in all my interactions with the participants, I tried to avoid specialised words and technicisms and kept the exchanges conversation-like to promote rapport and limit misunderstandings (Merriam, 2009). My good relationship with the participants helped our conversations to flow naturally and avoid shyness or stilted communication. On the other hand, our friendly talkativeness and the richness of their descriptions and reflections led to longer-than-planned interviews. In those cases, I tried to keep our exchanges transparent and ethical by openly giving the participants the option to stop and reconvene at a later date in case they wanted to split the interview.

From the beginning, I knew that participants were likely going to be abroad at the time of all three interviews and they were going to be in different parts of Italy. Therefore, interviews were planned to be carried out via Skype or other forms of video call unless requested otherwise by the participants. All exchanges took place online, with the exception of Interview 1 and an unplanned meeting in Rome with Lucia, both of which occurred face-to-face on her request. Online interviewing was already becoming increasingly common (Mann, 2016; Weller, 2017) when I planned my research and it became even more so after the pandemic. Not only did online exchanges solve the issue of geographical distance but video call interviewing still allowed me to have an idea of the participants’ facial expressions (and body language in part), which have been compared to the “nonverbal and social cues” (Janghorban et al., 2014: 1) of face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, the visual element of online interviews helped to put words into a clearer context and better understand gestures and contextual references that may have remained opaque without the video. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated when necessary (see section 4.5.1). However, online interviewing can involve problems with the internet connection, bad recordings and a higher “absentee rate and rescheduling” (Janghorban et al., 2014: 2). In order to limit such problems, I reminded participants of our meetings a few days in advance to confirm their attendance, I carried out all interviews in places with strong Wi-Fi to ensure my connection did not cause problems, and I recorded interviews (with the interviewee’s permission) with two recorders, which helped ensuring clarity in the recordings. These strategies did not prevent all problems but likely limited them. Some rescheduling was needed

but bad internet connection was the main issue we encountered in our conversations. This was especially problematic at the beginning of lockdown, when I was forced to upgrade my personal home connection and had to limit my video exchanges with Lucia for a few weeks whilst the change of provider was carried out. Similarly, during lockdown Lucia had to go outside her house and use her phone for our calls, which often meant that she had limited connection and/or battery. However, we soon adjusted to the connection issues and became accustomed to repeating ourselves a few times or turn off the video when needed.

The particular setting of a full YA was an excellent opportunity to carry out longitudinal research, and the decision to have multiple interviews was based both on this specific context and the recommendation in longitudinal qualitative research to allow between interviews “an amount of time sufficient to examine relevant change from one point to another” (Hermanowicz, 2013, p. 196). Furthermore, Seidman (2013) found the ‘three-interview series’ particularly useful to explore the participants’ experiences and their meaning(s), and contextualise them better, which aligned with my objectives. Having more than one interview also helps to create trust and rapport with the participants and allows for a deeper reflection on the topics of discussion as a consequence of the prolonged time between interviews (Mann, 2016). The frequency of our communications further contributed to reducing my fear that the participants would tell me “what they believe is expected, rather than their true beliefs” (Mills et al., 2006, p. 285). To limit this possibility I also explained on several occasions that I was interested in their personal perspectives, making no particular answer ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

The three core interviews took place at the beginning of their YA before their teaching started, after the Christmas break and at the end of their stay. This allowed for some time between the interviews that gave me the opportunity to start working on the transcription and analysis, but most of all to “review the continually evolving interrelationship between data, analysis and interpretation” (Richards, 2003, p. 269). This “reality check” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 34) helped me to be more reflective and reflexive and look critically at my research and at how each data collection wave could inform the next one. As mentioned, because of the pandemic, not only was the final interview carried out at a very different time for the two participants, but they also had a different experience and a different number of exchanges. During the months of lockdown Lucia started asking for

and initiating more regular and frequent exchanges, and our text messages (see section 4.3.4) turned into calls and video calls, more similar to interviews. At the other end of the spectrum, June stopped replying for a few weeks and became more reticent after her return to the UK. Both responses seemed understandable: June was not technically abroad anymore, which may have influenced the sporadicity of our interactions; and Lucia's increased communication with me was a way to escape the lockdown and her initial loneliness, as well as becoming another way to practise her Italian. Eventually I managed to have the three core interviews with each of the participants, as I had originally planned, but overall I had 4.6 hours of recordings with June and more than five times that amount with Lucia (23.2h). The implications of this stark difference and how I addressed it are discussed in section 4.6.

By combining the questionnaire and three interviews at different stages of the YA, I was able to keep track of the participants' experiences and witness the ways their perceptions about the YA developed over the months; however, my regular 'buddy messages' were the most influential instrument for that purpose, and I discuss them in more detail below.

4.3.4 The "Buddy System"

"A buddy or mentor in a host country (preferably, a student who comes from a host university) for each ERASMUS student can constitute a secured source of up-to-date information which can lower stress levels in critical moments such as arrival to the host country or in occurrences of culture clash events and lack-of-information events." (Krzaklewska & Skórska, 2013, p. 18)

The Buddy System involved the regular exchange of text messages between my participants and me, and it was designed to complement the interview data without burdening the sojourners with long video calls and taking up too much of their time (Ritchie et al., 2013), also allowing for asynchronous contacts. The idea for this approach came from my desire to make this research of mutual benefit for both my participants and me, as well as from my reading of the SA literature, which triggered my interest in the role a 'buddy' could have on the sojourners' experience. One particular example that inspired my idea was Wilkinson's (1998) study (see section 3.4.2.1) in which, if the American students had had a French 'buddy', they may have asked about the change in behaviour in their host families after their phone calls and they may have understood that it was a cultural

difference in phone use rather than a personal problem 'against' them. In a similar way, my participants were likely to come across cultural differences they did not know about or understand at first (despite the preparation courses at university). Therefore, by becoming their 'Italian buddy', they had someone to ask those cultural questions, and it gave me the opportunity to explore their experience and perceptions further. Friendship and support networks are valued factors in promoting cultural adaptation (Viol & Klasen, 2021; Ward et al., 2001) and in some cases host institutions acknowledge this and organise "language buddies" (Coleman, 2015, p. 43). These are often arranged for Erasmus students as suggested in the extract at the start of this section and have a strong linguistic focus as evident from Coleman's reference to 'language' buddies. However, the benefits buddy systems can have are transversal to all sojourners and I believe that designing my research including this instrument benefitted my participants too.

When the respondents completed the questionnaire, they were asked if they wanted to take part in the Buddy System, and if they agreed, they had to choose a preferred means of communication for it (e.g. WhatsApp, SMS, emails). I then sent them a first introductory message reintroducing myself and confirming that from that moment on, they could contact me at any point during their YA and ask about any culture-related topics, problems, doubts, or even simple curiosities. I explained I would only get in touch with them every four to six weeks to ask how their YA was going, so that I could keep track of their experience in Italy (see Appendix F for the Buddy System general guide). For the participants, I was potentially a source of knowledge and advice as an Italian person and a more experienced student living in a foreign country. Also, had they needed someone to talk to during their YA, I was a friendly, non-institutional ear they could contact. However, I was aware that by having frequent contacts with my participants, our conversations ran the risk of leading to over-rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For this reason, I clearly clarified my role and its limits in my introductory email, and just as I explained to my participants what the Buddy System was, equally I stressed what it was not. They were informed that I would not help them with homework or assessments, or any teaching preparation or lesson planning (in case of teaching assistants, as my participants turned out to be), and I would not replace their tutors or any academic support they already had within the

university. Since I was going to investigate the affective challenges the participants might go through in their YA, I clarified that our interactions were very different from counselling sessions (Mann, 2016) and I was not a trained counsellor, and they should not expect that. On the other hand, I was aware that the YA experience could trigger some level of distress (e.g. feeling homesick, lonely, overwhelmed, anxious; see section 3.2.2) and sojourners may cope with it differently. Therefore, although I would not disclose any data before the process of complete anonymisation had taken place, if in the course of the data collection (interview or buddy exchanges) a participant had shown particular distress and/or disclosed their struggle to me, I would have directed them to the most appropriate support (e.g. mental health support, academic support). As explained in section 4.3.1, I wanted to establish a friendly relationship with them because trust and a certain level of empathy can help participants feel at ease and increase the quality of the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009); nonetheless, their well-being was always my priority.

I hoped the virtual setting and the confidentiality of the buddy messages may help the participants open up about issues they may not feel at ease to talk about in face-to-face or online interviews, especially in the initial exchanges. Buddy messages could be quick and synchronous like an online chat or may have needed time between replies, as with emails. Both options had advantages: the quick chat-like conversation would benefit from its resemblance to face-to-face exchanges (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), especially once our rapport developed; email-like interactions would encourage honest, reflexive responses (Hooley et al., 2012) without the pressure of instant replying. For these reasons, I designed the Buddy System as a way to give students a familiar method (text messages) to ask about the unfamiliar in the YA in a friendly, non-judgemental environment.

Another widely used data collection method in qualitative SA research that I had initially considered is journaling (Gallucci, 2011; Isabelli-García et al., 2018; Jackson, 2006; Kinginger, 2011). Diaries, handwritten or electronic, have been particularly used to research sojourners' intercultural awareness, but they also provide personal accounts about the SA experiences, insights into identity development as well as linguistic data. Similarly to the institutionally arranged buddy systems, sometimes universities task their outgoing SA students with keeping diaries as a tool to promote sojourners' reflexivity (Isabelli-García et al.,

2018). Although I considered the idea of complementing my questionnaire and interviews with a blog or a YA diary, I thought this method would risk being too detached and not engaging enough due to its self-reported nature (Mackey & Gass, 2005), especially in a longitudinal study where it may be hard to sustain interest and commitment to writing regular diaries (Neale, 2019). Diary entries can be helpful starting points for interviews (e.g. Gallucci, 2011) but they also run the risk of leading to respondent fatigue (Bolger et al., 2003) or of becoming more scarce or superficial when sojourners are busy or overwhelmed, or due to external factors (e.g. limited internet connection in Alyosha's case, Zaykovskaya et al., 2017). The mutuality of the Buddy System and my involvement in it were hoped to make buddy messages more interactive and allowed me to have a more reliable regularity in my data collection (every four to six weeks I would contact my participants). This did not eliminate the possibility that my participants may not reply or be reticent and sporadic in their answers; nonetheless, by foregrounding my participation in these exchanges I hoped to contribute to making the buddy messages more engaging for them in comparison to having to write a diary on their own. Furthermore, my participants could send me asynchronous texts or voice messages at any point, which could be compared to an interactive and collaborative version of a diary. In light of my desire to make my research of mutual benefit and my relationship with my participants friendly, alongside my attempts to ethically avoid any unnecessary burden for my participants, I decided not to use diaries as a collection method. I believed the Buddy System would allow me to have most of the benefits of diaries, whilst compensating for the risk of withdrawal or reticence by making it an interactive activity and mutual resource.

When I contacted my participants for the scheduled buddy messages, the communication was kept as friendly as possible, and I focused my exchanges on very few questions. This was first of all not to waste their time, but I also wanted to maximise the potential for in-depth data that buddy messages could encourage from participants. The literature on the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 2011; Woolsey, 1986) inspired my design of the Buddy System questions. I would not say that I fully applied this technique, but it certainly informed my approach and aims for the buddy messages. A critical incident "is an interpretation of the significance of an event" (Tripp, 2011, p. 8), therefore it is

subjective and situated, and it represents “a value judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident” (ibid.). In practical terms, I asked my participants about two or three of the most memorable events that they had experienced in the weeks that had passed since our previous ‘catch up’ and why they found them memorable – whether in a good or bad way. This technique is often used when investigating someone’s “perceptions of problems” (Butterfield et al., 2005: 480) or beliefs and experiences, therefore it seemed suited for my purposes. Furthermore, not only did these critical events provide real, practical examples of the sojourners’ life abroad, but they also generated a ‘trail’, which in hindsight helped develop a clearer picture of the most important events in their months in Italy (discussed in the following four chapters).

4.4 Pilot Study

All the questionnaire and interview questions were based around themes used in the literature and other additions I made to suit my research purposes, but to test the clarity of my methods and wording, I carried out a pilot study. Piloting data generation tools is a widely recommended practice (Cohen et al., 2018; Dörnyei, 2007; Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003), especially in longitudinal studies (Saldaña, 2003), as it “allow[s] ‘fresh eyes’ to comment on [the questionnaire’s] suitability and clarity” (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003: 19) and it “assists in eliminating ambiguous questions as well as in generating useful feedback on the structure and flow of your intended interview” (ibid.: 52). My pilot study was carried out between July 29th and August 11th, 2019. I contacted six of my ex-students and three of them agreed to participate. As they had all been on SA during their degree, I asked each of the pilot participants to think back to their experience abroad and answer my questions imagining to be in a particular stage of their SA. One helped me pilot the pre-departure interview, another the Christmas break one, and the third one the post-YA interview. I am aware that selecting ex-students who had already been on their SA may have implications for the trustworthiness of the pilot data and the potential power disparity in our relation. However, the objective of the pilot was to test the data generation tools and practise my interview schedules, so I never planned to use its findings. I trusted my students would be honest about their opinions about the instruments and their experiences as they had all already graduated and we had been in

amicable terms since. Furthermore, due to limited time available for the recruitment, I needed to carry out the pilot before mid-August or I would have risked not reaching the potential participants before their YA started.

Because of the longitudinal and individual nature of the Buddy System, I could not pilot it realistically, but I discussed with the pilot participants what they thought about it as a research instrument, and they seemed positive about its potential benefits for YA students. This piloting phase was particularly helpful to better prepare before the interviews and practise for the interactions and possible issues that may arise during the conversation. I had carried out 16 interviews for my MA dissertation, so I was not nervous about them, yet I found piloting really beneficial as I was able to experience a phone (only audio), a video, and a face-to-face interview, which made me feel more prepared for what was to come in the actual study. Furthermore, I asked for feedback on my interviewing skills, the questions, the introductory email and the questionnaire, and the pilot participants' comments and my reflexive practice during and after the interviews informed my approach with June and Lucia. For example, I was often tempted to intervene and comment on what the interviewees were saying, and I had to consciously stop myself from doing so. I kept my ideas for after they had finished expressing themselves and intervened then, if still important. Similarly, despite the attachment to my interview schedule, piloting helped me to notice how redundant the conversation could become if I stuck to the schedule too strictly. The most helpful lesson I took from the pilot interviews was to add small reminders for myself on the interview schedule printouts before starting the data collection, not to forget things such as: starting off reminding the interviewees (and myself) about the recorder, and that there are no silly questions nor wrong answers; or asking if they had any questions for me at the end. Appendix G provides an example of the handwritten notes on one of the piloted interviews. All three participants found the interviews as a good way to help them reflect on their experience and said they felt at ease throughout. The feedback on my introductory email also helped me to shorten it down and some suggestions were incorporated before sending the email out to the real potential participants (see Appendix B).

4.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of my data was an ongoing and iterative process (Duff, 2008; Richards, 2003), parallel to and feeding into the data collection. The

questionnaire provided initial information which was discussed in more detail in the first interview and buddy exchange, then the preliminary analysis of these informed the following wave of data collection, and so on. Due to the high number of buddy messages and exchanges with my participants, Table 2 provides a timeline encompassing the questionnaire, the interviews and the main buddy messages, plus the extra calls with Lucia, showing the noticeable difference between the two data sets (see Appendix H for the complete and detailed data collection timeline).

Table 2 – Data Collection Timeline

LUCIA		JUNE	
Questionnaire	18/09/2019	Questionnaire	09/09/2019
Interview 1	23/09/2019	Interview 1	27/09/2019
Voice Buddy Message (Part 1)	15/11/2019	Buddy Message	11/11/2019
Voice Buddy Message (Part 2)	15/11/2019	Interview 2	05/01/2020
Voice Buddy Message	22/11/2019	Buddy Messages	06/03/2020
Call	16/01/2020		08/04/2020
Call	25/01/2020		15/05/2020
Interview 2	03/02/2020		21/05/2020
Call	07/04/2020		04/08/2020
Call	05/05/2020		11/08/2020
Call	15/05/2020		13/08/2020
Call	02/06/2020	Interview 3	17/08/2020
Call	12/06/2020		
Call	07/07/2020		
Call	14/07/2020		
Call	12/09/2020		
Call	22/09/2020		
Call	29/09/2020		
Call	15/10/2020		
Call	03/11/2020		
Interview 3	12/11/2020		

All data was systematically stored, categorised and referenced based on the type (i.e. Questionnaire, Buddy Message, Interview, Call, Voice Message), wave of collection (e.g. Interview 1, Buddy Message 2), date of collection and the participant. Given the oral nature of most of my data, the first part of the analysis process was indeed the transcription of all recordings and voice messages.

4.5.1 Transcription

Transcription is “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” (Bird, 2005, p. 227) and it is not a passive activity (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). It is an active and evolving process throughout one’s research, and over the several months that I spent transcribing, I noticed improvements in my accuracy and speed, and my approach changed as well. After the complete

transcription of the first interviews, which took around seven hours of transcription for each hour of interview, I decided not to transcribe sections of the conversations that were not relevant for my research (Bryman, 2016). Examples of these include: arrangements for following calls, initial sound checks, repetitions due to connection problems and goodbyes. At times I also decided not to transcribe digressions on topics unrelated to the research, but in those instances I summarised the key concepts and provided the times of beginning and end of the sections I cut in case those topics became relevant later. Furthermore, because I did not focus on the linguistic features of the conversations (e.g. in Discourse or Conversation Analysis), I did not consider it necessary to include indication of speech features such as intonation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) or the exact length of pauses. During the transcription process researchers “may ‘tidy up’ the ‘messy’ features of conversation” (Silverman, 2006, p. 331) (e.g. false starts, long pauses). Although this practice has been criticised, I purposefully only applied those conventions I considered necessary and helpful for my research purposes and for the clarity of my data (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). I used standard punctuation (unless used non-standardly by my participants), using full stops, commas and exclamation or questions marks depending on the intonation of the utterances. However, in order to let my participants’ voices come through, I have at times deviated from standard orthography by capitalising words they emphasised (mostly by saying them louder than the rest) and I added extra vowels in words they expressively elongated (e.g. pleeeeease, goood, the woooorst). For the same reason, I have chosen to keep my transcription of their utterances as verbatim (word for word) as possible, including colloquialisms or slang (e.g. wanna, gonna) and, later on, also inaccuracies in Lucia’s Italian. Similarly, I have not changed the original spelling in the text messages they sent me nor the abbreviations they used, as they reflect their idiolect and identity at that time. Where needed I have clarified them, as in the vignette in section 6.7.1 where I provided a list of the abbreviations used by June (e.g. “idk” for “I don’t know”). One more way in which I have tried to let my participants’ voices come through was by keeping their emojis in the transcripts and explaining contextual elements in square brackets. This strategy was used from the more straightforward [*laughs*] or [*laughter*], used respectively to indicate when they laughed or when we both did, to the more complex extra-linguistic features such as facial expressions or gestures that contributed to the meaning of their

utterances, as in “[*makes sound of something frantically fast*]” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020) in section 6.4.1. When it came to including extracts from the transcripts into this thesis I decided to replace features such as digressions, rephrasings, hesitations or repeated fillers (e.g. “erm”, “you know”, “like”) with “[...]” in order to aid clarity and reduce unnecessary words.

Given that almost all exchanges were carried out via video calls, we had to sometimes repeat ourselves or wait for the connection to come back. However, when individual words were not clearly audible yet understandable from the context and the general gist of the conversation, I refrained from asking them to repeat, unless I thought the missing word could be important or lead to ambiguities. This was a conscious choice made to allow the conversations to flow as naturally as possible despite the connection problems and the potential loss of some words overall.

It is important to note that Lucia gradually started to switch to Italian (see section 8.4.2.1). At first she sporadically used single words in her messages, then some sentences also in the interviews, until during lockdown she asked for the interviews to be in Italian for her to have some extra practice. I agreed to her request for a number of reasons:

- 1) I did not want to create attrition in the rapport that was developing between us,
- 2) Her mixing and matching of her linguistic repertoires showed examples of translanguaging, highlighting the fluidity of languages (Badwan, 2021) and I considered her request to be a sign of identity development and part of her acculturation journey and integration in the host community, and I did not want to stifle this.
- 3) I wanted to see if her linguistic choices in Italian could give me any information on her language learning and the influence of living with a host family, as it could indirectly provide invaluable insight into her experiences and home environment. Indeed, in some cases, her Italian led to conversations about some events happened in the host house (e.g. questions about the ‘southern’ pronunciation, her Marche accent teased by her hosts, or the use of the particle ‘ci’ typical of her region).

I was aware of the risk that Lucia may not be able to express herself as clearly as in English, but because it was her request and initiative, I accepted whilst

specifying that if she felt she was not managing to explain herself in Italian she could ask me or she could swap to English at any time.

4.5.1.1 Translation

I had considered the possibility that my participants may ask to speak in Italian with me, and when this happened I transcribed the words uttered by them in the way they pronounced them, even when inaccurate. Whenever possible in this thesis I have tried to provide the Italian utterance first, followed by its translation but in some cases due to wordcount limitations and not to interrupt the flow of the narrative or argument, I have simply indicated the translated words in *Italic*, to show that they were originally uttered in Italian (all original extracts are included in Appendix J). Having achieved my BA in Interpreting and Translation, I took upon myself the role of translator. Being fluent in both Italian and English and being the only researcher working on my data, I decided to only translate the sections I was going to use in this thesis to avoid unnecessary work. In my translations I opted for a less word-for-word translation and more of a world-for-world (Eco, 2000) one, focused on the meaning in Lucia's words, rather than their form. This was especially the case when she made grammatical mistakes in her Italian, which I did not reproduce in the translation. However, through member checking I have shown my participants the chapters about themselves and asked them to indicate anything they noticed – including any potential mistranslations or misunderstandings. This was aimed at increasing the trustworthiness of my research, the accuracy of my interpretations (and translations in Lucia's case) and also to allow them to add comments or reflections. No major changes or corrections were made by either of the participants. June said "I got your email and I've had a quick read of it already and it looks so great!! I'm going to have a more in-depth read of it when I can and I'll let you know when I do!" (June, Buddy Message, 25/11/2021) but she never got back in touch, and I did not insist as it seemed unethical to ask further comments if she did not initiate the conversation, or in case she did not have time or desire to comment more. Lucia provided more specific feedback, asking for one word to be deleted, as in hindsight she felt bad for saying it, and correcting the spelling of one word (the name of a card game) that I had misheard.

4.5.2 Template Analysis

Transcribing was at the base of my data analysis and I purposefully spent time reading and re-reading the transcripts and also listening and re-listening to the recordings allowing myself to “marinate in the data” (Tracy, 2019, p. 188) and become familiar with it. My aim was to understand my participants’ perceptions and beliefs about their experiences abroad and keep track of their development over time, both within the two individual cases and across them to notice any differences or similarities. I was therefore drawn towards thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) a “theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”. This was my initial approach, but soon after listening to and transcribing the first wave of data I realised that my personal experiences, my reading and my research questions were drawing my attention to particular aspects of the data. Although my analytical approach was mostly inductive, I could not ignore these *a priori* themes I had in mind, therefore I decided to opt for template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2004, 2012), “a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study” (King, 2012, p. 426). Template analysis allows to have a “limited number [of *a priori* themes] that correspond to key concepts or perspectives for the study” (King, 2012, p. 430), these *a priori* themes form an initial template but are revised iteratively and can be discarded or modified according to how the analysis develops and how the themes apply to the data. The flexibility of this approach allowed me to systematically apply my evolving template to each transcript “in order to analyse the text through the process of coding” whilst still allowing my template to be “revised in the light of the ongoing analysis” (King, 2004, p. 259).

My template was initially made up of a few broad themes closely related to the research questions (e.g. pre-YA experiences and beliefs, affective challenges, coping strategies, YA ‘success’). Whilst coding the transcripts, I gradually expanded and modified the template by adding recurring sub-themes (e.g. affective challenges → loneliness, language barrier, job issues, out of comfort zone) and progressively creating different thematic levels (e.g. affective challenges → comfort zone-related, language-related, relationship-related →

loneliness, FoMO, making connections, challenged teacher identity). One analytical step that helped me finetune my template was to re-apply its final version to all transcripts. Although every theme fitted, I decided to tweak some of the thematic levels and merge some smaller sub-themes. For example, the sub-themes “Awareness” and “Italian Identity” were present in both participants, but the first was particularly prominent in June’s case and the second in Lucia’s, therefore I changed the thematic hierarchy accordingly. Figure 3 provides an example of the broader themes for the two cases (on the left), and the sub-thematic division in the specific case of June’s Affective Challenges theme (on the right). In the latter, the three preliminary codes highlighted at the bottom were merged into the theme “Settlement Time” and later discarded (indicated by “-----”).

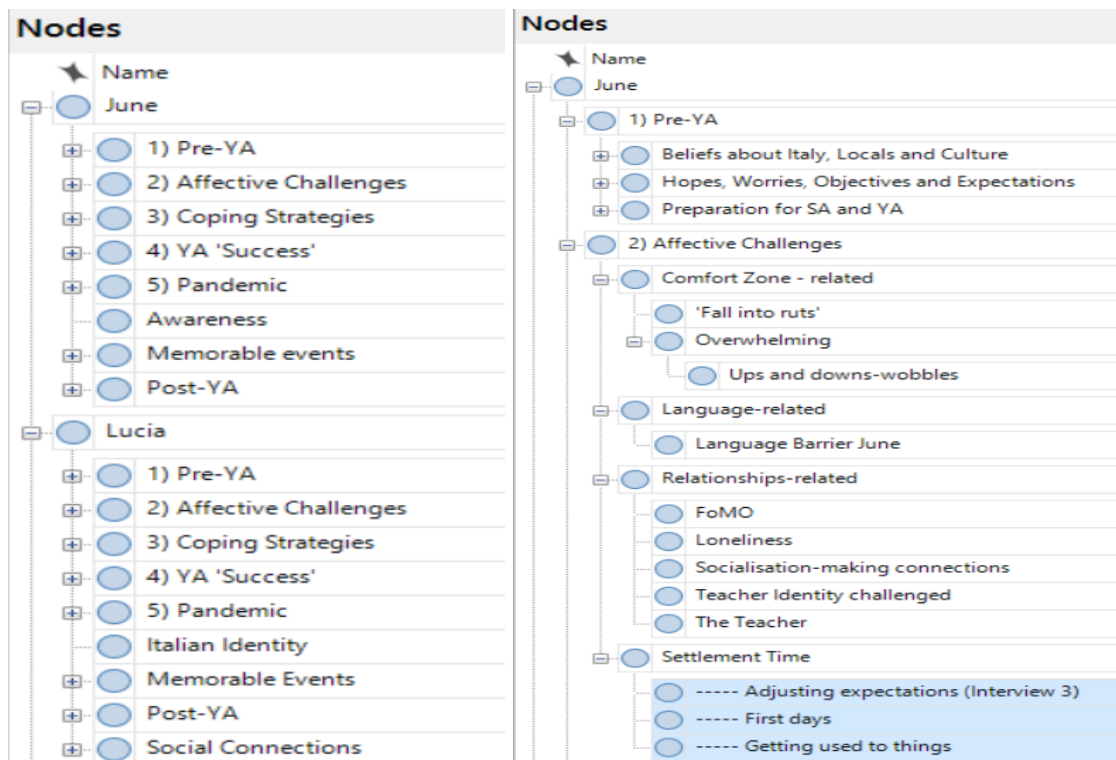


Figure 3 – Examples of Evolving Template on NVivo12.

I initially developed the template manually but when the increasing quantity of data made it unmanageable, I turned to Nvivo12 to have a clearer view of the recurring patterns between the two cases as well as the peculiarities within each of them. By uploading all data to the software I also had the chance to review all transcripts again and identify key extracts that could be used in this thesis, making it easier to find them during the writing up process. Appendix M provides two hand-written examples of my evolving themes (before and after the outbreak

of the pandemic), whilst Appendix N includes my NVivo-designed final templates applied to each participant in the form of thematic maps. The initial manual analysis helped me to immerse myself in the data, whereas the computerised analysis gave me more perspective. This double analysis was time consuming, but it allowed me to deepen my understanding of my research findings and notice details and connections that I would have missed if I had relied on only one method.

Template analysis can also have disadvantages as templates may be perceived as being too focused on coding, creating a barrier between the researcher and the data, limiting their engagement with it (King, 2012). On the other hand, templates may also become so detailed that the researcher may lose sight of the actual data interpretation, or the template may become too complex and difficult to manage (King, 2004, 2012). Given my prolonged immersion in the data I was not worried about the first potential disadvantage, and to limit the others, I presented preliminary analysis extracts to my supervisors at different stages, in order to have an opportunity to pause and have a 'reality check' (Saldaña, 2003) on the evolution of my analysis and my themes and promote reflexivity (see Appendix K for an example of my transcripts and this preliminary analysis).

It is also important to remember that "data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) and that themes do not 'emerge' from the data as if they resided in it and researchers dug them out or discovered them. I fully acknowledge my involvement in the co-creation of reality with my participants during the data generation and also my subjective input on the data analysis and the identification and interpretations of the themes. Indeed, from my epistemological point of view, this is the only way one can interpret the data, with interpretation seen as an ongoing process that involves making sense of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and transcending it (Wolcott, 1994). In the following section I discuss the ethical considerations involved in my research process, the methodological challenges I faced as a consequence of the pandemic and how I addressed them.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Methodological Challenges

"Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Stake, 1998: 103).

Good and ethical research 'manners' were at the base of my research journey, and the institutional ethical requirements served as a starting point for my code of conduct. This study was carried out in accordance with the University of Leeds Research Policy and ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds in June 2019 (see Appendix A). All information was kept confidential, and nothing was disclosed before the process of anonymisation was completed. I safely stored all data on the University server and accessed it remotely during the pandemic, whilst also deleting all buddy messages from my mobile (I had a mobile used only for my doctoral research) and reminding my participants to do the same. Although my participants were adults and the information sheet was in their first language (English), to ensure that consent was 'informed' (Homan, 2001; Pring, 2001), I made sure to provide all information in a concise way and in a simple and friendly language. Drawing on Neale and Hanna (2012), I considered consent as an ongoing process, especially given the longitudinal nature of my research. Therefore, as well as receiving consent at the start of the data collection, I also regularly reminded my participants that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any point, and I confirmed their permission to record our conversations at the start of every synchronous exchange. This also reflects my broader reflexive approach, considering all of my ethical decisions as ongoing processes that may require in-progress adjustments. One example of this, which involved thinking on the spot and adapting to unplanned events, was when I met Lucia in Rome in November 2019. It was a last-minute arrangement as I happened to be visiting my family when Lucia texted me saying she was in Rome. I had not realised she was there for the British Council TA gathering until I met with her and she told me that she had spoken with June and they had talked about participating in my research. This took me by surprise as I had not foreseen that my participants would find out about each other. However, after an initial moment of shock I decided that the most ethical response in that situation would be to invite June to my dinner with Lucia and be transparent about knowing that I was aware of their contacts. June could not join us and over time neither of them spoke much about each other in their conversations with me, but I believe that by being honest and maintaining my friendly approach in that occasion increased our mutual trust and openness. After that event, I sent both a text message and openly explained that everything

they would ever say to me would be kept confidential and I would never share anything they told me with the other. As my relationship with June and Lucia developed, so did my need to iteratively reflect on the boundaries that I had to create (and update) with them in order to keep my research ethical. Before concluding this chapter, I provide a few key examples of further dilemmas that arose from the outbreak of the pandemic as I had to adjust differently according to the differences in my participants' circumstances.

During my data collection and analysis, I transcribed each data item soon after its generation and I carried out a preliminary analysis before the following wave of data. However, the pandemic impacted on this process, affecting my final interview schedule and my Buddy System, as well as impeding me to collect first-hand contextual data as mentioned in section 4.3. After lockdown was announced in Italy my communications with June decreased, with more than two months of silence between May and August, whilst the opposite happened with Lucia, with whom I had more frequent, long conversations. Anonymity, confidentiality, data protection, informed consent and right to withdraw were the ethical foundations of my research practice but the pandemic brought about unexpected challenges. These were both ethical and methodological and below I discuss the main decisions in my response to the new circumstances and the evolving relational dimensions of my research:

1) Because the calls with Lucia became more frequent I did not always have enough time to transcribe and immerse myself in the data between one call and the other. Furthermore, these exchanges did not follow a semi-structured schedule but were related to topics Lucia wanted to discuss – or sometimes they represented outlets for her emotions. I knew from the pilot that taking notes during a conversation distracted me from actively listening, therefore jotting down the key ideas discussed in these conversations as soon as possible after each call seemed more helpful than rushing their transcription.

2) I did not want to force June to reply given that her YA had been interrupted, she was not in Italy and her overall well-being was more important than gathering data for my research. I sent her a text on 1st June and after almost two months without reply I tried to check on her again explicitly saying that there was no pressure on her to reply. Eventually she replied and also accepted to have the third interview, but I had already thought of the possibility that she may not get

back to me or may even choose to withdraw. I would have understood both decisions, and in the former, although I would have had only two interviews, what I had was already rich and insightful.

3) The other question I had to reflect upon was how to balance my increasingly friendly relationship with Lucia. My philosophical constructivist standpoint meant that by no means I considered our conversations as data I was detached from, on the contrary, I knew I was co-constructing it with Lucia, and I was inextricably part of it. However, balancing my level of friendliness was a challenge, which became even harder after the Covid-19 outbreak. A close rapport can be a double-edged sword: it can lead to more insight and make participants feel more at ease and open, yet it may create some friendly pressure or some expectations and friend-pleasing attitudes (conscious or subconscious), which may bias one's responses. This is normal in a co-constructed reality, but it is important to acknowledge it and its potential impact.

4) Furthermore, due to the global crisis and the personal impact it had on people, including Lucia and myself, I had to re-focus and carefully decide how much to share in our conversations. On the one hand, I started my research aiming to be a friendly ear for my participants without falling into the role of a therapist or counsellor, and I wanted to keep it that way. On the other, with the increasing frequency of our exchanges and the difficult times, the personal impact that the pandemic was having on our lives became a recurring topic. My decision at that point was to be open to all topics of conversation Lucia chose and felt comfortable with, but I purposefully decided to avoid sharing too much of my personal issues in order not to burden her with those as well. If anything had felt uncomfortable for me, I would have honestly said it and, similarly, in all of our calls, I reiterated that I would record our conversations, but she could always ask me to exclude all or parts of the recordings. Because of the stressful and worrying times, I was expecting our conversations to lean towards well-being, mental health, and affective challenges but, if Lucia had shown particular distress, I would have directed her to her university support services. Being in a similar situation, I could sympathise with her, but I would not take on the role of counsellor had the situation derailed in that direction. This seemed to me as the most appropriate strategy at the time based on my personal and research standpoint. The pandemic was an integral part of our lives and could not be ignored or separated

from the rest of Lucia's life experiences in Italy, which were the focus of my research.

Changing approach and adjusting data collection tools to the circumstances is accepted in case study methodology (and other qualitative approaches), especially in longitudinal studies as the researcher adapts to the unfolding of the data (Duff, 2012), and certainly the pandemic caused several changes in my plans. Nevertheless, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 will provide examples of some of the positive effects of the pandemic and lockdown.

4.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have clarified the philosophical underpinnings of my research and my positionality. My interpretivist-constructivist paradigm aligns with the qualitative longitudinal case study methodology I have chosen, and my data collection tools. Through template analysis I have identified the main themes in my data and the following four chapters present my findings and case analysis.

It is my intention to present June and Lucia's experiences as transparently as possible, providing key extracts from our conversations to let their voices come through, and adding some commentary to explain contextual elements and provide some analysis. Due to wordcount limitations I do not include transcriptions of all my questions or utterances in the selected extracts. This is not an attempt to hide my voice or my involvement in the co-construction of reality with my participants, of which I am aware and which I have discussed throughout this chapter, but only a practical solution.

To aid clarity, I devoted two chapters to each participant, the first introduces them and their pre-YA experiences and mindset, addressing my first research question on sojourners' prior beliefs and their impact on the perceived YA experience. The second chapter is longer in both cases as it focuses on my participants' YA months, referring to my remaining research questions about their affective challenges, coping strategies and their idea of a 'successful' YA. The second chapter for each of the participants also includes a short vignette, zooming in on a representative moment in their development and encapsulating some of the core themes in their experiences.

Chapter 5 June's Pre-YA

This is the first chapter on June, introducing her and her pre-departure experiences and mindset. Here I address my first research question looking at what her prior beliefs on the YA were (RQ1a) and how these impacted on her experience (RQ1b). Firstly, I provide some information about her educational background, her previous teaching experiences and stays abroad, focusing especially on her previous Study Abroad (SA) in France. I then present June's expectations and hopes about her YA, and the beliefs about Italy, Italians and 'the Italian culture' that she held before her departure.

A note on the extracts used in Chapters 5 and 6: because of the pandemic, my third interview with June had to be carried out six months after her return to the UK. By talking about her months in Italy in hindsight, her final interview provided rich insights into her initial experiences. For this reason, I have used some extracts from Interview 3 also when discussing early events in her stay.

5.1 Educational Background & Teaching Experience

June was a 20-year-old student of French and Italian in a UK university. She started university as an advanced student of French and a beginner of Italian. She was not a complete beginner of the language as she had taken a GCSE in it, but her university requires an A-level in a language for students to be eligible for the advanced classes, therefore she joined the beginners' group. By studying two languages, June had the opportunity to go on two SA experiences, and because her university requires all beginners of Italian to go to Italy for a full YA, June went to France for two months in the Spring of 2019 before going to Italy in September of that year.

As explained in Chapter 2, when choosing their destinations, students also have to decide (depending on their chosen countries) whether to go there to study at a university, on a work placement or as English teaching assistants (TAs) for the British Council. For her SA in France June chose the student option, whilst for the YA in Italy she decided to teach English. She was assigned to two Italian high schools, with students aged 14 to 19 (or older if they had to repeat a year). June explained that her final decision to choose the British Council option came from a meeting organised by the university between final-year students, who had just

come back from their YA, and second-year students, who were in the process of finalising their YA choices:

“[...] getting their first-hand experience was really helpful and way back when we were choosing what we were going to do, when they have the students come and talk to us about their experiences the previous year. That was a key moment where I was like ‘okay I know that I want to do the British Council’.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

That meeting helped June make up her mind, and even though she had not taught language classes specifically, she already had some previous experience teaching dance, so she was not “going completely off the deep end” (ibid.):

“So I've got quite a good amount of experience of teaching three- to 12-year-olds how to dance and also last year I led classes of upwards of 60 plus people every week [...] sort of my age and above, generally speaking.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Therefore, June was used to big classes and students of different ages, although she added that “the window of people that I haven't actually really taught that much is the window of people that I'm going to be teaching here, 14- to 19-year-olds” (ibid.). Her role in Italy would have familiar and unfamiliar aspects; nevertheless, June had a point of comparison that she could use as a basis for her teaching. Furthermore, having also done a language exchange with a Korean girl at the end of her first year, June seemed to have a range of experiences to draw upon:

“I have a little bit of trying to explain English to someone who's not a native speaker. So I'm kind of hoping that a little bit of experience I have which is slightly different from what I'll be doing there and the little bit of experience that I have, which is again slightly different to what I'll be doing there will kind of help me go into...next week!” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Not all students going abroad as TAs have previous teaching experience as it is not a requirement (see also Lucia's case for example) and June's confidence, or at least her hopefulness, about the teaching side of her YA seemed to have benefitted from the fact that she had already taught in the past. Contrary to Lucia's case, in her questionnaire June did not mention teaching as being one of her main worries for her YA. For this reason, it is plausible to think that June's choice to go to Italy to teach was also based on her previous experiences, which would constitute a first pre-departure factor to have an impact on her YA.

Teaching was an important aspect of June's YA, both from a professional and personal point of view, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter;

however, it was not the only previous experience that influenced her YA choices, as I explain in the next section.

5.2 Previous Experiences Abroad

June had been abroad on holidays multiple times, but she acknowledged that two of her experiences had an impact on the way she lived her YA: a summer holiday in a youth camp in Italy and her SA in France. Below I address both stays and the influence they had on June's expectations and beliefs about her YA.

5.2.1 Youth Camp

Before her final year of high school, some Italian family friends who lived near her invited June to a youth camp just outside of Rome for approximately two weeks. That was around the time she was studying Italian for her GCSE and she decided to go. June only mentioned this experience in our final interview, but she explained:

“[It was] kind of my first experience of being abroad without my parents, without a very structured thing like a school trip. It was very different to that, especially because I was older than all of the kids who were in the youth camp, but slightly younger than the young adults who were leading activities [...] so I was kind of caught between the two.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

In this first trip without her family, June experienced the feeling of being in an unusual role – not a student, not a staff member –, and she “had to learn to kind of adapt to that” (ibid.). This already introduced her to some of the experiences she would encounter in the YA setting, as she was away from her family, she had to understand what her role was, and she faced unexpected events:

“...that was another kind of experience of being in a different context without the support of my actual parents or people that I knew really well [...] so it was the kind of experience of being destabilised a bit and learning to roll with it, figure out your own place or what you're doing, your own role, especially when you're not having much guidance on what you're actually meant to be doing... But you still have to make yourself useful...”. (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The feeling of destabilisation and lack of guidance were recurring themes also in June's later experiences abroad, both in her SA in France and her YA in Italy, but it would seem that her process to develop strategies to counteract those negative feelings and adjust to a new context in a foreign country had already started in this first experience. However, in this specific trip to Italy, June still had her family

friends and also became friends with an English woman they knew (with pseudonym Shirley), so she had a few people who could support her and that June “could touch base with” (ibid.). This was particularly important when a young Italian man at the youth camp started to give June too much attention and made her feel uncomfortable, so much so that Shirley, who June felt had “adopted” (ibid.) her, intervened and helped her:

“I’d just turned 17 and one of the guys in this [youth camp]... who’s like 22-23, kind of got weirdly obsessed with me and was kind of following me around a lot and not in a friendly, healthy way [...] really freaked me out and I told Shirley about that and she was immediately like ‘Okay, sit down. I’m not taking my eyes off you!’ so she really looked after me!” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

This unpleasant experience, which is not uncommon in the SA literature (see section 3.4.1.3), prepared June for some other unwanted attention she faced during her time abroad in France. However, it may have also contributed to the expectation that she would have to go through this kind of situation also in her YA.

The lack of guidance, the unwanted attention and the need to adjust to a new role and context seemed to be common elements in June’s SA and YA and may have influenced her expectations and attitudes towards them. In the following section I focus on the key events related to June’s SA in France, which may have further prepared her for her YA in Italy.

5.2.2 Study Abroad Experience in France

After the Easter break in 2019, June went on her SA and stayed in a small town in France for two months. She went with a few other students from her university, and they stayed in a student accommodation. When first asked to define her SA experience in France in the questionnaire, June wrote: “Difficult! There were lots of ups and downs, it didn’t feel particularly well-organised which was a constant stress”, and in her first interview she added that the day she arrived in her SA destination was “one of the worst days of my life”. She explained that the reasons for such a negative initial impression were multiple, including that “the standards of student accommodation were much, much lower than what I was accustomed to (my room was filthy when I arrived and there was no wifi)” (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019). Similarly to her previous experience at the youth camp, June had to go through some level of destabilisation; in this case her role

as a student was clear, yet the conditions of her stay were not as good as she expected, and she had to re-adjust to those. If the conditions of her accommodation were not unsettling enough, June expressed her surprise also in relation to the “conservative” attitudes she found in her SA destination more in general:

“I wasn't expecting it to be as conservative as it was [...] even despite dressing in a way that I thought was more conservative, me and my friend were still catcalled” (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019).

This negative experience partly resembles the incident with the young Italian man at the youth camp, but in this case her friend was a victim too, rather than a form of protection as Shirley had been. On the other hand, June may have found comfort in not being alone in that situation. Receiving unwanted attention in another foreign country may have reinforced June's beliefs about the frequency of this kind of situation when abroad, which may have influenced her expectations for her YA and her attitudes when she arrived in Italy.

During our first interview, June reflected back on the first stressful days of her SA and concluded that she felt “completely overwhelmed” because of the number of issues she had encountered in such a short time, and explained:

“I think there were just a lot of little things that had any one of them been removed, I probably would have been ok, but the fact that I had loads of just completely new experiences kind of going from the Easter holidays where I'd been like ‘Woohoo, I got all my deadlines in beforehand, I can enjoy myself!’ and then going straight into ‘ok, you need to do this, this and that and deal with this problem and this problem’.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

The stress, the ups and downs and her feeling overwhelmed were all alleviated by the presence of her good university friend, with whom she spent most of her time, and who was fundamental for June's mental health during their months in France.

“[...] if it hadn't been for the other girl I went with, I probably would have gotten a little bit stuck in my own head because that's how I tend to react in circumstances like that.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Similarly to the family friends in her experience at the youth camp, this university friend became June's support system in a period in which she felt unsettled in a foreign country. Feeling stressed and overwhelmed triggered June's coping

strategy of 'getting stuck in her own head' but her awareness of such a tendency also helped her to find other solutions, in this case, her friend's support.

Her awareness and acknowledgement of her patterns in response to stress are possibly part of the reason why mental health was one of June's priorities from the very beginning of her YA, as will be discussed later in 5.3. However, despite the negative start, June's SA experience improved with time as she said that "it was a really useful experience" (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019). Indeed, June's unexpectedly challenging SA experience to some extent prepared her for the longer YA in Italy:

"I would say it definitely did help a lot. I think it was an ideal sort of stepping stone for me, because even though the experiences in France and Italy themselves were quite different [...] the pressure was quite similar [...] in a way, going through *SA destination* I was like 'well, it can't be much worse than that!' like, 'I'm not sure a worse experience than that exists so, you know, I'll be fine'." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Although it was an extremely stressful experience for June, it also served as a "stepping stone" which prepared her for the worst-case scenarios she could imagine. As a consequence, her YA would unlikely be harder than that and, using a video-game analogy, June vividly compared her SA and YA journeys:

"[France is] like one of the enemies that you have to fight and defeat, and then the Italian year abroad was like the final boss, in terms of the big one, and sort of fighting that one [France] sort of gave me the experience, the skills, the kind of reassurance in myself that I needed to be like 'okay, I can do this, even when I'm miserable and it's really really hard!'" (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

This extract explains June's perceptions about her two periods abroad and how going through her SA in France gave her more confidence and experience to 'fight the final boss' or, at least, face it with new tools and coping strategies. Her short stay in France gave June the opportunity to learn to adjust her expectations and find ways to cope with "real-life stress", which June differentiated from academic stress "which I don't particularly enjoy but I'm used to" (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019). The intense period in France and the related affective challenges June faced, resulted in an increase in her confidence and a more positive outlook towards her upcoming YA. It also helped her to change her attitudes towards making mistakes and facing negative situations, which she started to see as useful learning tools:

“[...] also in terms of being on the back foot with the language, I sort of got used to feeling out of my comfort zone and having to psych myself up to talk to people and the initial horrific moment of starting to speak.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June had been studying French for many years before going on her SA, therefore speaking French was not as familiar as the English-speaking environment of the youth camp, but it was not as unfamiliar as her YA in Italy. This eased her into the habit of speaking a foreign language for a prolonged period of time. Her SA experience also helped her to learn how to ‘psych herself up’, motivate herself to ‘get out of her comfort zone’ and overcome some of her fears. Self-talk and self-motivation to speak to people or do things she did not feel like doing were some of the coping strategies that June used in her months in Italy and are discussed in more depth in Chapter 9. In the same interview, June continued explaining how, overall, she had learnt from her SA in France and saw its positive sides too:

“That kind of encapsulates the *SA destination* experience for me... a lot of unpleasant things happened, and some good things happened too! You know, not to completely slander all the *SA destination* or France or French...but the kind of overall tone was like ‘Okay, key things: adjust your expectations, unpleasant things will end but they will help you overall.’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The acknowledgment that even the “unpleasant things” are only temporary and can be helpful in hindsight, highlights the impact that June’s SA in France had on her mindset and perception of SA experiences before going on her YA in Italy. This also relates to my research question (RQ1b) that investigates the ways prior beliefs (also based on previous experiences) impact on sojourners’ YA experiences. One particularly important event during June’s time in France was her solo trip to Paris for one weekend, as it represented a key moment for her confidence building and coping strategy development. Towards the end of her two months in France, June decided to go to Paris alone explaining:

“I went to a concert in Paris and I’d gone by myself, so I sort of did Paris by myself for the entire weekend and it was amazing and that was a big confidence boost for me.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Managing to go around a big city like Paris on her own, was an important new step for June and her confidence, and even in our final interview she still considered it one of the highlights of her SA. Moreover, having seen the positive effects of that trip, she utilised the strategy of going on solo trips also in her YA a

couple of times, which resulted in some of what she described as the most memorable events of her months in Italy (see section 6.6).

It is arguable that June's previous experiences, such as the youth camp or the SA, had an influence on her expectations and beliefs about stays abroad, which in turn had an impact on the way she experienced her YA. In particular, June's SA experience tested her in many ways: her coping strategies for stressful situations, her ability to get out of her comfort zone and adjust her expectations, and her reactions to uncomfortable events. However, her two months in France also laid a strong basis for her YA as she gained confidence and developed new mechanisms to cope with stress, cognitive dissonance and feeling overwhelmed.

5.3 Pre-YA Mindset

I now turn to June's pre-departure mindset in order to further address my first research question and better understand what June's prior beliefs on the YA were (RQ1a) and whether and how they had an impact on her experience in Italy (RQ1b). In the following five sub-sections I outline the pre-departure worries, objectives, beliefs, expectations and hopes June had about her YA in Italy.

5.3.1 Worries

Despite having already experienced a period abroad, in her questionnaire June expressed a few concerns she had about her upcoming YA: affective, practical and linguistic.

“Not being able to manage being lonely, which could have a negative effect on my mental health which in turn which [*sic*] would make me even less likely to put myself out there and make friends.” (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

This first worry shows June's awareness about the importance of mental health, and it also highlights one of the biggest differences between her previous experiences abroad and her YA: living alone. Loneliness was a recurring theme in most of our exchanges and is discussed more specifically in section 6.2. When asked about her questionnaire answer June explained: “I knew that I was going to live alone, which hasn't... like I've never done that before” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019). Having a friend with her had been fundamental to help her cope with stressful events and the ups and downs of the experience abroad in France. Thus, it is logical that by knowing she would not have the kind of support system

she was used to, she would be worried about the unfamiliarity of the situation. This worry is in turn related to one of her objectives for her YA: making friends in Italy, which is addressed in section 5.3.2.

Her second worry was more practical: “Not being able to maintain my diet (gluten + dairy free/reduced + low refined sugar [...])”, which – considering Italy’s culinary fame and its traditional dishes – may be a common concern for many other sojourners going to Italy.

Finally, her third worry was “Not being good enough at Italian both at the start and by the end of it!”. With her Italian being weaker than her French, it is understandable that June would be worried about her starting point, but her concern about her Italian level at the end of her YA seemed noteworthy. It may have been based on high standards, fear of failure or many other personal factors, but it likely also related to the fact that June did not think that her French had improved much after her SA. In one of her questionnaire answers she stated: “I feel it [the SA] has set me up well for my year in Italy though I'm not sure how much my French actually improved!”. June acknowledged the confidence boost and personal growth derived by her SA experience, but her language had not improved as much as she had expected. Nevertheless, this limited improvement led her to re-adjust her expectations also for her YA and, when asked about her planned strategies to cope with the language barrier in Italy, she explained:

“[...] while I was in France, my expectations about how much I would improve dropped very fast. And I thought ‘okay, instead of obsessing over this one thing that I said incorrectly or what kind of reaction I had, I'm going to look at it in terms of the successful things’ [...], and by the end of the two months, I could think of quite a lot of interactions or conversations that I would class as, you know, successful ones.”
(June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Although being in a French-speaking context was a new situation for June, she was more proficient in the language compared to her level of Italian; therefore, the YA environment would have tested her ability to cope with the language barrier even more. Rationalising, focusing on her successes and learning from her previous experiences were other coping strategies June used in her YA, but which she developed during her SA.

5.3.2 Objectives

Now that June's pre-departure worries have been introduced, I move on to the four main objectives that she listed in the questionnaire:

“1 - developing my language skills, I'd like to be a comfortable B2/C1 level by the end ideally.

2 - making (Italian!) friends and getting stuck into a community, whether that be at the school I'm working at, or somewhere else like a church.

3 - personal growth in a more general sense.

4 - taking advantage of every opportunity presented to me.”

(June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

Once again, the language focus was amongst her top objectives and she tried to make it rather specific, providing the level she wanted to reach. This may or may not have been influenced by pre-departure meetings or university syllabi, but if it were, it would represent another factor that could impact on June's beliefs and expectations prior to her YA.

As already mentioned when discussing June's worry about loneliness, one of her aims was to make friends and become part of a community. This links also with her third objective, so I discuss these together. When I asked June to explain what she meant by “personal growth” she replied:

“I guess I kind of mean maturing as a person [...] I'm not expecting to be exactly the same that I am now by the time I finish the year because I think when you have a big life change like that, you do end up changed yourself, and I guess I was hoping that it will be kind of a positive growth to become someone who, I don't know, is a better person. But learning from my experiences.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

June believed in the transformational effects of ‘big life changes’, including SA and YA experiences, which resonated with some of the findings in the SA literature discussed in Chapter 3. Later in the interview, June explained that her idea of changing and “maturing as a person” in response to “a big life change” was also based on her experience of personal change between her school and university years and on the changes she noticed after her SA. Her expectation that her YA would be change-inducing is based on previous experiences, which influenced her belief system, once again relating to my first research question. The final sentence of the extract is representative of this learning process, as June hopes to be able to ‘learn from her experiences’ and become “a better person”. This was also reformulated shortly afterwards in the same conversation

when I asked June to explain what she meant when she said “maturing as a person”:

“Specifically for Italy [...] I think like my confidence in social situations. Not that I'm a particularly nervy person but when I was younger I was always more comfortable with people like adults [...] people my own age would... freak me out. So, I think in that sense kind of more sociable...obviously I'm not the same anymore.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Although June was “not the same anymore”, the new experience of being on her own for the first time, living in a foreign country was arguably enough to make her worry. Even after her arrival in Italy she was unsure about her ability to make friends and hoped to manage to become part of a community and create some connections, as she explained:

“I am still a bit concerned in terms of how... because a significant part of my socialising with people has been meeting them where I live and being aware that that's not as much of an option this time round is gonna force me to make more social contacts with people that I don't know and sometimes I'm not as confident in my abilities to do that.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

June was clearly aware of the new challenge she would face having to make friends outside of her accommodation and university environment. In her opinion this would ‘force her’ to look for more opportunities to socialise and become part of a community. Joining local groups and communities does not necessarily equal socialising and becoming a real part of them, but June’s experiences in that regard are presented in section 6.3.

Finally, June’s fourth objective of taking advantage of the opportunities that were presented to her is reflected in her attempts to force herself to say ‘yes’ to opportunities, also in order to avoid regrets later. This is discussed in more details in section 6.5.1 but a clarifying example of this strategy is June’s thought process when people would invite her for a meal:

“My initial gut reaction is always to be like ‘Oh no it's fine’ but then I was like ‘No, no, no, no, DO IT! Say yes and thank you, go and have that experience’ and sort of applying that logic to the rest of my life I think it's going to be a positive thing for me.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Her instinctive response was to refuse any offers or invitations but, based on her objectives to take advantage of opportunities and make interpersonal connections, she consciously opted to accept the invitation and “have that

experience". From the final sentence of this extract, it seems that June found this strategy so successful that her "say yes" mindset may become part of her new coping strategies, as a result of her YA. This not only relates to my first research question (RQ1b) on the impact that prior beliefs can have on one's YA experience, but it shows the impact that the YA can have on sojourners even beyond their stay abroad. June's positive mentality and more of her coping strategies are discussed throughout the following chapter.

5.3.3 Beliefs

June's beliefs were addressed explicitly in three open questions in the questionnaire in order to provide me with a base to expand in the first interview. In particular, I asked about her beliefs about Italy, Italian people and 'Italian culture':

Q: Based on what you have heard, studied or simply based on your opinions, what do you expect your destination to be like?

A: Not too touristy but definitely equipped to deal with tourists given it's [*sic*] proximity to Cinque Terre. Not too isolated but not an enormous city either - a decent sized city that's still got beautiful scenery and easily accessible countryside. (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

June's ideas about her YA destination seemed positive, well-researched and it appeared to be a well-balanced place in her opinion, even though she had never been there before. She had indeed studied the area also because she wanted to find an accommodation before travelling there and had found an apartment where she would live on her own. Her housemates in France had contributed to the lack of cleanliness of the shared accommodation, therefore – although choosing one's accommodation online is never a certainty for quality – having a place for herself probably helped June to be in more control and avoid cohabitation issues. In this case, her overall pre-departure feeling about her destination did not seem negatively impacted by her French experience, but she seemed to have learnt from it.

Q: Based on what you have heard, studied or simply based on your opinions, what do you expect the locals there to be like?

A: Welcoming and friendly (though this may be wishful thinking). Certainly more welcoming than my general experience of French people. Particularly as I'm going to be working in a school, I think some of the students will be interested in my experience as someone from the UK. (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

Here June openly compares her SA to her upcoming YA, with a more positive outlook on the latter. Her awareness that her optimism could be wishful thinking opposes her earlier-mentioned belief that ‘a worse experience than her SA does not exist’. It is also interesting to note that June’s role as a teacher – therefore of more authority than being a student – was one of the reasons at the base of her positive ideas about how people would be in Italy and how they would perceive her. June’s teacher identity was an important element of her coping strategies as explained in section 6.7.2.

Q: If you think of “Italian culture”, what are the first thoughts that come to your mind? (Please give as many details as possible)

A: A real love and respect for food, family and community. Obviously the typical Italian stereotypes of pizza, pasta, the Mediterranean diet, and hair-raising driving. The Sanremo festival. Lots of festivals, carnivals, and religious holidays. Lots of bureaucracy. (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

The more negative “hair-raising driving” and “lots of bureaucracy” are accompanied by numerous positive aspects of what June imagined as Italian ‘culture’ and she acknowledged that some of these may be linked to stereotypes. The media and textbooks often describe Italy and ‘Italian culture’ with similar ideas to those used by June so it is likely that many other students (and people in general) would share some of that same imagery. What was particularly interesting to me in her answer was the element of community. The idea of community seemed to reflect June’s objective to ‘get stuck in’ one, which may indicate a cross influence between her aims and her beliefs. By believing that Italians are friendly and love community, she may have developed her objective to become part of one of their communities. Conversely, it could also go the other way and by wanting to become part of a community, she may have created the belief that Italians are friendly and community lovers. In either case, her belief system seemed to have an impact on how she experienced her YA, further relating to my first research question.

5.3.4 Expectations

Some of June’s main expectations have already been mentioned, for example that the YA would be “a big life change” and that she would ‘not be the same anymore’ as a consequence of such an experience. However, after a pre-departure talk with some students who had been TAs for the British Council the

year before, June also realised that different people would change in a different way:

“...so that was really good to hear directly from them about what it was like... but also it made me aware that their experiences were also very different so I couldn't expect my experience to be any similar to theirs as they were to each other's”. (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

June realised that no YA experience is the same and, although in the talk she learnt about some of the more practical and administrative aspects of the other students' experiences, she also understood that there were no specific directions for the individual YA journeys. This lack of guidance recalled her time at the youth camp, thus it was not something completely unexpected or unfamiliar. However, her past experiences and awareness of the possible challenges she may face in Italy, did not prevent difficulties from occurring, as June explained in her second interview when I asked her if her first three months had been as she had anticipated:

“I was expecting it to be difficult and it has been difficult, I think because I have a very realistic view of things so I knew that living alone was gonna be a challenge, just because even though I'm an introvert, I still need people and so that was... you know, when it started getting a bit harder in that sense... I wasn't expecting it, so it's always a bit of a shock when you do find yourself feeling like that but it wasn't completely unexpected in that sense.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Expecting the YA to be hard does not make it less hard and June still felt the “shock” of being in an uncomfortable situation such as living alone. Therefore, although it would seem that previous experiences (at least partly) prepared June for her YA, this raises the question to what point one can be prepared for something so unique as a YA and whether some preparation can be unhelpful or even detrimental (see Chapter 9). It is also important to note June's self-definition as an introvert who ‘still needs people’ as she put a lot of effort into finding opportunities to socialise and surround herself with people over her time in Italy, which she thought would help her achieve her objectives of making friends and be part of a community. Therefore, also in this case, her belief that she was an introvert but that she also needed to be with people, was developed before her YA and yet it had an impact on her aims and actions within the YA context.

One case in which June did not seem to ‘learn from her experiences’, although she believed she had, was in relation to her language learning. She had already

had to adjust her expectations in France, where her French did not improve as much as she had expected and hoped for, and when she arrived in Italy the situation repeated itself. June felt that her expectations were too high and she had to re-calibrate them:

“I think I was expecting...I don't know why, because it's kind of the same as what happened when I was in France studying French, I always go with an expectation that my language is gonna improve so much! And it's just not the case, even with French... I already had a considerable foundation, more than that, and I still found myself... the main thing that I got out of that is not an improved French but improved confidence and improved ability to... survive abroad, which I think has helped me a lot in these past three months but it's kind of the same with Italian.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Her expectation that her Italian would “improve so much” could be linked to many internal factors, such as hope, wishful thinking or a focus on the uniqueness of every SA, which would allow her to potentially achieve in Italy things she had not achieved in France. However, her high (maybe even over-idealistic) expectations are not uncommon amongst language students going abroad, and they could also be related to external factors, such as pre-departure talks with other students or university guidelines and recommendations. Whatever led June to aim at a big language improvement before departure, impacted on how she experienced her YA events and led her to both disappointment and re-adjustment of expectations, repeating some of the processes she had already used in her SA. Although some of June's expectations had to be re-adjusted in her YA, her time in France prepared her as she had learnt that things do not always go as expected and “unpleasant things will end but they will help you overall” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020).

5.3.5 Hopes

June's initial hopes resonated with her objectives and expectations, as she explained:

“My experience of Italy and Italians so far is that they are quite laid back, which is something I think I need to learn from! Also being able to travel and sight-see easily - I want to experience as much of Italy as I can.” (June, Questionnaire, 9/09/2019)

In this extract June expressed one of the many hopes that students going abroad usually share, which is the hope to travel and explore the country of their YA. However, she also subtly expresses another belief about herself as not being

very laid back, which may have had an impact on how she perceived and approached her YA. Believing that she could learn to be more laid back may also be based on her positive belief about the transformational potential of the YA experience.

In this first chapter on June, I have addressed my first research question investigating her pre-departure beliefs and their impact on June's YA. I have presented June's previous experiences abroad, which seem to have influenced her beliefs and expectations prior to her departure to Italy. Her pre-departure mindset also guided the formation of her objectives, which led her to start the YA with some key actions in mind (e.g. taking advantage of opportunities and being more sociable) and a few pre-developed coping strategies in place to deal with potential setbacks. In the following chapter I present June's YA journey, the main events of her months in Italy, her challenges and the ways she coped with them, and her hindsight perspective about her YA experience after the pandemic interrupted it abruptly.

Chapter 6 June's YA

This chapter focuses on June's time in Italy and her YA experiences, addressing my research questions on her affective challenges (RQ2), the relation between her prior beliefs and her coping strategies (RQ3) and her idea of a 'successful' YA (RQ4). Table 3 provides a timeline of the main events that happened during June's YA, in order to give a better timeframe for the following sections.

Table 3 – June's YA Timeline (Data and Main Events)

<i>September 2019</i>	<i>October 2019</i>	<i>November 2019</i>	<i>December 2019</i>	<i>January 2020</i>	<i>February 2020</i>	<i>March - August 2020</i>
Questionnaire (9/09/2019)	Issues with one of the teachers at school	Weekend in Venice	Christmas break at home (around 3 weeks)	Interview 2 (05/01/2020)	Carnival with Parents	May-August gap in communications
Arrival in Italy		Trip to Rome for British Council course			PADEMIC	
Interview 1 (27/09/2019)					Back to the UK	Interview 3 (17/08/2020)

As explained in the Methodology chapter, June's data comprises a questionnaire, three interviews and a number of written text messages gathered over 11 months (see Appendix H for the detailed timeline). The questionnaire was completed before June's departure and the first interview was carried out a few days after June's arrival in Italy. This was then followed by buddy messages four weeks later, overlapping with her trip to Rome. In this first period June was trying to settle in, find a routine and adjust her expectations. The second interview took place soon after her return to Italy following three weeks in the UK for the Christmas break. At that point June seemed more optimistic and more at ease and confident in her day-to-day life in Italy. When the pandemic started we exchanged a few buddy messages, which became gradually more sporadic with a longer gap in our communications between May and August 2020. Our final interview took place in mid-August and covered a wide range of topics, with particular attention to how June perceived her YA in hindsight. The impact of hindsight and a retrospective account is certainly a factor to take into consideration when reading those extracts (as I discuss in Chapter 9); nonetheless, they still represent June's perceptions and are therefore valuable elements for her case analysis.

6.1 June's Arrival in Italy and Contextual Overview

June flew to Italy in September 2019 with her mother and a family friend who stayed with her for a couple of days to help her settle down in her apartment and the area. They arrived a week or so before the start of the lessons, bought a bike for June and explored the area and the local market. At the time of our first interview June described her first days in Italy up to that point as “Gooood, quite overwhelming” and she explained that her mother and family friend had left a few days before and “that’s when it really started to feel like ‘Ok, I’m actually doing this for 8 months’, just a bit crazy” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019). Although June felt overwhelmed in those first days, her confidence received a positive boost on her very first day, as she recounted about the meeting with her landlady when she arrived at her YA destination:

“Travel always stresses me out so I was already in not a particularly great head space but then arriving and meeting my landlady, and she was so lovely but she was speaking so fast!...but I was understanding most of what she was saying, and her... basically monologuing for two hours explaining everything about the accommodation and [...] my mum and our family friend were sat on the sofa like ‘I have no idea what’s going on’ and that was such a big moment for me, kind of looking over that [and] they had absolutely no idea about what was happening and the fact that I did was a big confidence boost for me, and on my very first day in Italy so I was like ‘Oh I actually DO understand some Italian! That’s good!’” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Despite the stressful journey, this positive experience with her Italian at the beginning of her YA was an important moment for June and gave her YA a less negative start, compared to her arrival in France. This initial confidence boost with her weaker language may have also contributed to June’s higher expectations about how much and how quickly she would improve in Italian. Furthermore, June seemed happy about her YA destination, which she described as:

“[...] a really really beautiful place and if I was in a bigger city I think I’d be too overwhelmed and I’d be a bit ...I don’t know, maybe concerned but because it’s quite a small city it’s got a really good balance between having lots to do and lots of places to explore but also not being so big that I’m, you know, I’m feeling like a tiny little fish in the ocean.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Living in a small city seemed to be a good solution for June to limit her feeling of being overwhelmed and – although her teaching and lesson planning took up a lot of her time –, in line with her objectives, she also joined a modern dance class and started to attend a local church quite early on in her YA. These were not only

activities aimed at socialising, creating connections and practising the language, but also coping strategies put in place consciously. June explained in multiple occasions that she knew her usual patterns when she felt overwhelmed: “When I get stressed about things I can have a tendency to retreat while I panic sometimes” (June, Buddy Message, 11/11/2019); “I know what I’m like and if I let myself just turn into a bit of a hermit, then I’m not going to take advantage of this year” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020). Going to church and to the dance classes gave June the chance to be sociable and fill her free time with something different from her lesson planning and teaching preparation. As discussed in the previous chapter, June wanted to make the most of the opportunities that came her way and wanted to become part of a community; thus, joining the dance and church groups allowed her to fulfil both aims.

June had found her first week and a half in Italy “quite overwhelming” and later described her first three months abroad as:

“Very, very intense... I think that’s a fair way of putting it, there’s been lots of ups and downs, I think I’ve definitely learned a lot but not necessarily the things I was expecting to have learned.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

It is not uncommon for sojourners to have “ups and downs” and June’s acknowledgment that she “learned a lot” seemed to confirm the value that going on SA can have. The fact that June had different expectations about what she would learn resonates with her experience in France, where she already had to re-adjust her expectations. Therefore, it would seem that even though her SA prepared her and gave her some tools that would help her in her YA, it did not – or could not – prepare her for everything, as the following sections show. Some of the “ups and downs” that recurred in June’s YA had already been a feature of her SA, but the following section addresses one challenge that June had never experienced before: living alone.

6.2 Living Alone and Loneliness

June knew she had never lived on her own before going on her YA, and loneliness was one of the worries she mentioned in her questionnaire answers. Feeling lonely was also amongst the main affective challenges June experienced in her YA and directly related to my second research question. June expected the YA

to be a stressful experience and when I asked her what she thought were the most stressful sides of it, she replied:

“Being away from home and from friends [...] it's not just like the Christmas holidays or even the summer holidays because with the holidays everyone's away from... say 'uni' at the same time, whereas here, uni life is continuing as normal... and you're very removed from that, I think that's something that I wasn't expecting would be as big of a shock maybe as it has been in the past week and a half, but I'm already feeling it. So I think that's quite difficult.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Being far from her family and friends was already hard after the first few days and this extract expresses the “shock” June felt initially because of that, but it also hints at a sort of ‘fear of missing out’. It would seem that June was not only missing her loved ones, but she also felt as if she may be missing out on what they would be doing without her whilst she was in Italy. In the same exchange, June explained her usual reaction to loneliness but also her expectation of it:

“I just kind of marinate in my loneliness and then kind of ‘oh why always me?!’ [...] I'm expecting it to happen a couple of times but it's not necessarily a bad thing as long as it doesn't become a habit.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019).

As mentioned earlier, June was aware that her usual coping strategies to stressful situations were to “retreat” and “turn into a bit of a hermit”, and the vivid image of ‘marinating in her loneliness’ resonates with those. However, the second part of this extract shows that June was expecting to feel lonely in her time abroad and part of her response to that was to be kind to herself and allow herself to feel lonely, yet not so much as to let it become habitual. In our final interview I mentioned to June that loneliness was one of her worries in the questionnaire and I asked her about her overall experience of it during her YA in hindsight. She replied that “it was more of an expectation than a fear” and because she was expecting to feel lonely, it did not take her by surprise:

“I was like ‘you are going to be lonely at some point’. And that's not just me creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, I was looking at it logically. ‘You're going to a city where you know no one but yourself. Even if you were in England, you would probably be lonely at some point. This is in Italy, it's a whole different context.’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June seemed to have rationalised her thoughts, and her expectation that she would feel lonely seemed so strong and deeply rooted in her mind that it could arguably be compared to a belief. Despite the negative feelings that loneliness

brings, June's expectation of it "in some ways made it easier to deal with because, again, it wasn't unexpected" (ibid.). On the other hand, expecting to be lonely also had an impact on her attitude:

"In some ways, [expecting loneliness] made me a little complacent in terms of like 'Oh, well, I'm going to be lonely anyway!'. So, on my worst days I was like 'what's the point of trying?!'...But the majority of the time, the way I dealt with it was forcing myself to do things and to go out and meet people and talk to people, and, you know, it wasn't effective 100% of the time and it wasn't necessarily effective in the way that I wanted it to be... you know, I wasn't making best friends for life, which is the support system that I'm used to having." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

This extract provides more examples of the "ups and downs" of June's YA, of her strategy to force herself to take action, but it also explains that this strategy was not infallible, and it did not always lead to the desired results. Referring back to my third research question, it would seem that June's pre-departure belief-like expectation of loneliness had an impact on the way she coped with it, despite this not always being as effective as she wished. June's forced attempts at going out and meeting people were not only a strategy to cope with loneliness and getting out of her comfort zone, but they were also (maybe subconsciously) a way to somehow re-create her UK comfort zone in Italy. This did not always go the way June may have hoped for, but it helped her to make the unfamiliar (e.g. new people, environment) a bit more familiar (e.g. dance, church activities).

Although she had not dealt with this challenge before, June was able to draw on some of her past personal experiences related to mental health, which helped her develop resilience and her belief that she would be able to overcome difficulties.

"[Mental health has] been a concern since I was 14 so I think by now it's like 'another new experience!' and I'm like 'you know what?! I've dealt with this kind of thing, maybe not this exact kind of thing before, but I've gone through difficult periods of my life before, in terms of mental health and other things', like 'I can do this, I'll get through it! I'm not going to enjoy all of it, but it will end!'" (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The awareness that she may not "enjoy all of it" was compensated by the belief that difficult situations are temporary, and they eventually end. June's past experiences shaped her belief that she could go through difficult times and come out of them, which is a very empowering and useful tool, especially in a YA

context. Not everybody starts their YA with such awareness and point of reference to hold on to.

In our final interview, when June reflected back on her biggest struggles over her months in Italy, she confirmed her initial thoughts:

“I think my biggest struggles in Italy were loneliness...despite my efforts...and I think ‘allowing myself to fall into ruts at certain stages’, like... once I had got into a routine that was really good, but at the same time, it was a routine that I’d made in the initial period when I was panicking and I kind of needed to build the routine up to a place where ‘okay I’ve got my head above the water now, I’m fine, I can build more things into my life because I have more mental capacity for it’ but it was quite easy and it was kind of compounded by the fact that I lived alone, and having to police yourself out of bad habits...yes, I think that was probably the hardest thing.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June’s struggle to “fall into ruts” resonated with the image of ‘marinating in her loneliness’ and the stagnation that she was trying to avoid. Similarly, her attempts to ‘police herself out of bad habits’ seemed in line with her initial idea of allowing herself to feel lonely but without letting it become a habitual pattern. However, this can be difficult when you are at the same time the judge, police and culprit. This extract shows that coping strategies, just like routines, may need to be re-adjusted over time. Initially, June was overwhelmed and “panicking”, and her routine reflected her level of confidence and (lack of) familiarity with her new environment. However, with time, June gradually settled in and got more used to her life in Italy so that what initially caused her to panic, became more familiar and less stressful. Thus, when she ‘got her head above the water’ she felt able to get out of her comfort zone a bit more, although not as much as she would have liked to in hindsight. This gradual increase in her confidence has led to an ongoing adjustment both of June’s expectations and of her coping strategies, which eventually made her feel surer of herself and less overwhelmed.

Living alone was also one of June’s concerns in relation to her socialisation as in the past she had always relied on her housemates and classmates to be her main social outlet. In Italy June joined a dance class and went to church regularly to find alternative ways to socialise and to combine the familiar and the unfamiliar. However, finding opportunities to be with people and make connections was one of the challenges that June did not expect, and she tried to cope with it also by establishing familiar and reliable support systems, which are discussed below.

6.3 Support Systems

In our first interview I asked June how she was planning to cope with loneliness, and she explained that in the past she “had a tendency to wallow” but she then added that her strategy had changed:

“...now I would probably try going outside and go for a walk, it helps me... or depending on how emotional I am, I may make a skype call with my family or friends [...] Yes, I think talking to people without making yourself homesick... and also going out and appreciating the place that you're in and changing how you think about being lonely.”
(June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

The support systems June described replaced the housemates and classmates she did not have in Italy and helped her cope with loneliness and homesickness. She seemed to know herself well, having different strategies available depending on her emotional level, involving others or not, probably based on previous experiences. However, her final reference to “changing how you think about being lonely” may link back to her awareness that loneliness is to be expected and, as long as it did not turn into a habit, she could allow herself to “wallow” sometimes.

In view of the expected loneliness, June had a number of reassuring thoughts ready, which she could think to soothe herself when feeling lonely or homesick. Besides, she had her friends and family as support systems in case she needed to talk to or see somebody:

“It definitely wasn't easy, but I also wasn't expecting it to be so when I started to have wobbles I wasn't completely blindsided by them, I was like 'at some point, the other shoe is gonna drop, so just prepare for that!' ...and, you know, I did have some support systems in place, even when I was feeling like 'I just want someone to give me a hug', 'It's been months since I've seen family and friends' and I was like, 'you've got people you can talk to, your mom will always pick up the phone, your friends will always pick up the phone, you're going to see them all at Christmas. It's not that far away!' so I had a lot of systems in place to keep me up.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

These coping strategies helped June overcome, or at least limit, her loneliness and they seemed to work well for her as, in our final interview, June said that “overall it [her mental health management] was a success!”. Closely related to her support systems, the following section focuses on June's process to become part of a community, as a further way to combat her loneliness and make friends during her YA.

6.3.1 Becoming Part of a Community

Feeling part of a community turned out to be less easy than June expected and, in this case, her experience in France did not seem to help her. In her SA she was a student, learning a language together with many other students, therefore the situation was very different, as June explained in the following extract:

“Another [unexpected] thing would be how easy it would be to find people to connect with... that was a little harder than I was expecting, because... I hadn't really tried too hard to do that in France because I got there and it was a language school so you had sort of a pre-formed group to go into, it was people round about your own age or on a similar stage of life...whereas Italy was completely different.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Earlier I mentioned the positive impact her previous experiences had on her YA attitudes and coping strategies but, in this instance, having to make an effort to find people to talk to was not something June had experienced before. Because of the positive beliefs created in the easy social context of her SA in France, or just for her lack of similar previous experiences, June did not expect it to be particularly hard to make social connections, which led her to be taken by surprise when it turned out to be difficult. This may not be a direct answer to my third research question, but it confirms the presence of a connection between one's expectations and prior beliefs and the way one reacts to and copes with challenges related to such beliefs during the YA.

Part of the reason why June found it difficult to socialise was the language, both because of her level of Italian that was initially a barrier (see section 6.4.1) and because she spent most of her time at school speaking in English:

“...because I teach English, so I work in English at school, most of my social interaction happens in English so I've had to work really hard to find other opportunities where I can speak Italian, whether that's the dance lesson that I go to or the church.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Being a teaching assistant, June did not have classmates or peers in the same situation (not in the same school at least) and it was also a new work environment, which added an extra layer of the unfamiliar. Therefore, her dance lessons and the church became the main outlets of June's socialising attempts and also of her Italian practice later in her stay. Nevertheless, as she recalled some memories of her time at school, June acknowledged that she probably spoke more Italian than she thought at the time:

“Because I had to work so hard to find opportunities to practise my Italian I feel like I barely had any conversation with anyone, even though I know that I have, like with the caretakers at the school, who’ll just be like ‘oh, hi!’ and there’s this one caretaker who’s always really nice and always says hello to me and so... I’m on my way to a lesson and he’ll start a conversation with me and I don’t know how to politely cut this conversation really short otherwise I’m gonna be late...but yes, so I know that I’ve spoken more Italian than I think I have but I still feel that I should be improving more, doing more or stuff.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June’s idea that she “should be improving more” may derive from university or personal expectations or a mixture of factors. Because she had already experienced a slow and below-expectation language improvement in France, her hopes for her Italian seemed possibly a bit idealistic rather than based on her previous experiences. This may suggest that June’s beliefs about her ideal self prevailed over the reality she experienced in France, which would add further variables to the answer to my third research question and would indicate a possible hierarchy in one’s beliefs and their impact.

Both the church and the dance groups helped June limit her loneliness and homesickness by making her feel loved and keeping her busy both in the body and the mind. To a certain extent these activities fulfilled June’s desire to become part of a community, although she could not experience that for as long as she had planned and hoped for due to the pandemic. The following two sections focus on the main support systems June developed in Italy and her integration within those communities: the church and the dance groups.

6.3.1.1 Church

Besides calling her mum or her friends, another social support system for June were the meals with the people she met at the church. These were important moments for her socialisation and helped her both with her loneliness and with her language:

“Because just being able to... connect with people and share a meal together has been really lovely and has helped me feel almost part of a little community even though they don’t know me massively well...yet I guess...[...] even though there are sometimes some mismatch of communication, I still feel really welcome and looked after.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Becoming part of a community was one of June’s objectives and the time she spent with the welcoming church group seemed to be the closest experience she

achieved in terms of that aim. Even without knowing each other well and with some communication difficulties, June considered those encounters as a form of interpersonal connection, which was part of her objectives and of her coping strategies to limit loneliness and homesickness.

One particular example of June's growing feeling of being part of the church community and her practical attempts at taking advantage of the opportunities presented to her, is portrayed in the following two extracts. The first one is from November 2019, two months after the start of June's YA, and the second one is from early January 2020:

"There was a lunch after church yesterday so I spoke with quite a few people - it often turned into a mix of Italian and English as one man in particular was quite keen on trying to practice... but all the same I think it was a good way to ease myself into that community and speaking Italian with them as I was already nervous about meeting so many new people!" (June, Buddy Message, 11/11/2019)

Easing herself into the church community and allowing herself to use a mix of English and Italian, rather than expecting herself to speak impeccably and solely in her target language, were successful strategies June employed in the church encounters. This gradual integration and kinder approach to herself led June to feel more at ease in the church environment, so much so that in December, just before leaving for the Christmas break, June reaped the benefits of her positive and proactive approach:

"The last church service that I went to before Christmas, two separate people invited me round theirs for lunch like... this year, so I've got invitations to go to these people's houses for lunch so that was really good, kind of a final confidence boost before I left, like 'Ok you have people to come back to' [...] and one of the ladies that invited me round randomly asked me 'oh, do you speak French?' and, in French, I was like 'yes, I do', and she asked me a question so that I started talking and because my French is much more fluent than my Italian she was surprised and she was like 'oh, you can speak!' and I was like 'Yes!' [*laughter*]. But I guess that's good in one sense because I found a way to practise my French and also my Italian at the same time." (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Having people to come back to was not only a good motivation to return from her Christmas holiday in England but also an example of the new social support systems that June managed to create on her own over the course of her first few months in Italy. After the first three months of feeling lonely and having a hard time communicating and connecting with people, these exchanges at the church

lunch seemed to reward June's efforts. Her consistency and commitment to saying 'yes' to the opportunities that came her way and going out of her comfort zone seemed to work so that eventually 'the other shoe dropped' and June felt more at ease and confident in herself and in her interactions.

6.3.1.2 Dance Lessons

Similarly, June also appreciated the positive effects that going to dance lessons had on her mental health:

"It was dancing so it was a physical exercise so you have to be aware of your body and I'm really really glad I did that, I think if I hadn't had that I would have been a lot worse off, and it was something that I forced myself to do because I knew it was good for me and it got to the point where I was enjoying it, [...] sort of being able to learn something new that I wasn't thinking about as hard as learning Italian." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The combination of physical exercise and mental stimulation of the dance classes helped June not to get 'stuck in her own head' or 'marinate in her loneliness'. Furthermore, it allowed her to focus on learning something new other than Italian, which would likely show her some visible progress more easily than her language learning. In the extract June also mentions her frequent coping strategy of forcing herself to do things she may not want to do. Even when she did not want to go out, to church or to her dance classes she tried to talk herself into going, and convincing herself by saying things such as:

"I need to... I know I don't wanna go to the advanced dance class but I'm gonna go because it's exercise so I'll feel better and it's an important social interaction like seeing and speaking to other people." (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June's coping strategy of 'psyching herself up' has already been mentioned and this is a clear example of it in action. By motivating herself to be sociable and go to the dance class or the church event that she had in plan, she would be taking advantage of the opportunities she had, fulfilling one of her pre-departure objectives. June applied this attitude also when the circumstances did not seem to favour it, as in the example described below:

"I got on the wrong bus... it wasn't a normal bus and it was like a 'only hop-on, can't get off' bus, which I had never experienced before and then I had to get off and the driver was staring at me and everyone on the bus was staring at me...and like 'Did you press that button?' and I was like [*pretence scared/submissive voice*] 'Yes, this is the bus surely I can get off'...internally because obviously I didn't

know how to say that in Italian...and I was kind of like 'ehm...no...?' and then he ranted a little bit and then I was like 'I'm really sorry, my Italian is not good enough to understand that' and he was like 'ah' because he realised then that I wasn't Italian so he was like 'fine, just get off, quickly' and I was like 'oh, I'm so sorryyy!' that kind of confrontational situations just really panic me and I got off the bus and I was just really fragile but I still had the entire dance lesson to get through so I had a bit of a sniffle then but then I was like 'no! I have to interact with people and I don't want them to ask me why I'm upset' so I pushed through and then I got home and I had a bit of like 'ohh that was really stressful' [*pretence crying voice*] so...I just hate stuff like that, it took me a while to use public transport in England because I was that awkward...I'm not anymore in the UK and partly it's because I've had to do it in a different country and suddenly when you go back to your own country everything is so much easier!" (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Similar experiences on public transport are quite common when people go to a new country and are not accustomed to how things work there. However, after a few mishaps June managed to get used to this aspect of life in Italy, which she considered helpful also for her life in the UK. Having experienced this kind of challenge in a foreign country helped June to find the same context easier to handle in England, and it is arguable that her past experiences may have helped her be more resilient when this incident happened in Italy. This transferability of the experiences lived abroad provides more evidence for the potential value that SA, and experiences abroad more in general, can have on confidence and the development of resilience and coping strategies. The extract also shows a practical example of June's commitment to go to the dance lessons and be with people despite the circumstances. It would have been easy for June to go back home after the stressful event and skip the dance class, but she consciously decided to 'push through' and attend anyway. Once again, her actions seemed to be in line with her beliefs: in this case she believed that by going to the class and move 'she would feel better' and it was 'an important social interaction', therefore she went, despite the stressful incident on the bus.

The dance lessons did not seem to give June the same feeling of community as the church events, but the physical exercise and social interaction aspects of the lessons were still helpful coping mechanisms for her. Even though June did not necessarily speak much when she danced or went to church, she still found those moments helpful as "it's still being around people in a non-work context that's a bit more relaxed I guess" (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020). This also implies an

underlying stress that she was feeling in those initial months of her YA, likely in a 'less relaxed' work context. June had already been in stressful situations abroad, but she had never been in a position of authority, such as being a TA in an Italian school, so it is understandable that she would look for social opportunities in more familiar contexts, outside of the work environment. Nevertheless, the first three months in Italy, from her arrival up until the Christmas break were particularly intense for June from a personal, professional and social point of view and she was surprised to need what seemed to her as a long settlement time. June's perspective and unmatched expectations about the time she would need to settle in in her YA are discussed below, as they represent an important example of self-reflection and adjusting of expectations for June.

6.4 A Longer Settlement Time

Based on her SA experience in France, June already knew that she may have to re-adjust her expectations; nonetheless, her settlement time and the difficulty she had finding social connections and opportunities to practise the language took her by surprise. June expected to settle in in a relatively short period of time and when this did not happen, her unmatched expectation (or cognitive dissonance) had a chain effect on her overall mindset:

"I had a bit of a panic, I was like 'I'm not speaking enough Italian' so... 'I need to go, I need to speak Italian!' but it's taken me longer to settle in than I thought it would, it's literally taken me the entire three months I've been here already to kind of finally feel like 'right, now I can focus on studying Italian a bit more'." (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Taking the first three months to settle in was "a lot longer than I thought, planned, anticipated or hoped for" (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020) and it added a layer of stress that June had not foreseen, and which prevented her from focusing more on other things, such as her Italian. This suggests an underlying pressure, a "need to" achieve and to do enough; whether this was self-imposed or related to the university expectations is not clear. However, these ideal achievement levels filtered June's experiences and made her feel as if she was not doing enough, negatively influencing her confidence. The external pressure of her expected achievements may have contributed to June's stress and arguably to 'keeping her head under the water' for a longer time, delaying her adjustment and settling in. This would suggest that external pressures, as well as personal beliefs, may

have an impact on the ways students cope with challenges in their YA. With some reflection, June was able to rationalise and explain her longer settlement time in a more understanding way:

“In the first three months you’re never gonna feel like you’re doing enough because you have to go on so much else, the initial administrative tasks, like getting the tax code or figuring out how the transport works... or crying on public transport too many times [*laughs*] not good! Just kind of mistakes that are bound to happen when you’re living in a different country but still doesn’t make them pleasant.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June seemed to have reached the awareness that feeling overwhelmed and making some mistakes is part of the process and “bound to happen” in a YA. Her awareness and her increased familiarity with the new environment also led her to adjust her coping strategies to focus more on her language learning and social objectives, rather than having to use her time to manage her overwhelming emotions and her initial ‘panic’. In the same interview, June also reflected on the positive sides of taking longer to settle in as that first period prepared her for the months to follow:

“If I had tried to do everything at once, which I have quite a history of doing [...] I think it wouldn’t have ended as well and I don’t think I would have been as happy to come back as I am [...] so I feel like the first three months and the Christmas break as well, have put me in a good mindset to now take a good and healthy but still productive approach to my lifestyle and my study and work ethic.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

By acknowledging that in the past June would have likely reacted differently to the challenges of her initial months in Italy, she shows an increased level of maturity or self-awareness as she avoided her past tendencies to ‘try to do everything at once’. Despite taking longer to settle in, June still considered her first months as good preparation for the rest of her YA and one of the reasons why she was happy to come back even after three weeks at home for Christmas. By the beginning of January 2020, June seemed more confident in herself and her lifestyle, and ready to focus on her Italian in the second part of her YA. June’s language progress is discussed in the following section.

6.4.1 June’s Language Journey

Improving her proficiency was amongst June's main aims for her YA, but speaking and practising the language turned out to be also one of her challenges, as she stated in our second interview:

“...other big challenges? I think the language and the constant bubbling of the fear that I'm not doing enough or not improving enough.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Students who go on a SA or YA are expected to come back with a certain level of proficiency in the language of the host country, which automatically puts an extra level of pressure on them. Adding such pressure to any personal ones and to the initial period of a YA with all its inherent stressful elements can be overwhelming. June's fear of not doing, or improving, enough is common in students abroad and it seems to be a result of such kinds of pressures. This underlying fear may have added a further layer of stress to June's experience, which may have had an impact on her overall well-being. On the other hand, June was also aware that she had time to learn and improve her Italian so, despite her high expectations and the external pressures, she gave priority to her mental health over the language learning:

“I think...me a couple of years ago, would have probably run myself into the ground trying to improve, whereas now I'm more...there are so many other things going into a year abroad, obviously the language is a key one but, you know, I'm here for eight months I have time to get to that point so I don't wanna force myself and completely burn out in the first three months, and I'm glad that this is the approach that I've taken because now I feel more able to do that kind of thing.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June considered language as a key element of a YA, but she prioritised her well-being and tried to avoid burning out and overloading herself. Although she was surprised by her longer settlement time, she still allowed herself to take the time she needed to settle in, which meant that in January she felt “more able” to focus on the language. June had developed this kinder approach in the previous two years, which relates to my third research question as it shows the impact that previous experiences can have on the attitudes students have on their YA and how they cope with challenges (e.g. ‘running oneself into the ground’ vs ‘not burning out’ and giving oneself the time needed).

June had already been on a shorter SA where she experienced the pressure to improve, but she also had to re-adjust her language learning expectations, and had come back from France with more self-confidence and coping strategies:

“I’ve always struggled with confidence and I think being in that situation with my stronger language has kind of prepared me for being on the back foot here and knowing how to deal with that. So when I first got to France, I had a two-week period where I panicked, whereas when I came here... I mean, yes, I was with my mum, which did help somewhat, but I was only in kind of an anxious state for a couple of days and now, I feel more comfortable going... Obviously this is a general statement... but I feel more comfortable speaking Italian and interacting with people... And Italian is not even my strongest language. So, I think that’s a definite difference that I can see between the two that I’m kind of attributing to my experiences in *SA destination*, because it was a confidence boost at the end of the day.” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

June’s SA experience in France played an important role in her preparation for the YA, not only for the coping strategies that she developed there and applied in Italy too, but also for her attitude towards the language barrier. June’s attribution of her feeling “more comfortable speaking Italian” to her experience in France further addresses my third research question as the “confidence boost” from the SA had a positive impact on June’s prior beliefs and attitudes, which in turn may have had an influence on the way she coped with her YA challenges. Without her experience in France, June may not have felt so confident, comfortable and capable to overcome difficulties, and her initial period in Italy would have likely been more overwhelming and intense than it was.

Thinking about the potential language barrier June would find in her YA, she explained that, based on her experience in France, she lowered her expectations about her language improvements and opted to focus on the positive, successful exchanges she had as mentioned in section 5.3. Therefore, despite the fear of not improving enough and her high expectations on her linguistic progress, June planned to apply the same positive attitude also in Italy:

“I think having a positive attitude to not doing as well as [*unclear*] and just going out there and just making mistakes, being wrong and getting corrected and not being afraid to do that... and getting exposed to the language and expose other people to ‘my language’ and improve and learn from my mistakes. And also, you know, kind of typical revise my tenses and my vocab, things like that!” (June, Interview 1, 27/09/2019)

Together with the traditional revision, June seemed to be willing – at least in words – to learn from her mistakes and from talking to people, communicating through what she defines as ‘her language’. Throughout this extract and especially by talking about ‘her’ language and not being afraid to make mistakes,

not only is June describing a positive attitude but also an initial form of agency. This would suggest a development of her learner self, parallel to her increased self-confidence.

When June talked about the biggest lessons learnt in her first three months in Italy she explained:

“I feel like I’ve learnt how to be ok with being a bit awkward or not understanding things [...] and I’ve learnt how to navigate those situations and still be able to continue a conversation with someone even though I’ve not fully understood, whereas in the past I would have just gone full rabbit in my head [*makes sound of something frantically fast*] now I’m more like ‘sorry can you just say that again? Could you explain it a bit more slowly?’, letting the other person know that I’ve not understood what they’ve said, that’s been a big thing for me personally because I hate being in awkward situations and I hate being embarrassed and...not that it’s something to be embarrassed about, not understanding is something normal but just kind of a mental block that I’ve had to learn to get over so I think that I have more or less learnt that, ish...” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

This is a more practical example of June’s developing agency and of her strategies to deal with Italian conversations and awkward or embarrassing situations. June’s awareness of her mental block implies a certain level of reflection and, although her process of ‘getting over it’ may have already started in France, she attributed it to her Italian experience. In either case, this ‘lesson’ helped her in the following (and last) few weeks of her YA to take up more opportunities, for example when she was invited for lunch by different people at a church gathering. This positive attitude and her attempts at saying ‘yes’ to opportunities and getting out of her comfort zone were extremely important for June’s experience and are discussed in more details in the section below.

6.5 Getting Out of the Comfort Zone

Forcing herself to do something she may not want to do counterbalanced June’s previously mentioned kinder approach to herself, giving herself some motivation to get out of her comfort zone and ‘psyching herself up’. In our final interview June explained the importance of such a strategy:

“I think one of the things that made it [the YA] really successful for me were all the moments, either big or small, where I forced myself to step out of my comfort zone, which is more or less all the time... but I never regretted a decision to do something, and I think that really is what made the experience, so me deciding to be an active

participant in it ... that was a key thing, being spontaneous.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The idea of “deciding to be an active participant” in her YA experience echoes the increasing agency that June developed over her months in Italy. ‘Forcing herself to step out of her comfort zone’ was a fundamental strategy for June’s experience and growing agency, and it led her to familiarise herself with being outside of her comfort zone and take advantage of the opportunities she had. However, getting used to forcing herself to do things she did not want to do and stepping out of her comfort zone was not easy. June explained that her YA was particularly important for that as she talked about one of the main lessons she drew from her experience in Italy:

“Learning how to be out of my comfort zone in a productive way rather than one that makes me recede. Because I had both of those experiences at different points, both in *SA abroad town* and in Italy, but on the whole with Italy [...] I reached out a lot more. I put myself out there a lot more, made myself do things a lot more and, yes, I had more time there but even with that in mind, I was much more outward looking in a lot of ways, whereas in *SA abroad town* I was just like ‘I’m miserable so I’m gonna stay miserable’. Now that’s an exaggeration but it was much more like ‘Keep your head down, get through it, get done with it, go home.’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Learning to have a more proactive attitude in her YA, helped June to be less isolated and more ‘outward looking’, which she felt was an improvement in comparison to her SA experience, depicted in vivid terms in the extract. From how June described her SA mindset, it is clear that she did not have the same empowering beliefs that she had at the start of her YA, as they were indeed developed through, and as a consequence of, her SA experience. This further corroborates the idea that prior beliefs have an impact on how sojourners cope with the challenges they face in their YA (related to my RQ3). Despite June’s less proactive approach in her SA, her experience in France laid a good basis for her time in Italy, especially with regards to the coping mechanisms she developed before the start of her YA. In particular, forcing herself to get out of her comfort zone was a key strategy that helped her deal with loneliness, her difficulties socialising, and it contributed to her feeling more part of a community:

“I think making connections with people, trying to build relationships even if initially it's very stressful, and forcing myself to do things even when I didn't want to do them... there were quite a few times where I was like ‘I don't want to go to dancing I'm tired!’ or ‘do I have to go to church? It's Sunday morning, every week!’ [...] but the vast

majority of the time, forcing myself to do things turned out to be a positive experience and really putting the effort in to try and build relationships with people and made it successful.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Although June was not expecting to have to put effort into building relationships, once she found a strategy that seemed to work for her, she applied herself to achieve her objectives, in some cases even when she did not want to. Her commitment was fuelled by the positive outcomes of her ‘forced actions’, which in turn motivated her to keep stepping out of her comfort zone, in a sort of virtuous circle. Another area in which June tried to apply her strategy of getting out of her comfort zone was her challenge and worry that she was not improving her Italian enough. Although Italian was not her strongest language, June forced herself to communicate, even if it meant making mistakes and not being completely accurate grammatically.

“[Another lesson was] learning how little language you actually need to learn, or need to know in order to communicate with people... you don't actually need that much, it's more about how you conduct yourself as a person, even with cultural differences and behaviour and politeness conventions taken into account [...] ‘People are generally nice and they will bear with you, and there are other ways of communicating than spouting grammatically perfect sentences with a flawless accent’, a lot of the times that's just not realistic or feasible to the situation that you're in, so you just have to try your best and hope that they meet you where you are.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June’s proactive approach, putting effort into finding opportunities to practise her Italian and not obsessing over grammatical accuracy and perfect accent, led her to realise that there were more important things that would enable her to communicate, even without being perfectly fluent. The belief that “people are generally nice” was at the base of this new mindset, and if June had not developed such a belief, she would have probably ‘put herself out’ a bit less, decreasing her exposure and active practice of the language. Extremely linked to June’s coping strategy of forcing herself to get out of her comfort zone, is her attitude to say ‘yes’ to opportunities, which is discussed in the sub-section below.

6.5.1 ‘Yes’ Attitude

Another important coping strategy for June was her “always saying yes to anything” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020), which she vividly rephrased as: “even if you think this is going to be really weird, do it anyway. Just go, make that

contact” (ibid.). This strategy developed gradually, parallel to June’s growing confidence, as she had to consciously stop her automatic polite replies and ‘force herself’ to say ‘yes’. In her words she explained this strategy as:

“The saying yes to opportunities and kind of catching that gut reaction of... very British kind of ‘oh, no no, I couldn’t possibly!’... sort of stopping that and just being a bit more spontaneous, and that being a good thing. I think I’ve had a tendency to... just from a personal aspect... plan a lot of my life.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June’s tendency to ‘plan a lot’, may have led her to be less spontaneous and rely on polite automatisms more than she liked. However, her ability to ‘catch her gut reaction’ would suggest a good awareness of herself and of her automatic response patterns during interpersonal communications. This ability was developed over time as June clarified that “when I said yes to things, I never regretted it. But it did also take me a while to get to the point where I would say yes to things” (ibid.). Learning to be more spontaneous, led her to say ‘yes’ to more of the opportunities she was offered but it took time, and in some cases June had to combine her strategies and ‘force herself to say yes’. In this extract, there is also one of the few stereotypical references she made in our conversations, referring to her “very British” reaction. As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, cultural essentialism emerged relatively frequently in Lucia’s exchanges, whereas June seemed to be very mindful on the matter and rarely made large-culture comments without acknowledging they may be stereotypes or generalisations. In this example, the habit to politely decline is associated with her national roots, and many would agree that it is a common feature associated with ‘British manners’, yet rather than relating it to her being British, it more likely reflects her personal upbringing and her belief system.

In some cases, June only had to overcome her automatisms and force herself to accept invitations to future meals or lifts somewhere, whilst in other cases she had to push herself a bit more, saying ‘yes’ not knowing exactly what to expect. In June’s words: “okay, not really sure what this will lead to, but I’ll do it anyway” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020). This forced spontaneity was applied for example when June’s mentor invited her to visit the city centre with one of her final year classes, with only a few hours’ notice. This very short school trip led June to discover new parts of the city and become friends with some of the students; therefore, as June explained, accepting one small invitation “had a knock-on

effect on me, like making more contacts” (ibid.). Just like the virtuous circle mentioned in the previous section, the positive reinforcement that June received from this kind of spontaneous decisions, led her to be more prone to making more of them, which eventually contributed to increasing her confidence and spontaneity. For this reason, June attributed such increases to her months in Italy, which taught her that:

“I don't have to wait for a difficult experience to be over in order to enjoy it... I think I often set a lot of rules for myself in my head and often I don't realise I'm doing it and I follow those rules, and then I have a moment where I'm like 'Hang on, I don't need to do that!', you know, 'I can just spontaneously do things'...and so a lot of the best experiences that I had in Italy were actually quite spontaneous.”
(June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Being used to planning much of her life and creating rules for herself, June may have struggled to detach from her plans and from her established routines; nevertheless, some of the most memorable events in her YA derived from June's spontaneous decisions. The following section focuses on the trips that June had during her YA and that she considered “quite spontaneous”.

6.6 Trips

Visiting a big city on her own was one of the coping strategies that June had found most effective during her SA in France, when she went to Paris for a weekend. Similarly, in November 2019 June visited two big cities in Italy: Venice and Rome. These trips were part of June's most memorable events from her YA as they boosted her confidence and fulfilled her pre-departure aim and hope to travel and visit Italy.

6.6.1 Venice

At the beginning of November 2019 June went on a weekend solo trip to Venice, which she described as “amazing!!” (Buddy Message, 11/11/2019) and later explained:

“Yes I went by myself to Venice which was actually really fun 😊 I went to the biennale exhibition and spent four hours straight there but I could've stayed longer! I also went to an exhibition by a korean artist at the Palazzo Fortuny, as well as all the 'touristy' spots like Rialto bridge and piazza San Marco etc - I tried to cram in as much as possible and it was so worth it. The weather wasn't great but it didn't bother me because I'm used to the rain 😊 I also went to Sunday mass at the basilica which was super interesting! I really

want to take my family there now 😊". (June, Buddy Message, 23/11/2019)

The bad weather did not stop June from enjoying her visit to Venice, and she managed to see all the main touristic places of the city and make the most of her time there. She also enjoyed going on her own, which resembled her experience in Paris. Despite the limited time, June's weekend in Venice was still extremely memorable, as she explained in our final interview:

"Going to Venice, which wasn't as spontaneous because obviously there has to be a little bit of planning involved with that. But that was again like 'hey you know what? I'm gonna do this!', and I did it and it was hands down one of the highlights of my year. Getting to go to the big exhibition [...], going around by myself was a proper... really sort of... an experience that built me up." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Despite some necessary planning, June considered her visit to Venice quite spontaneous, and it turned out to be a confidence-building experience that, even in August 2020, she still shortlisted as one of the most memorable events in her entire YA, together with her trip to Rome that followed a few weeks later.

6.6.2 Rome

Towards the end of November 2019 June went to Rome for a training course for all the TAs teaching in Italy for the British Council. For this reason, Lucia was there as well and by pure chance I happened to be in Rome (to see my family) around the same dates. I only found out that Lucia was in Rome because she texted me asking for suggestions about typical Roman food and, because I was there too, we decided to organise a last-minute dinner together. However, only when we met did I find out what course she was attending and that June was there too. At that point we invited June but it was late and she was enjoying her time with the other TAs talking and exchanging experiences. June and I did not manage to meet in person, but she enjoyed her visit to Rome and considered it memorable especially because she met other students from different parts of the world who were doing the same TA British Council programme as her. Meeting people of a similar age, having a similar experience, was important for June "because that was something that I had been missing up to that point [...] having people who understood exactly what I'm talking about" (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020). June's friends did not share her experiences as a TA in a school (except for Lucia), therefore meeting a group of people who understood her and

her challenges was very good for June, also because it was the closest event in her YA that resembled the typical Erasmus student experience:

“The most useful thing about that weekend wasn't the teaching guidance. It was being able to meet other language assistants. That was the really good part, that was what made me feel like I was having a proper Erasmus experience. You know, people from loads of different countries or talking in a mix of different languages, it was really really cool.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The days in Rome were likely similar to the Erasmus reality she had experienced in France, combining the novelty of the teaching course with the familiarity of the Erasmus student life. This is particularly interesting when compared to Lucia's rationale for going abroad as a TA rather than a student, as will be discussed in Chapter 7. In our second interview, just a couple of months after the course in Rome, June referred to it as “a proper Erasmus experience” and explained that by that she meant:

“Having such a multicultural experience with a group of people, all being able to communicate and enjoy themselves and there was no kind of conflict in some sense, so that was a memorable moment for me.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Because she was surrounded by speakers of other languages, June had to use a mix of English, French and Italian to communicate with the other TAs at the dinner table. The references to the enjoyment of communicating and the absence of conflict may also hint at a difference with her usual exchanges in her YA destination, which she may have perceived as not always enjoyable and somewhat conflictual. In the same interview, June revealed that she had been feeling lonely and tired before her trip to Rome, and that her experience there had helped her to feel better:

“That Rome weekend came at the perfect time for me because just before that was when I had my big kind of slump, which I think happens here in the UK, you know, it's kind of... ‘all novelty has worn off and you're just tired’ and in my case lonely so I think that came at the perfect time to pull me off and I felt much better after that.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June's loneliness and overwhelming feelings were likely alleviated by the novelty of her life in Italy but once the initial excitement wore off, she experienced a slump and came out of it also thanks to her trip to Rome. June's visits to Venice and Rome, confirmed the energising and confidence-building power that travelling

had for her, yet in hindsight June expressed her regret not to have travelled enough during her months in Italy due to not feeling settled enough:

“I wish I had gotten out more in terms of, not just out of my house but [...] to other places because when I did do that, they were some of the best experiences like Venice, like Rome, they were really really good experiences so I wish I'd done a bit more of that in the initial period, because I kind of didn't because I was like 'I'm not fully settled in yet, I want to be fully settled in before I do anything'... when actually now I'd be like 'you're gonna be unsettled wherever you are, so have an adventure at the same time!’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

It is understandable that, because of the initial stress and intensity of her YA, June may not have said 'yes' to all opportunities at the beginning, waiting for the “difficult experience to be over”. In a way, this was also a coping strategy, preventing burnout, or excessive cognitive dissonance, and avoiding becoming overwhelmed by putting herself under too much pressure all at once. Indeed, later in that same interview she reflected again on her idea that she may not have made the most of her YA at the start, and explained:

“I feel like it's also very easy for me to say that now, in hindsight, and especially with the pandemic going on at the moment, like 'why didn't I take advantage of everything I had at the time?' but of course you're going to say that when you've been shut inside your house for months on end.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Hindsight, and a few months in lockdown, led June to almost have some regrets about missed opportunities but, as she then rationalised it, it was probably just due to the circumstances at the time of the interview as, when she was in Italy, those steps may have felt too big and overwhelming. The effects of the pandemic on June's YA and her hindsight perspective about it are discussed in section 6.8, and now that June's personal and social life have been described, I turn to the professional side of her YA and to her teaching experiences in Italy.

6.7 School and Teaching Experiences

June taught in two different types of high schools, an artistic and musical high school and a technical high school. In our buddy messages in November June seemed generally happy with her teaching and looking at the positive sides:

“I'm really enjoying teaching the majority of the classes, the students are generally really lovely and enthusiastic, and even when they're not so enthusiastic they're still fairly responsive 😊” (June, Buddy Message, 11/11/2019)

June's positive experiences with the students continued as she gained more confidence teaching and as she got to know her classes better:

“Most of the students I worked with are really eager and enthusiastic and in every class I've got one or two students, who I know now, if no one's answering a question I can just look at them and be like ‘pleeeeeease, answer’ so that's good.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

June was approximately the same age as the final year students and being so young gave her the opportunity to get to know some of them better, as she noticed the different relationship between teacher and students in her assigned Italian high schools compared to her experience in the UK:

“I think especially with the final year students, because I guess they're adults, even though they're still in school, their relationship seems much closer than how the teacher-student relationship would be in the UK... for example I met up for coffee with two of the final year students who were like ‘oh, we want to learn more about English culture’.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Her aim to socialise was finding outlets also in her professional life, and her relationship with the students seemed to be going well. June recounted that one of her first-year students at the artistic high school even “made a Christmas decoration for me and gave it to me right before I left” (ibid.). This good relationship with the students came by surprise for June as she was applying the experiences that she had had with TAs and supply teachers in the UK to herself in the Italian context:

“...not that I was expecting them [the students] to be horrible, but just knowing I guess just how British high schools can be like with supply teachers or people who don't have a specific air of authority around them...which I definitely do not...just in virtue of my height because I'm tiny, I look like I'm 12 sometimes so...the number of times I've had the same conversation in the teacher's toilet!! [*laughter*] Explaining that I am allowed to be in the teachers' toilet because I am not in fact a student! And they're all like ‘wow! But you look so young!’ and I'm like ‘yes, but I am your colleague, ok?!’” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

The pleasant surprise of her interactions with the students was opposed by the frustrating misunderstandings with some of the staff. Similarly to her experience at the youth camp, June found herself in an age-related middle position between staff and students. However, this time she had a specific role and she tried to put her foot down to maintain the authority of her position. Overall, teaching gave June many satisfactions and proud moments that contributed to the development of her agency and confidence. This can be noticed in the description she gave

about her most memorable moments, shortlisting many of her teaching experiences:

“The first big class I did in terms of not being just the help but being the first class that I actually led myself, when I did the presentation on the Celts [*in October/November*] and the reception that I got from that both from the students and from the teacher was really encouraging and it was a confidence boost. And also the first time I turned up to the class and there was no teacher there and just a cover teacher and she was like ‘oh you’re the language assistant, you can do the lesson!’ and I’d not prepared anything but that has happened a couple of times now so I know how to manage that...I’m able to improvise and to explain to the cover teacher that ‘I’m an English language assistant, I can handle this lesson’ and they’d be like ‘Great, I’ll go and do my homework’... so those lessons is another big thing.” (June, Interview 2, 5/01/2020)

Leading classes with and without preparation, receiving good feedback from the students and the teachers and noticing her increased ability to improvise and ‘handle the lessons’ were only some of the experiences that built June’s confidence and her teacher’s identity. Alongside these positive memories, June also had to deal with less pleasant feedback and interactions in her relationship with one of the teachers she was assigned to and who led June to re-adjust her strategies with her. Their relationship is discussed in more depth in the vignette below.

6.7.1 Vignette – Issues with the Teacher

The first few weeks of June’s work consisted of getting to know and assisting in the various classes she would co-teach for the rest of the academic year. Over this initial period, whilst June was still getting used to how things worked at her schools, some issues arose with one of the teachers she helped. These difficulties challenged June personally and professionally but eventually made her feel more confident about herself and about her teaching abilities. Below is a vignette with June’s report about this teacher and the various encounters and exchanges with her, from the initial issues to the later unexpected developments. June’s words are accompanied by some of my analysis and contextual explanations, but I considered important to show her perspective and perceptions about these events in order to give as much transparency and clarity as possible to her accounts.

Vignette**“June and the teacher – A bad first impression and the importance of resilience”**

Abbreviations used: *bc*: Because
idk: I don't know
tbh: To be honest

Buddy Message, 23/11/2019

I met this teacher (and her class) for the first time on the Monday and everything was fine, I introduced myself to her and the class which was pretty normal procedure! She immediately centred the lesson around me which I thought was a bit strange because it meant I was basically talking the whole lesson rather than observing what she was doing and how she taught etc. At the end of the lesson I asked if there was anything she wanted me to prepare for the next lesson (with the same class ie next week!!) and she just asked me to organise a comprehension task which I was like great! I can do that!

I didn't think much of what I noted until two days later when I had this teacher again for a different class (again, a class that I'd never met before!) I was expecting to just have the normal introduction/observation lesson again because it was a different class and that's what had happened with all the other teachers. But when I walked into the class, the first thing she asked me was 'so have you prepared anything?' And I was like ?? no?? I was genuinely confused so I tried explaining why I didn't have anything prepared - basically that I'm new, have never met the class before, I'm not an actual teacher with any training and I need to observe the classes to get a feel for how it works etc etc but she just kept talking over me and wouldn't let me finish a sentence. I kept calm and professional though, I didn't want to be a doormat but also I couldn't get a word in edgeways! She then said 'well what are we going to do today then?' in a very expectant kind of 'well what am I supposed to do now' tone if that makes sense. And again I was confused bc internally I was thinking that she is the teacher so surely she can just have whatever lesson she planned as normal?? But in her eyes apparently me being there meant that she couldn't? Anyway she then began to essentially scold me in front of the entire class which was mortifying and I felt she was being quite condescending. She then centred

the lesson around me again and so I stood at the front talking for the whole lesson. At one point she left the room with no warning for like ten minutes, leaving me alone with the kids which isn't meant to happen at all!

This unexpected situation with the teacher undermined June's confidence both from an emotional point of view and a professional one, also because her pre-departure beliefs and expectations about her teaching abilities were quite positive thanks to her previous experiences. Despite the teacher's patronising behaviours, June tried to keep "calm and professional" in front of the students, which may indicate the underlying development of her teacher identity that did not want to be discredited and belittled. As a response to this animated exchange June decided to prepare at her best for the following lessons with that teacher. Had June not had previous positive teaching experiences and some confidence in her abilities for this role before the start of her YA, she may not have had such a proactive reaction. This would also seem to relate to my third research question as June's prior belief (i.e. that she would be able to draw on her past teaching experiences to fulfil her role as a TA) had a positive impact on the way she coped with the challenge she faced dealing with this teacher.

Buddy Message, 23/11/2019

Anyway I knew that after her reaction in the second lesson, I had to be super prepared for the next week and I was! She didn't give me any resources or guidance on what to do so I picked something I thought would be interesting but also fun and made a worksheet about it. When I got to the school my USB wouldn't cooperate with the printer however so I quickly hand wrote out the worksheet in the ten minutes I had left before the lesson to photocopy it if the teacher couldn't get the usb to work either. Any of the other teachers would've been glad to help and idk I was proud of myself for thinking ahead by writing it out bc it meant that I'd still have a lesson. However again when I tried to explain that I needed help with printing and if not that then I needed 2 minutes to photocopy the sheets she wasn't having any of it and again scolded me for being unprepared, despite the fact that I was still very new at the school and didn't know how the printers worked despite a solid half an hour of trying!! She

left the class to photocopy the sheet and I did the lesson which I think the students really liked so that was good! She interrupted me quite a lot to essentially rearrange the order of things I was doing without letting me explain why I'd decided to do things a certain way round but that was a minor grievance tbh and in this case I appreciated her advice because constructive criticism doesn't bother me at all! My problem with her constructive criticism is the tone with which she delivers it, even when I take into account cultural differences and the fact that English isn't her native language, it's hard to interpret it any differently!

Regardless, I felt embarrassed and patronised, and she had given me no guidance or resources at ALL on what to do or how to plan, plus her lack of understanding for me being new and in a different country/language/school didn't help! I was getting very mixed messages because she felt able to essentially tell me off in front of the entire class of students as if I was one myself yet she was also expecting me to lead classes often without her in the room as she has made a habit of collecting her things and leaving unprompted for ten/fifteen minutes before returning, organise the resources and everything completely by myself as if I was a fully fledged teacher. She then found me when I was lesson planning in the library the day after specifically to tell me off about the photocopies AGAIN when she'd already done it once before in front of an audience of 15 year olds, saying that it was a 'waste of time'. That kind of tipped me over the edge after everything had been building up so after she left I actually cried for a bit in the library. I've found myself crying in public here more often than I would like 😭😭 But yeah I called my mum and then spoke to my mentor teacher about it which I'm SO glad I did because it turns out this teacher has a reputation for being exactly how I've perceived her, like being very unhelpful and rude to other teachers etc. My mentor was really apologetic about it and spoke to this teacher to clarify what my role is and what responsibilities I do/don't have, but she says she doesn't think much came of it as this teacher doesn't listen to anyone. Either way, I now know what to expect from her so I'm able to deal with it much better and 'play the game' as my mum says 😭😭

In the incident with the photocopy, June focused on the positive side of having transcribed her activity so she could still deliver it in case of technical problems, but the teacher did not appreciate her effort. It is interesting to note that June felt that the teacher treated her both as a student and as a teacher by ‘telling her off in front of the entire class’, but also leaving her alone with them unsupervised. However, June seemed to position herself in an in-between role as well in these occasions, as she wanted the teacher to treat her as a colleague and equal, and yet seemed uneasy when the teacher actually did so. Whilst this is understandable from the TA point of view as they are not supposed to teach on their own as part of their contract, it is worth pointing this out because, as June’s confidence increased and her teacher identity developed, she found the lessons that she delivered on her own as very rewarding, demonstrating a shift in her mindset and confidence. This extract also shows how June used her support systems, in this case her mentor and her mum, to cope with the overwhelming situation that the issues with this teacher were creating in addition to June’s already stressful settling in phase.

Interview 2, 5/01/2020

She’s been surprisingly lovely, in the last lesson she was like “oh it’s such a joy to work with you!” and “Looking forward to working with you...” no, she didn’t say that, she said “Have a good Christmas!” and I was like “you too! have a good holiday!” and I’m like “does she realise that I AM coming back in January or does she think that I’m like leaving for good?” [*laughs*] But yeah, I know how to handle her so it’s not an issue so much anymore, initially it was a bit of a shock but now it’s just like how she is and she is like that with everyone, even the head of the department so...she’s just a bit of an odd one but still... I think she’s a bit too harsh with the students sometimes but it might just be that way because she tells them off in English so I will understand what she is saying but I’m not sure they understand what she is saying...so I’m like... “errr” [*makes a frustrated face of not knowing what to do and feeling in an awkward situation*]...yeah, sometimes also... well, it is how it is she is a bit... you know ...like sometimes she doesn’t strike me as being particularly professional but the other teachers are, which is good, and they’ve been really lovely.

Three months after the initial “shock” June felt much more confident about her teaching and her coping strategies to interact with the teacher. Knowing that the teacher’s behaviours were not solely aimed at her and that she “is like that with everyone”, released some of the personal element of their negative interactions, which may have helped June to adapt her approach to working with her.

Interview 3, 17/08/2020

...pre lockdown they [things] were actually starting to go quite well with her. For some reason I think, you know, because obviously, by that point I'd figured out what she wanted from me so I was delivering that and I think she was like “Oh, I can actually trust this girl to do what I have deemed her job”. So then she warmed up to me a bit, she invited me to go to the movies but I couldn't because I think my family was coming that weekend or something. [...] I was like “where has this come from?!” so she really did warm up to me and she offered, because obviously she knew that I didn't have a car and she was like “if you ever want to go outside of *YA city* you know I can drive you places” and I was like “thank you!”. But I never got to take advantage of it but that was nice...kind of being able to smooth that over.

In our third interview the situation seemed to have turned completely as the teacher “warmed up” to June and invited her to the cinema and offered her lifts. Because of the pandemic June never took advantage of those offers but the relationship with the teacher noticeably improved, which was also reflected on June’s increased confidence and stronger teacher identity as she felt like she had earned the trust of the teacher. In the same interview, June discussed some of her most memorable experiences over her months in Italy and she mentioned the teacher again for a number of reasons.

Interview 3, 17/08/2020

I think in terms of more negative experiences are the issues that I had with the teacher who was not so nice to me... that was a memorable experience, a bit

because A) it wasn't pleasant, because you know the whole... basically all the "crying at the library" episode..., but then also the fact that I came out the other side of that and I'm pretty sure she liked me by the end of that, so kind of going from having it being a wholly negative experience to being something like a more well-rounded kind of "okay, I don't particularly like her, you know, she wasn't very kind to me when I needed kindness but... it's just something that shows me that I can go through it and if I just stick with it, you can win people over" and even if you don't...well, their problem not yours but in that particular situation... and I think that was a good professional experience for me to have as well because obviously there's always going to be people that you don't get on with or for some inexplicable reason they don't like you when they meet you for the first time...so, that I think that was a good...both in terms of the year abroad... it was a good memorable experience, also in terms of just like a professional working capacity [...] that's something that I might, you know, bring myself back to if I have a similar experience in the future.

This concluding extract expresses June's perceptions about this experience after more than 10 months from her first encounter with the teacher. In hindsight June saw this as a formative experience: it may not have been pleasant, but it was important for her personal development, which was one of her pre-departure YA objectives. By 'coming out of the other side' of that situation, her confidence was once again boosted, and it also confirmed her prior belief, formed after her SA, that "I can do this, even when I'm miserable and it's really really hard!" (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020). The final sentence shows June's awareness of the importance of this experience, as it is something that has very likely happened to many other TAs in the past and happens in the work environment quite frequently. On the one hand, this would seem to show that June has learnt from her experiences and to some extent matured (as she was hoping and expecting to). On the other, this also partly relates to my third research question, or rather its post-YA applicability, as June's experiences strengthened some of her beliefs and gave her new tools and strategies that she may use to face future challenges. June's self-reflection about her need for kindness at the beginning of her YA highlights the impact that the multiple affective challenges she was facing in those initial months had on her YA experience. Within the process of becoming more

confident and developing agency, June also developed her teacher identity, which influenced and was influenced by her confidence building process.

6.7.2 June's Teacher Identity

In our final interview, June reflected back on her teaching experience and reiterated her enjoyment of the process, probably also in light of the UK lockdown that had been lifted not long before the interview:

“Being with the students and getting to share my culture with them, because I like that... I really enjoyed that, and them being excited to see me, made me excited to see them. So that was a really really positive experience that I was having every single week.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Sharing her knowledge and having a positive relationship with her students, made June appreciate her teaching experiences. Furthermore, in that last conversation June also reflected on the importance that her role of ‘English teacher’ had for her life balance and mental health, as a sort of unplanned coping strategy:

“It was a different kind of stressful so it gave me a bit of a respite from feeling like I didn't know anything, because I was like ‘This is the English classroom, I know more than all of you!’ so, having that kind of... I don't know, even if it was only in my head like a slight dynamic shift [...] having that experience as someone with responsibility, with the knowledge to back up that responsibility...” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The role of responsibility she had at the school became a sort of superhero cape that transformed June from a beginner learner of Italian in Italy to an English native speaker in an English classroom. Her teacher identity gave June the opportunity to feel less stressed about the language barrier, at least for the amount of time she spent at the school. Being a teacher also seemed to be a key factor for her mental health during her YA, as she explained the role it played for her:

“It's hard to keep going when you feel like you don't know anything and you're just constantly trying and you don't feel like you're going anywhere... so having that experience helped me to keep pushing on, keep going, it was good for my mental health sort of not feeling like I was constantly struggling.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The progress June felt in her teaching helped her boost her confidence, which then transferred also to her personal life and her social interactions as presented earlier in the chapter. Besides the increased confidence and improved language, June also commented on the impact that her teaching experiences in Italy had

on her life in the UK and her future potential career as she confirmed her interest in teaching:

“I think it's given me a lot of confidence in lots of different areas, not just language, in terms of how I conduct myself and being able to do things and being in a professional environment, teaching in a classroom... you know it's given me a lot of work experiences and confirmed for me that I don't hate this, I'm actually quite enjoying it so, maybe that will lead to a future career one day, hence the TEFL course now.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June already had some previous teaching experience from different contexts but after her YA she decided to take her interest forward and enrol on a TEFL course during the lockdown months, hinting that “you can take a girl out of the classroom, but...” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020). This reiterates the potential impact that sojourners' experiences abroad can have not only on their confidence and beliefs but also on their lives upon their return to their home countries.

Another factor that had an undeniable impact on June's experience was the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which abruptly interrupted her YA towards the end of February 2020, making it only around four months long (excluding the Christmas break at home), rather than eight as planned. The following section presents June's perspective on the impact that the pandemic had on her YA.

6.8 Hindsight – The Effects of the Pandemic on June's YA

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the timeline of the events related to the Covid-19 outbreak was different between Italy and the UK: Italian schools closed earlier than the UK ones and Italy announced its national lockdown a few weeks before the UK. For these reasons, both participants faced school closure around the end of February. Initially, most Italian schools were closed only for a week, but this was soon extended according to the individual region. When the news about the situation in Italy started to become more worrying, I decided to check on both participants to see how they were coping and what the situation was like for them. Being in different regions and different kinds of accommodation, they experienced the pandemic in two very distinct ways.

June was living alone and teaching was a big part of her life, so when schools closed she decided to fly home and ideally come back once the schools would re-open. In our message on 6th March, June explained:

“I decided to come home last week because of the school closures etc in my region, and I'm planning to go back next weekend all being well! Although I really have no idea what's going to happen 😊 before I left it was really weird though, I went to the grocery store to get some supplies and the atmosphere was super strange, I felt like I'd entered the early stages of a post-apocalyptic zombie film or something 😬”
(June, Buddy Message, 6/03/20)

The image of “a post-apocalyptic zombie film” vividly describes the atmosphere that characterised the pandemic and the lockdown in most countries and provides a further motivation for June’s decision to leave. However, in our final interview June reiterated her initial plan to go back to Italy stating: “I didn't even bring a suitcase; I only brought a rucksack with the bare essentials”. Unfortunately, the situation turned out to be more serious than initially anticipated and June realised quite soon that she would not go back to Italy: “It got to the third week of me being in the UK and I was like ‘I'm not going back, it's not gonna happen’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020). Her decision not to go back to Italy again was based on multiple factors, both personal and practical:

“The uncertainty of ‘if I go, will the UK borders close and then will I not be able to come back or will the Italian borders close, and I won't be able to leave?’ You know, ‘will I be stuck in my flat by myself for months on end?’” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

June’s concerns were likely similar to those of the vast majority of sojourners who were abroad in that period and who faced the same dilemma. Furthermore, loneliness had already been an issue for June before the pandemic, therefore the idea of being forced to ‘be stuck in her flat’ for an undetermined amount of time, with schools closed and any social encounter forbidden, was a strong deterrent for June to go back to Italy. If these were not enough reasons to stay in the UK, on a more practical level, the uncertain situations in Italy and in the UK together with her experience flying back home made her finalise her decision that travelling internationally did not feel safe enough:

“I didn't see much point in going back unless the schools were open again but we didn't know when they'd open and by the time they started relaxing and opening them again, we got into lockdown here and I just didn't want to take the risk of travelling internationally going to airports, especially after arriving back into Manchester from northern Italy, which was where it was worst, and there was literally no temperature readings, absolutely nothing! I just breezed straight through border control and now onto the train to *other big city*... I was really shocked at how there was literally nothing at all to... you know there was the odd sign up that was like ‘if you've been to Wu

Han in China, quarantine' and that was it." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The reality of travelling during the early stages of the pandemic depicted by June shows why she did not feel safe going back to Italy and she firmly decided not to take such risks. However, this does not mean that she was totally happy with staying in the UK as she understandably felt she had missed out on almost half of her YA. Around one month after her return to the UK June explained in a text that she had high hopes for the remaining months of her YA experience:

"Things were going really well before covid actually!! I was at the happiest that I'd been the whole time and I really felt like I was starting to properly enjoy myself - I was envisioning the March-May period as being the best most beneficial part yet but alas we know now that that was not to be the case 🤔😂" (June, Buddy Message, 08/04/2020)

June had come back from the Christmas holidays feeling more confident and settled in and she seemed eager to make the most of the second half of her YA. She was planning to focus on her language, envisioning having an easier time socialising and taking advantage of the opportunities that may come her way. In our interview in August, she reiterated her disappointment for the experiences she missed out on:

"[The pandemic] it's impacted pretty majorly [...] I could palpably feel that I was starting to progress, like I had fully settled in and I feel like the months that I've lost, you know, they would have been some of the best months out of the whole experience, which is really disappointing." (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

The pandemic had a major impact on June's experience not only because it took away what June defined as "the best months" or "the most beneficial part" of her YA but also because it prevented her from seeing her progress continue. Furthermore, because the Italian lockdown was announced with very short notice, June did not have a chance to say goodbye to the people she had met during her months in Italy. In hindsight, June described the ending of her YA as a dual experience:

"The way that it happened, has sort of cut off a lot of the relationships that I had very abruptly. In terms of the people at dance, the people at church and the students. [...] It was simultaneously a very dramatic ending to the year abroad and a very anticlimactic ending to the year abroad, because [...] it just kind of happened and then it was over, and I wasn't able to, you know, talk to people, thank them for everything that they'd done for me, even if they weren't aware of it..."

just in terms of simple human connection of having a meal with the people at church.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Not being able to thank and say goodbye to the people she had met, made the ending of June’s YA “dramatic” and “anticlimactic” at the same time, abruptly terminating an experience that June thought could be “a big life change”. Despite the disappointment and sadness of going back home early, with time and hindsight June managed to reflect on her experiences and acknowledge their value:

“I think in some ways the pandemic has forced me to appreciate the parts of the year abroad that maybe I wasn't the biggest fan of at the time...like in terms of having to get up very early and having long days, and having five back-to-back classes of 20 plus students, and it's forced me to appreciate that and... just put it in a different light.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Whether it was because of the lockdown she lived in the UK or because of hindsight and the time June had to reflect on her experiences, she considered her YA “as successful as it could have been under the circumstances” (ibid.). This leads me to the final section of this chapter, looking more specifically at what made June’s YA experience successful, directly addressing my last research question.

6.9 What Makes a YA Successful?

The pandemic was certainly a variable nobody had predicted but June focused on the positive sides and confirmed that, overall, she had fulfilled her objectives:

“I think, had the pandemic not happened, it [her YA] would have been more successful, but given the shorter length of time, everything that happened... I think it was a successful experience, and because I grew as a person... you know, I think my language improved and even if my language... I mean, I know my language is still far from perfect, but it's given me the confidence to speak a bit more, it's got me more attuned to how people actually speak rather than just reading it from textbooks.” (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020)

Personal growth and linguistic improvement were two of June’s objectives, together with taking advantage of opportunities and making connections. Therefore, despite the shorter stay, June managed to reach her aims and was able to acknowledge and see the results of her experiences. Increased confidence and the exposure to real-life native language are two of the generally more recognised benefits of SA but, as June realised before going to Italy, every YA experience is unique and unpredictable.

According to June, her YA was a successful experience especially because of the times in which she had gone out of her comfort zone and pushed herself, becoming 'an active participant' of her YA. Although some of June's objectives were likely influenced by institutional requirements or guidelines, her personal aims contributed to her idea of success. Therefore, the definition of a 'successful YA' is individual, multi-faceted and may also be impacted by contextual factors as "had the pandemic not happened, it would have been more successful" (June, Interview 3, 17/08/2020). The meaning June attributed to success in her YA had to be re-adjusted due to the circumstances she found herself in and was likely different from the ideal outcome she had imagined for her experience. Overall, in her final interview, June concluded that she had achieved her idea of success "to the best of my ability" but specified that "it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm 100% satisfied". Success and satisfaction may not be synonyms in one's YA and they can be perceived to be at different levels over time, making YA success an even more multi-faceted concept to research.

6.10 Case Summary

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 presented June's experiences in her YA in Italy, starting from her prior experiences, beliefs and expectations (RQ1a), following with extracts depicting her months in Italy and her premature return home, exploring her perspective about her YA in hindsight. The prior experiences and beliefs June developed in her life before embarking on her YA seemed to have an impact on her thoughts and actions in her time in Italy (RQ1b), as well as on her attitudes and responses to the events she experienced (RQ3). The main affective challenges she faced were loneliness, homesickness, stress or overwhelming feelings, and worries related to her linguistic progress and longer settlement time (RQ2). Her coping mechanisms seemed to be based on her prior experiences, but they also developed over her time in Italy and included a range of strategies, also depending on her emotional state. Positive self-talk and reassuring thoughts were some of her key strategies, together with having a proactive and 'say yes' attitude, getting out of her comfort zone and using her support systems when needed. Contextual factors such as the pandemic and living on her own, as well as her social interactions at school, church and at her dance classes, all contributed to the shaping of her experiences, and led June to 'grow as a person' and consider her objectives achieved and her YA successful. The pandemic

added a further variable to the many factors involved in a YA and strongly affected the 2019/2020 cohort of students abroad, whilst still having repercussions on the current ones. The following chapters present Lucia's case and her YA experience, sharing some common elements with June's but also differing in many aspects, including her perspective on the pandemic and its effects on her YA.

Chapter 7 Lucia's Pre-YA

Similarly to June's case, I present Lucia's YA experience over two chapters. Chapter 7 provides an overview of Lucia's background and pre-departure experiences and mindset, focusing on the worries, objectives, beliefs, expectations and hopes she discussed before going to Italy. Chapter 8 shall present an account of Lucia's YA and her experiences over the 14 months she spent in Italy. It is worth noting that in the second half of her stay, Lucia started using Italian in our conversations, therefore the extracts that appear in italics are those which have been translated into English. The original versions are in Appendix J.

7.1 Personal and Educational Background

Lucia was a single honours student of Italian, which means that she did not study any other foreign language as part of her course. This also meant that, because she studied only one language, Lucia did not have a shorter SA before her YA in Italy. She started her university degree as a complete beginner and when asked about the reason why she chose to study only Italian, Lucia explained:

"I've always gone on holiday to Italy, when I was younger, pretty much every year and so before I did Italian as a degree, because I'm a bit older, I'm 26 [...] everybody is a lot younger, but I always thought I'd love to live in Italy and before I did Italian as a degree I thought maybe I want to be a chef in Italy... I love cooking and stuff, so for me it's more about... 'I want to become Italian' not 'I want to learn the language', so less to do with the language because lots of people do it and say 'I love languages'...I don't really love languages, I just love Italy." (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia's desire to live in Italy and her love for everything Italian resonated with my own personal story and was often a topic of conversation between us that likely contributed to the development of our rapport. However, it is arguably unusual for students of languages to say: "I don't really love languages"; and Lucia's motivation to study Italian seemed to be strongly identity-related rather than linguistic. Over the course of her YA, she changed her mind about the importance of learning the language (see sections 7.3.2 and 8.4) but her desire to "become Italian" remained and was a recurring theme throughout her months in Italy. Lucia's numerous holidays and previous experiences in Italy seemed to have contributed to her motivation to study Italian at university and, although she did

not go on a shorter SA, her YA in Marche was not her first experience in Italy on her own. Indeed, she had been to Perugia and Bologna on solo journeys at different points in time and on different kinds of trips. These are discussed in sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.2.

The extract above also introduces another frequent topic in Lucia's conversations: age. Being slightly older than the rest of her classmates seemed to be one of a number of reasons why Lucia did not bond with them too much. In our first interview I shared my experience as an Italian student in the summer courses I attended in England, where I would try to avoid speaking Italian even to my Italian classmates. Lucia related to my story and explained her relationship with her classmates:

“I always feel like in lessons I'm quite different to everyone else because they do two languages, so they seem less interested in Italy and maybe less knowledgeable and I suppose it's a bit like you turning up at the language school and 'ah, that's the kid that doesn't speak Italian', that's how I feel when we are in lessons, like ...am I the kid that knows everything about Italy?” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia not only felt older but also different compared to her classmates. Being a single honours student also meant that some cultural modules that were optional for students of more than one language, were compulsory for Lucia, who therefore did not share all her lessons with the same classmates. With the cultural classes and her previous experiences in Italy, Lucia seemed to feel more knowledgeable about Italy, and also more interested in it, than the rest of her classmates, adding a further layer of distance between them. On the other hand, when Lucia arrived in Italy, she found herself feeling younger than what she was used to in the UK. This was mainly because of the different educational system between Italy and the UK as, although students normally finish high school at 19, some may have to repeat a year or more, finishing high school at 20 or older. Similarly, university students can become 'fuori corso', which means that they do not complete their degree in the expected time, and they graduate at an older age. For these reasons, it is not infrequent to see 26-year-olds in the first years of university, whilst it is not common to see young teachers at schools or universities, which made Lucia feel better about her age when teaching. Nevertheless, in some cases she almost felt too young, and at times she was mistaken for one of the students by the other teachers and members of the staff,

as happened to June. Age is a particularly recurrent theme in Lucia's experience and is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Just like June, Lucia chose to be a teaching assistant for the British Council in an Italian school rather than going to study in an Italian university. However, unlike June, Lucia did not go on a SA where she experienced the university life in a foreign country, and she did not have previous teaching experience. Her reasons to go to Italy as a TA rather than as a student seemed to be linked to her identity-related motivation as she explained that "that's not being an Italian" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019) and she reiterated her conviction in a later voice message:

"My main reasons for being interested in Italy aren't to do with studying, I mean, I like studying Italian at university but [...] I already loved Italian life and stuff beforehand and so my goal was to become more knowledgeable about the average Italian and not 'how to be a student' because I can do that at home so...that was quite an easy decision." (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

Her rationale for being a student in the UK is in line with her YA choice, as she enrolled in order to learn more about "the average Italian" and she wanted to be able to experience that over her time in Italy, rather than being an Erasmus student at an Italian university. Furthermore, most of the potential universities in Italy were in the north of the country, which Lucia did not know and did not consider as "the real Italy".

"I chose Marche, Umbria and Abruzzo and I kind of wanted to feel more like my experience of Italy, which is more rural so... staying in the countryside and then visiting different places, that's always what I've done as a child with my family so it didn't feel as real to me to go to... because all of the universities that you can choose are northern and I don't know the north that well, I've mainly gone to the middle or the south so for me it was more important to go somewhere where I thought 'this is the real Italy to me', I'm not really interested in going to Milan." (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia's family trips to the south or centre of Italy contributed to shaping her beliefs about "the real Italy", which in turn had an impact on which regions Lucia chose for her YA destination and how she perceived Italy and Italians according to what was familiar to her and what was not. This relates to my first research question (RQ1a) about Lucia's beliefs about the YA, and it seems to confirm a relation between prior beliefs and YA experiences at the base of my RQ1b. Lucia's words also seem to suggest an initial reluctance to go out of her comfort zone. Her love

for Italy was based on her previous experiences but maybe also limited by them as those parts of Italy that she had not visited, and she did not know well, were considered outside of “the real Italy”. This led Lucia to not feel interested in visiting them, but her disinterest may also hide an underlying fear of the unfamiliar. In the following section I explore Lucia’s previous experiences abroad and their relevance to her YA.

7.2 Previous Experiences Abroad

Lucia did not go on a SA in her second year at university, but she did have numerous experiences abroad, especially in Italy, where she had been going on holiday with her family “from when I was like 10 or 11 onwards, every year for like two weeks” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019). Her love for Italy was ignited by her parents, especially her father, but with time it became almost an obsession for Lucia:

“...my mum is like ‘why are you so obsessed?’ [...] everything has to be Italian, Italian clothes, Italian car, like trying to pass for an Italian!... ‘what’s wrong with you?’” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

In the same conversation she later added:

“...people usually say to me ‘It’s weird because you’d rather be Italian, what’s wrong with you? you’re Italian but you’re actually English!’” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

From these two extracts it appears that Lucia’s desire to be Italian is not limited to when she is in Italy, rather her identity seems to revolve around it also in her UK daily life. The repeated “what’s wrong with you?” may allude at a subtle, or even subconscious, belief that wanting to be Italian is strange, but it is not necessarily a negative thought, it may even be a further stimulus for Lucia to pursue her ‘Italian identity’. How this ‘Italian identity’ impacted on Lucia’s YA is discussed Chapter 8, but it is helpful to know how pervasive her interest in Italy was already before going on her YA. This also puts into perspective her numerous trips to Italy and her decision to enrol on a single-honours degree in Italian, despite allegedly ‘not loving languages’. The following sections focus on Lucia’s solo trips to Perugia and Bologna, her experiences there and how these impacted on her YA.

7.2.1 Perugia

Perugia is a city in central Italy, it is not a major tourist destination, but it has a renowned University for foreigners that makes it popular amongst international students. Lucia went to Perugia twice before starting her degree in Italian and before she had started to learn the language. However, she lived in a farmhouse half an hour away from the city, so she did not experience the busier atmosphere of Perugia's centre. In her questionnaire Lucia explained that the first time she went to Perugia for two months she worked "as a volunteer at a B&B", and then a few months later she went back to the same place and "studied Italian and worked". In her second trip to Perugia, Lucia enrolled on a language course at the university "but it was the worst course, so I didn't learn anything" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019). Despite the unsuccessful language course, she did not abandon the idea of learning Italian and she later started her degree in the UK and, whilst still travelling to Italy with her family, she also went to Bologna on her own for a language course. Her trips to Perugia were less language-focused than those to Bologna, but they nonetheless contributed to Lucia's beliefs about Italy and her desire to feel Italian. When she described her stay in Perugia amongst the other trips she had, she explained:

"I loved Perugia. I could have stayed quite easily. It helped that I was living with a family so never felt alone and there were also other volunteers from other countries." (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019)

Working with other people from different countries allowed Lucia to experience Italy without feeling the pressure to speak Italian. Experiencing Italy with a host family and other volunteers in a rural area was extremely important for Lucia as she got to know the place and the few locals. The host family and the other volunteers also helped her to never feel lonely, which is a theme that recurred both in her and June's YA experiences abroad. Becoming familiar with the area and its inhabitants made her feel like a local, which was one of her objectives for her YA (see section 7.3.2).

"...probably because I didn't know any Italian, there was less pressure and so when I'd go into town I'd just use the odd word that I knew but I didn't feel like there was any pressure [...] I guess I felt Italian, more so I think also because I lived with an Italian family so that was a massive thing, I think if I had lived on my own I wouldn't have felt like I was an Italian but because I worked for the family so he [the father in the host family] used to drive us places and we'd end up knowing all of the... I think knowing the place really well is important." (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

The absence of pressure and expectations about her proficiency in Italian allowed Lucia to feel at ease and feel Italian, even without knowing the language. This changed when she arrived in Italy for her YA as discussed in section 8.4. Furthermore, living with a host family was clearly a fundamental factor that helped Lucia feel Italian. Her first-hand experience and the positive effects it had on her, also contributed to her beliefs that a host family could be a good and beneficial arrangement for her accommodation on her YA. For this reason, she enquired with her institution about options with host families for her YA. She did not receive any reply about it, but she decided to spend the first few weeks in temporary accommodation until she found her definitive solution. However, had she not had positive beliefs about living with a host family, she may not have chosen this option for her YA.

7.2.2 Bologna

Bologna is a large city in northern Italy, more popular with tourists than Perugia and with a number of renowned language courses and a big university. Lucia enrolled in one of the language schools in Bologna and went there twice, every summer since she started her university degree. In her questionnaire Lucia explained that “last summer I also studied Italian in Bologna for a month and a half. And this year for a month”. Her second trip to Bologna was particularly relevant for her YA because she decided to go there with the intention of refreshing her Italian but also regaining familiarity with Italy, in view of her upcoming YA. Comparing her perceptions about Bologna and Perugia, Lucia said that the latter felt more traditionally Italian to her, explaining:

“Bologna is more international, I feel you’ll come into contact with lots of other languages whereas in the outskirts of Perugia it’s just Italians and so it felt more traditional, it felt a bit more old-fashioned, more traditional, more like... the café will be full of old men playing cards, drinking coffee.” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia considered Bologna more international and therefore less traditional, showing a somewhat stereotypical image of what ‘traditional Italy’ meant for her. Her trips to Perugia and Bologna clearly had an impact on Lucia’s beliefs about “the real Italy” and on her destination choices for her YA. When I asked Lucia how the university had prepared her for her YA she explained:

“I don’t really feel prepared by the university, I feel like I prepared myself by going to Bologna to be honest. Yes, I feel like if I hadn’t

gone to Bologna I'd feel a lot more nervous about going. I feel like Bologna was an easy way to get me used to Italy again, because I feel like if you don't go for a certain period of time you lose that feeling of it being very familiar. Because last year when I was there for over six weeks, I started to feel 'Oh, yes, I just live in Bologna!...and it's quite nice, I don't want to go back to *home university city*.'" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Although Bologna was less traditional than Lucia's idea of the "real Italy", she soon got used to it and when she went back the second time it felt familiar to her. Lucia managed to reach the feeling of 'living in Bologna' again, and this time she did not live with a host family. Lucia's trip to Bologna was not only for linguistic purposes but she also used it to familiarise herself again with Italy. Bologna became a sort of extension of her comfort zone, a reference point not too far from her YA destination. Lucia explained her thoughts as follows:

"Once I'd been there for like a month it felt very familiar and I actually travelled down to *YA town* on the train so then in my head *YA town* was part of my Bologna trip so then that linked to... I was thinking 'well, when I'm in *YA town* and I feel like I'm having a bad day I can just go to Bologna on the train, why not?' Bologna feels like home to me so...that's something familiar and nice, and Perugia is not that far away... it's nice to have things that you think 'oh, yes, I know this place really well'. So I feel like I prepared myself by going to Bologna because I feel like when I fly back this weekend it'll just feel like an extension of my summer." (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Going to Bologna to familiarise herself again with the city and also with her YA destination, and thus associating them with a pleasant summer holiday, was one of Lucia's coping strategies. It represented a metaphorical safety net that she set up prior to her YA, in case she ever 'had a bad day' or felt overwhelmed during her months in Italy. More of Lucia's coping strategies and later trips to Bologna during her YA are discussed in the following chapter. Now that Lucia's previous experiences abroad have been presented, I focus on her pre-departure mindset, discussing the worries, objectives, beliefs, expectations and hopes she had about her YA in Italy before her departure.

7.3 Pre-YA Mindset

7.3.1 Worries

In our first interview, when asked about the main differences she noticed in the habits, culture, and ways of doing between Italy and the UK, Lucia struggled to

identify any. She explained “I can't see the differences that much”, and even when I mentioned the renowned (although maybe stereotypical) cuisine differences as an example she added: “I eat like an Italian at home so to me it's not much of a difference”. Even after the first few months in Italy Lucia found it hard to notice big differences between life and culture in Italy and in the UK, for her “there's not that much of a culture shock” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019). Thanks to her previous experiences and her familiarity with Italy, Lucia did not seem worried about anything particular related to the host country and her worries referred mainly to her language skills:

“My ability to understand what is being said to me. I feel my listening skills are non-existent [*sic*]. Again the teenagers in my class. My vocabulary in Italian. I feel this year at uni we did a lot of tenses and so I lost a lot of my nouns and verbs. Probably also when teaching English- switching from Italian to English I find myself forgetting English and my spelling in English is already not great!” (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019)

Listening skills, vocabulary, language-switching and forgetting her own language were Lucia's biggest worries about her YA. Lucia's beliefs about her language skills and her 'non-existent' listening skills impacted on how she approached linguistic exchanges in her YA. This is explored in the following chapter where I also discuss how her attitudes and beliefs seemed to change over the months she spent in Italy, and what factors seemed to contribute to such changes. Lucia's only worry not directly related to language was about the teenagers she would have in her class. “If the teenagers in the school are naughty/rough” was the only thing she mentioned in the questionnaire as something she was not looking forward to in her YA. This could be related to her lack of teaching experience but also to her lack of confidence in her Italian, as she may have felt unable to understand them or make herself understood in the classroom context. However, when I asked about her answer she added:

“I think one of the other reasons as well that I put that is because I became quite friends with the teachers in Bologna and I feel like Italians are way more blunt and straight to the point so I was like ‘I'm going to be teaching in this school’ – this was all in Italian – and she was like ‘oh it's going to be terrible!’ [...] And then I told one of the other teachers that I was more friends with and I was like ‘It's so mean that she said that!’, and she was like ‘it's probably true.’” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

These exchanges with the Italian teachers likely contributed not only to Lucia's worry about her future students, but also to her idea that Italians are more direct

and frank than what she was used to. This seemed quite firm in Lucia's view of Italians, although it was not necessarily intended in a negative way. The relation between Lucia's conversations with the Italian teachers and her attitudes and concerns towards the students she had not yet met directly related to my first research question (RQ1b), investigating the connection between prior-beliefs and the perceived YA experience. Lucia did not seem overly worried about settling in as she felt accustomed to the Italian ways of doing, and her short trip to Bologna helped her to get into her Italian mindset again. However, when I asked her about how she had prepared herself in Bologna, she replied:

“I think getting used to being on my own and getting used to being in situations where you don't necessarily have a full idea of what's going on so even catching buses and stuff, like... if you're catching a bus somewhere in England at least you know that you can go and speak to the driver, which stop is it or whatever but it's harder when you don't know the language as well or the area as well, so I guess small things like that, getting used to doing those things again on your own, and just speaking Italian I think, even these two weeks that I've been back in England I'm talking to myself in Italian in the shower and I'm like 'Oh, my god, it's going!' so yeah, I think using the language and getting used to doing things on your own and being aware of the fact that you are on your own and being careful about...not necessarily careful but like what areas you go at night and all that kind of things.”
(Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

The insecurity about her linguistic abilities mentioned as her main worry, is noticeable in the references to 'not knowing the language' and 'not understanding what's going on'. However, the fact she kept talking to herself in Italian after she came back from Bologna would hint at a gradual increase in her confidence after the month she spent there. A different kind of worry that seems to arise from her words is the reference to “getting used to being on your own”, which recurred four times in the short extract. Although Lucia did not explicitly mention loneliness as a worry, it could be argued that a latent concern about it may be present, also in relation to the more practical 'being careful what areas you go at night'. Lucia's extended experiences in Italy contributed to her feeling familiar with the Italian context and culture, but she was still insecure about her Italian skills, and this is reflected also in her objectives, which are presented in the following section.

7.3.2 Objectives

Lucia's pre-departure objectives were “to become fluent, to become a local, to visit lots of places and to make friends” (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019).

Becoming fluent, making friends and travelling around Italy are similar to some of June's hopes and objectives, and in line with the aims of a YA, promoted and encouraged by universities. What Lucia meant with fluency was not clarified but in our first interview she explained:

"I think my level's meant to be B2 and my speaking and listening is not B2, is like A2 so I definitely think that's a big thing in my head like 'I'm not very good at speaking and listening', I think that's always there." (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

The levels of fluency Lucia mentions are based on the university guidelines for her degree and the extract shows her constant feeling of linguistic inadequacy, which probably contributes to her aiming at reaching 'fluency', even though the guidelines may aspire at a hard-to-reach proficiency level. However, straight after the previous comment, Lucia added:

"...but I think that when I'm there it'll go away, the feeling of worry, I think it's more before I go, I'm like 'oh my god, I'm not going to understand a thing!' so I think it will be ok" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia may be trying to reassure herself in view of her upcoming YA, but her previous experiences can both worry her and give her hope. On the one hand, Lucia has experienced the feeling of not understanding what is being said to her and she may be worried about her linguistic abilities. On the other, she has also had first-hand experiences of getting used to being in Italy, and she knows that she can feel at home there. Therefore, prior experiences can be a double-edged sword, generating both positive and negative beliefs. In this case these beliefs seemed to be alternating in Lucia's mind, in a sort of inner battle between worry and hope, which may have had an impact on how she experienced her YA, or at least the initial part of it.

The objective that stands out in Lucia's list is her wanting "to become a local", which has already been mentioned as an expression of her strong identity-related motivation and will be further discussed in the following chapter. Lucia had 'felt Italian' in her experiences in Perugia and Bologna and aimed to reach that feeling again in her YA. In order to fulfil her objective, she would have to get to know her YA town and the locals well, as she did in Perugia, but she would also have "to make friendships with locals, to do what other Italians do rather than stick out for the whole year as 'the English person that lives in *YA town*'" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019). Lucia's desire to achieve an 'Italian identity' and merge with the

community in her YA destination became clearer and stronger over her months in Italy, but when I asked her the reason behind the specific desire to “become Italian” she explained:

“I don’t know...I guess because I’ve always been into Italian cooking and stuff...and then when I went to Perugia I was like ‘Yes, I prefer this life to English life’ but I don’t know if that’s necessarily true rather than a romantic idea of ‘this life is better because everything is really slow’ and the food is a massive thing because I’ve always thought ‘I’ll be an Italian chef’...I don’t know, I guess yes, the life that seems a lot nicer but I don’t know, I think that’s probably a romantic idea of it [...] I think also because... from when I was younger I wanted to be Italian, when I was spoken to in Italian and they’d say ‘oh I thought you were Italian’ and I’d like that so it was almost like they’d find out that I wasn’t Italian and I’d never wanted them to find out!. I think it was a bit like that in Bologna as well, it was like ‘Oh no! I can pass as an Italian!’” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Mentioning the food and the idea that life is slow and “seems a lot nicer” in Italy seems to be partly stereotypical and partly based on her specific experiences, although she acknowledged that her thoughts about Italian life may be “a romantic idea of it”. Nevertheless, her positive outlook and attitudes towards Italy, Italians and the ‘Italian culture’, benefitted from her previous trips, and, in turn, relieved some of the cultural pressures other students may have at the beginning of their YA. This chain effect suggests a connection between Lucia’s pre-departure beliefs about – a maybe idealised – Italy and her YA experiences (related to my RQ1b). Furthermore, Lucia’s perceptions and preconceptions about Italy and Italian life led her to approach her YA with less stress and with some hope that ‘she could pass as an Italian’.

The fact that her Perugia experience happened before she started studying Italian led me to ask her whether knowing the language was a necessary condition for her ‘becoming Italian’. Lucia replied that it was not, and that living with an Italian family was a fundamental factor, as mentioned in section 7.2.1, and she continued to explain other important elements that contributed to her feeling Italian, regardless of knowing the language:

“I ended up knowing the woman that works in the café, the woman that serves me ice cream, the guy in the supermarket... all those little things, and then I’d know the whole family and the family would be pleased to see you, the two kisses thing, and then the grandparents would treat you like one of their kids, like ‘get up that ladder!’ so that was always quite sweet! And... I picked tomatoes with the grandma who was like 92 and I was like ‘my grandma at home would never be

in a polytunnel, picking tomatoes in the boiling heat!... I felt like I was a grandchild so that was quite sweet so I guess there were various reasons that made me feel like 'I'm an Italian!'" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Knowing the locals and the area, feeling part of the family and participating in their activities were some of the main elements that made Lucia feel like an Italian, and the more rural setting probably contributed to confirming her idea that the more traditional Italy is in the countryside. These factors were very important also during her YA months living with a host family, and her experiences in Perugia had an impact on how she tried to participate in the family activities. In the following chapter, I discuss how Lucia's approach to and role in the host family evolved over time and how she eventually seemed to change her mind about the importance of speaking Italian in order to feel like a local. Before moving on to that, three final sections explore Lucia's pre-departure beliefs, expectations and hopes.

7.3.3 Beliefs

Several of Lucia's beliefs have already been mentioned: the "real Italy" is the centre and south of the country, Italians are blunter than the British, life in Italy is nicer and everything is slow. These beliefs have a rather essentialist flavour and they seemed strongly engrained in Lucia's mind, so much so that even after her YA some of them remained unchanged. When asked about her idea of 'Italian culture' she answered with more of her imagery:

"The importance of family. Great food, coffee, towns full of old fiats, cities full of slim, well dressed locals. Quieter places having lots of old men playing cards, lots of churches to visit, towns being a bit dead at lunch time and full at 10 at night and children everywhere."
(Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019)

This extract depicts a very visual and detailed view of Italy but also a stereotypical one. Based on Lucia's accounts, her previous experiences seemed to contribute to the development of her beliefs about Italy, its culture and Italians, and in the following chapter I discuss how her YA impacted on, and partly changed, her views. Nonetheless, these essentialist beliefs likely had an impact on Lucia's perceptions of her YA experiences, which relates my first research question (RQ1b). Lucia also added that those same 'Italian' features listed in the extract above represented what she was most looking forward to in her YA.

7.3.4 Expectations & Hopes

Lucia's expectations about her destination were that it would be "(f)un, testing, lonely at times" and she added "I expect to be used as a teacher rather than an assistant in the school" (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019). These seemed to reflect her worries (testing, lonely) and prior beliefs (fun) but, given that she did not have previous teaching experiences, the comment about the teaching role is likely the result of other students' accounts from their SA journeys or her conversations with the teachers in Bologna.

Lucia's hopes that emerged from our first interview were language-related and seemed in line with her objectives: being forced to speak Italian and developing an accent in Italian.

"I think also because I lived on the outskirts [of Perugia] and no one spoke English, and in Bologna it's always like... I'll try and speak Italian and then I just get talked back to in English so...I'm kind of hoping that in *YA town* there won't be...as much English spoken to me so I think that will force me to try and use my Italian and that will make me feel more like I live in Le Marche not an English person that's just there for a bit" (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

Lucia had selected her options carefully, so she knew that her YA destination was likely not going to be a big city like Bologna. One of her hopes was that she would find fewer English speakers, or at least, fewer opportunities to speak English. This would presumably force her to speak Italian more often. Although she was right about the less frequent English input from the locals, her hope that this would force her to speak more Italian did not go as planned, as will be discussed in section 8.4. The extract also reiterates her strong identity-related motivation to 'feel like she lives in Marche' rather than being "an English person that's just there for a bit".

Another hope Lucia mentioned was about developing an accent when she spoke Italian, which fits perfectly with her desire to 'become a local' as it would add to her 'Italian identity'. However, wanting an accent seemed at odds with her lack of love for languages and with the fact that in her opinion knowing Italian was not a necessary condition to feel Italian. She discussed her desire to develop an accent with one of the teachers in Bologna, and Lucia recounted:

"I was like 'will I have an accent!?' and she was like 'well, you may have an accent but it's a year so maybe it's not long enough' and she

was like ‘why do you want an accent?!’ and I was like ‘I want an accent!’” (Lucia, Interview 1, 23/09/2019)

She seemed really excited at the idea of having an Italian accent but when she actually started having it, her host family teased her about it. Nevertheless, Lucia seemed very proud of it and enjoyed when people noticed it, likely because comments about it would acknowledge not only her language but also her Italian identity. The following chapter explores in more detail Lucia’s experiences over her 14 months in Italy, with particular attention to her affective challenges and coping strategies.

Chapter 8 – Lucia’s YA

8.1 Timeline

Lucia’s YA lasted around 14 months and, although not comprehensive, the timeline in Table 4 provides an overview of the key events in Lucia’s life and my main data collection (in bold). The specific events will be discussed over the following sections, but it is worth noting that Lucia’s first five months in Italy were in a pre-pandemic context and she then experienced more than two months in lockdown between March 9th and May 18th. In the summer months the national restrictions were lifted, and life seemed to be starting to go back to normal, so Lucia spent the summer holidays with her host family, and her parents came to Italy on holiday in two occasions. Lucia only came back to the UK at the end of November 2020, when the rumours of a potential new lockdown in Italy convinced her to fly back home before being ‘locked in’ Italy again.

Table 4 – Lucia's YA Timeline

September 2019	October 2019	November 2019	December 2019	January 2020	February 2020
Questionnaire (18/09/2019) Interview 1 (23/09/2019) Arrival in Italy (Airbnb)	From Airbnb to Second House	Move in with host family British Council course in Rome + unplanned meeting with me	Flight home mid-December	Back in Italy Peak in feeling lack of independence after time with her family in the UK 2 Calls	Interview 2 (3/02/2020) School closed at the end of the month Choice to stay in Italy
March 2020		April 2020		May 2020	
<u>Lockdown</u> Adjustment time, loneliness, lack of alone time and independence Teaching online		<u>Lockdown</u> Still not confident about her Italian 1 Call		<u>Lockdown</u> 2 Calls (from mid-May they started to be in Italian) Pictures selection	
June 2020	July 2020	August 2020	September 2020	October 2020	November 2020
End of teaching online 2 Calls	Trip with parents 2 Calls	Trip with host family Fewer Exchanges	Schools open again Another short trip with parents 3 Calls	Lucia’s final year starts (online) Schools closed at end of October (not a lockdown) 1 Call	1 Call Interview 3 (12/11/2020) Flight home on November 30 th

The following section focuses on Lucia’s YA destination and the process that led her to decide to move in with an Italian family.

8.2 Lucia's YA Destination and Accommodation

Lucia's YA destination was a small town in Marche, a region on the East coast of Italy. She moved there at the end of September 2019 and, with the exception of three weeks during the Christmas break, she stayed there up until the end of November 2020. Because in her previous experiences with her family she had rarely gone to beach destinations, she explained that her first thoughts about her YA seaside town were: "I've been to Italy loads but this isn't an Italy that I know" (Lucia, Call, 15/05/2020) and "*these big palm trees... it's weird and at the beginning I thought 'this is not Italy for me'*" (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020). Initially the YA destination took her out of her comfort zone, but after spending a prolonged period of time in the town and finding some similarities with her experience in Perugia, she became more familiar with her surroundings.

When she first arrived, Lucia stayed at an Airbnb, where she became friends with the owner of the place. However, the Airbnb was quite far from the school and slightly isolated, so she decided to move. Her second accommodation was a big house closer to the centre of the town, but she felt lonely, and the house was too expensive and not very homely. Furthermore, whilst living in these accommodations, Lucia noticed that she was not using her Italian enough, so she kept looking for other solutions:

"At first it was really easy, but it was a bit boring and a bit lonely, and the main thing was that I was never speaking any Italian [...] The first place was 20 minutes, or half an hour by bike, away from the school, then the second place was in the centre of *YA town* but it was further away from the school... but it was just too easy to not get involved with...life. It was easy to just go home, make some food, go and have an ice-cream, wonder about but never speaking any Italian... so that was the main problem (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

Loneliness, boredom and lack of Italian practice were the main reasons that led Lucia to look for different accommodations. Because she was not practising her Italian enough, Lucia also enrolled on a language course in Ascoli Piceno, a city in the same region, where she travelled almost weekly. When she realised that the second accommodation was not right for her, she asked the language school for advice, and they directed her to a student accommodation. All these efforts and commitment to work on her language seemed to clash with her pre-departure thoughts about not having to necessarily speak the language in order to feel Italian. On the other hand, Lucia had briefly mentioned that she expected that the

YA may feel “lonely at times” (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019) and had hoped to find a host family like she had in Perugia, so it is understandable that she looked for a place where she would not live alone. During her house search, Lucia met another teacher at her school who told her that she could stay at her house for a few days if she needed a place whilst looking for another accommodation. However, after they went for a coffee and a chat, the teacher offered her to stay for the whole of her YA:

“...when I told her that I was never speaking any Italian and I was actually enrolled in an Italian course, but it was an hour away by train [...] and she was like ‘oh maybe you could live with us full time, I can ask my family and find out!’” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

The teacher’s offer seemed to fulfil Lucia’s hopes to live with an Italian family for her YA. She considered both the host family and the student accommodation, but her final decision was easy and based on her objectives for her YA and her prior beliefs, as she explained in the same voice message:

“I did go and see the apartment and I met the students who lived in this apartment, but I decided that [...] my reason for coming to Italy and doing the teaching was to get to know normal Italians and have a better view of society, I didn’t come to be an Erasmus student, I didn’t come here to be one of the international people. That wasn’t the reason. So it ended up being a very easy decision for me and I’m glad that I decided to live with the family” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

Because of her previous experiences in Perugia, her objective to understand the Italian society better and her beliefs about what it meant to be Italian, she opted to go and live with the teacher and her family. She moved in with them around the beginning of November 2019 and her first impression was mostly positive:

“I’ve been there for nearly two weeks and it’s really good, it’s hard to spend any time by myself but it’s good for my Italian, which is the main thing...and I prefer that I’m learning about Italian life rather than Italian life from the outside.” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

The lack of time for herself was one of the recurrent challenges Lucia had to deal with during her time living with the family, as will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. However, the idea of learning about Italian life ‘from the inside’ is another example of Lucia’s strong identity-related motivation, in line with her objective of becoming an Italian. Moving in with an Italian family was a fundamental turning point for Lucia’s YA. It made her experience very different from how it would have been if she had lived by herself or in a student

accommodation. In the next section I introduce the members of the family and their relationship with Lucia.

8.3 Host Family

Lucia's host family included the teacher who offered her to stay with them, her husband and their children, a teenage-daughter and an older son who studied in Bologna. In this thesis, I refer to the parents of the host family as Mamma ('mum' in Italian, to differentiate her from Lucia's 'real' mum) and 'Babbo', as Lucia called him, which is an Italian word for 'dad' used in some regions of the peninsula. Lucia often called Mamma, her "Italian mum" but for convenience, I only refer to her as Mamma. To facilitate the reading of this thesis, rather than adding further pseudonyms, I will simply refer to 'the daughter' and 'the son' when talking about the host family children.

8.3.1 Babbo and the Children

Lucia got on well with Babbo, they did not spend too much time together, but their relationship seemed to become stronger towards the end of Lucia's YA as he repeatedly invited her to stay longer than she was planning to. Lucia's relationship with the daughter was a bit more complicated. Lucia tried to become her friend since she moved in with the family, but the teenage girl did not seem to engage much with her.

"I'm trying to force the daughter to be more mates with me but it's not working [...], I'm working on it but at the moment we're not mates and she does everything with her own friends... I feel bad in a way because I think 'I wish she'd do something with me' but when I was 17 I wouldn't want to do anything but what you would normally do so in that sense it's fair enough but I'd like to do more things if I can with her...if I got to be more friends with her, plan things to do together or like go on a walk, or go for breakfast together, that would be nice but I don't know if that will happen." (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

Lucia rationalised the daughter's behaviour, common in teenagers, but still tried to become friends with her. However, after almost eight months living with the family, including the national lockdown, Lucia was starting to doubt that her attempts would be successful. The 10-year age difference, the daughter's tendency to spend time with her friends or in her room, and their mutual shyness were some of the factors that Lucia thought were hindering her desired friendship. On the other hand, another possible factor that Lucia considered was that she

did not have any sisters and was used to dealing with her brothers. This was also one of the reasons why she thought she got on better with the son, even though he did not live with them. Because the son studied in Bologna, Lucia did not see him very often but, on the few occasions they met, they seemed to get along well, as Lucia explained comparing her relationship with the two siblings:

“He was far more interactive with me...at the dinner table he was way more chatty than she [the daughter] is, [...] I probably got on with him more just because I have brothers, because I don't have a sister and I have friends that are girls but in a weird way 'how do I be a sister with a sister?'. I know how to behave with a boy in a brother situation so there was probably a part of me that was like that.” (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

Not having sisters may have made it harder for Lucia to engage with the daughter, therefore, family and personal background could be another 'pre-departure' factor to consider as potentially impacting on the way sojourners experience their YA, as discussed in the following chapter. However, Lucia's identity-related motivation may be part of her resilient attempts at becoming friends with the daughter. Her desire to be Italian drove Lucia to wear Italian clothes, eat and cook Italian food, choose to be a TA rather than an Erasmus student, move in with the family rather than living alone, work on her Italian fluency and much more. For these reasons, it is arguable that her attempts to become friends with, or to “be a sister” to, the daughter may also be a way to feel more integrated in the family, despite her already close bond with Mamma and the good relationship with Babbo and the son. The relationship with the daughter improved towards the end of Lucia's stay, parallel to the increase in Lucia's confidence and independence, as I mention in section 8.4.

8.3.2 Mamma

Mamma was probably the most important figure in Lucia's YA as they worked in the same school and during lockdown they spent most of their time together. Their relationship had ups and downs but, over the 13 months Lucia spent with the family, they formed a very strong bond. By working at the school, Mamma knew Lucia's job environment, its challenges and the teachers she worked with, and she supported Lucia on many occasions when she needed to talk about the difficulties she faced at the school.

“...the thing about living with the family that I actually really like is the fact that I can moan to Mamma about school, because she's also a

teacher and she's horrified about the things that I tell her because she is a really good teacher and you can tell from how she is as a mum that she is a really good teacher whereas the teachers that I have [*as in 'work with'*] are just horrendous" (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

The school and Lucia's experience as a TA are discussed in section 8.8, but it is already clear from this extract that it was a challenging environment. Lucia has always portrayed Mamma as a very caring and selfless person, putting others (and Lucia) first, and this is possibly part of the reason why Lucia felt part of the family so soon and was invited to all of the family events. The relationship between Lucia and Mamma developed especially during lockdown, when they spent most of their time together. So much so, that when lockdown was lifted and Mamma was able to go and visit her family in another region for a few days, Lucia missed her more than she expected and on two different occasions she talked about how she felt when Mamma was not there:

"Sembra strano senza la mamma...forse perché io trascorro tutto il mio tempo con la mamma [...] è triste, io voglio la mamma! E anche ieri sera lei era "ma come è stata la cena?" e io "meglio con te"...ma dai solo per 5 giorni quindi...(Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

"It seems weird without Mamma...maybe because I spend all of my time with Mamma, [...] it's sad, I want Mamma! Even last night she was like 'How was the dinner?' and I was like 'better with you'... but come on, it's only for five days so..." (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

In the few days that Mamma was away, Lucia struggled to re-adjust to her absence, showing how strong their bond was and how linked their lives became over time.

"When Mamma went to see her parents and I was actually sad, I did actually cry and I was like 'this is pathetic! why am I crying because Mamma is not here? this is ridiculous!' and I think it was a bit because I didn't have school and the daughter always does her own thing, and the dad does his own thing when Mamma's not here." (Lucia, Call, 7/07/2020)

Lucia's openness about her feelings and thoughts reflects the friendly rapport that we developed during her months in Italy, and these extracts reiterate the fundamental role Mamma had in Lucia's life, almost showing a certain level of dependence – or co-dependence. This seemed to emerge also from Lucia's final interview, where she explained that when Mamma had some bad days, Lucia was there to support her:

"She [Mamma] appreciates me helping around and seeing her point of view [...] it's almost like we reversed roles, which is quite nice. I

like being able to help as she's helped during a huge part of the year so that's quite nice, but I also think the relationship is quite complex because I spend loads of my time with her." (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

With time Lucia felt like she was able to support Mamma more and reciprocate the help she had given her over her initial months in Italy. However, finding a balance in their relationship was hard as they spent lockdown and most of the summer together, almost 24/7. Lucia explained that part of what made their relationship more complex was the difference in their communication styles and interpersonal approaches:

"If I ask 'oh, you want to do this? you want to do that?', for me it would be normal to say 'I can't be bothered, I'm not in the mood', whereas she doesn't want to upset me... but in a way it doesn't work because I think to be close you have to be honest, so sometimes I think if she was more honest it would work more for how close we are to each other, rather than her not saying anything. I'd rather she said it, but sometimes she doesn't understand that she can say these things to me and it won't matter." (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

With Lucia trying to support Mamma whenever she could and Mamma trying to please Lucia also accepting to do things she may not want to do, the relationship seemed to have evolved into a co-dependence. However, Lucia did not want Mamma to say 'yes' to everything she would suggest just because of their close relationship, so she started explicitly telling Mamma to say 'no' if she did not want to do what Lucia was about to suggest. This strategy seemed to work often enough for Lucia, especially because of her use of facial expressions to help Mamma understand her intentions: "I pull a lot of faces because it helps a lot [...] so my facial expression will be like 'you can say no' as in 'I'm about to ask a dangerous question'" (ibid.). Over time Lucia found strategies to adjust to Mamma's (and the family's) habits and behaviours, but when she reflected about the evolution of their relationship, she noticed that by becoming more fluent and independent, their relationship grew more complex:

"[...] the more I've become competent in the language, in a way the less that I needed Mamma and so I've become more my own person within the house rather than this little kid who needs help with everything. So then the relationship was changing, as in the roles have kind of changed and it's been positive and negative at the same time because I think sometimes... because I don't need her as much, maybe some of the things that I do can be annoying." (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Lucia's increased fluency and confidence impacted on the delicate balance they had developed over the initial months and undermined the co-dependence between them. On the one hand, these changes were evidence of Lucia's personal development and improved proficiency and confidence. On the other, they led to a destabilisation of her relationship with Mamma and to further need for adjustment. Lucia explained this twofold situation with a vivid analogy:

"I know it's a weird comparison but say you have a baby and he throws something on the floor...and he doesn't know any better. Whereas, if you have a teenager and he can't be bothered to tidy up after eating, you're like 'you're very capable of tidying up so why haven't you tidied up?' [...] when I was 'the baby', I didn't know that something needs to be done and I need help with everything, to get to school and blablabla, but after a while that I've become competent at these things and I don't need all this help, then maybe [...] if I leave my shoes somewhere, small things, stuff like that, it can be a bit...almost creating extra jobs in a way, even though I do loads and loads of stuff in the house..." (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Like a baby who grows and learns its way around the house and its role in the family, Lucia moved from not knowing what to do in the house or how to express herself to being fluent and feeling part of the family. This personal journey in Lucia's YA is discussed in more details in section 8.4. However, her knowledge of what she was expected to do, did not mean that she would always do it straight away, and new challenges presented themselves along Lucia's path. In a number of occasions, Lucia's need and desire for independence clashed with Mamma's motherly attitudes and the following vignette depicts one of the biggest challenges Lucia and Mamma faced in their relationship.

8.3.3 Vignette – Misunderstandings Between Lucia and Mamma

This vignette presents Lucia's account of a difficult period for her relationship with Mamma and what she did to try to fix the situation. Language inaccuracies and different backgrounds led to some misunderstandings between them, undermining their relationship over the summer.

The Misunderstanding(s)

Lucia, Call, 7/07/2020

Basically at one point I was kind of concerned that when they [Babbo and Mamma] went out for dinner or something, they'd always invite me and the daughter, and she is always "oh no, I've got something else to do with my mates" and so it was always just me and I'd be like "yeah, I'll come!" and then I started to feel weird, as if they had to take me everywhere because the daughter always says no so I almost felt like I was starting to become the third wheel... so basically I made this grave error where I was upset and said it to Mamma [...] about how I feel, basically I said it as in "I don't want to spend all my time with you if you want to spend all your time with Babbo, I'd prefer that I wasn't there...because I don't want to be the third wheel" but when I said it in Italian it didn't come across well because I didn't use the right words and what I think it sounded like is "I don't want to spend any time with you" and then she didn't really understand the rest of what I said in Italian...so she only understood "I don't want to spend any time with you"

Feeling more confident in herself and fluent in Italian, Lucia decided to openly explain to Mamma that she did not want to invade her time with Babbo if she wanted to spend some time alone with him. However, by attempting that conversation in Italian, the incorrect use of tenses and other linguistic inaccuracies, led to a misunderstanding between Lucia and Mamma. At first Lucia was not aware of the miscommunication and Mamma did not question it or ask for clarification so Lucia only realised later that there may be a problem.

...so I didn't know at the time that it had come across like this but then she was in a really bad mood for I don't even know how long, maybe three or four days and I was like "I don't get this! this is so weird! Why are you in a bad mood?" and so it went on and on and then in a few moments when the daughter would say something to Mamma that was insulting or slightly insensitive to the situation... I can't think of anything specific but she can be quite moody and very teenagery, so she can be very rude without realising it – or rude intentionally to be honest – and then a few things that Babbo has said that I was thinking "she's clearly upset, you could be nicer to her"...and so then I was like "it's not something to do with me but to do with them, so she's feeling upset"

because they're not being very nice" ...she can often be used in the sense that she does everything around the house and no one lifts a finger so sometimes I think she can feel like she does all the house work basically...so I was like 'is it just this?'

Mamma's tendency to avoid upsetting people, regardless of her own feelings was mentioned in the previous section and it was a topic Lucia discussed on a few occasions. In particular, she talked about it with regard to Mamma's role in the family, where she was in charge of all the house chores and expected to do everything on her own. Lucia had always tried to help in the house and her unawareness of her misunderstanding with Mamma led her to look for causes outside of herself that could explain Mamma's moodiness. However, the daughter and Babbo's behaviours were not too different from the norm, so Lucia was not convinced that their comments were at the root of the problem. After a few days, Lucia addressed the issue with Mamma directly as she started suspecting her moodiness could be related to the conversation they had had.

...and so one day after lunch time I brought it up and I was like "You know the other day I said this this and this" and she said "Yes" and I was like "I actually think it came across badly but I didn't think about it at the time" and she was like "Right, what do you mean?" "Well, I said this, does it sound like 'I don't want to spend any time with you?'" and she was like "Yes" and I was like "Oh, s**t! Well, this is not what I meant!" and then I explained and I was like "and it's actually the opposite, I actually really like spending time with you and it was just like 'I don't want to spend loads of time with you if you feel like you have to', but I actually reaaaally like spending time with you!" and she literally started crying and she was like "Lucia you're the only one who likes to spend time with me" and I was like "Oh my god this is so sad!" because I think the others are neglecting her and not treating her that well and then there was me on top saying that. So I felt bad for that, and so some time after that I was thinking "I hope she's not still in a mood because she still doesn't understand why I said it but I don't know" she needs something to cheer her up... I think she has

actually said something to the dad and from that moment the dad has been nicer than usual... more thoughtful than usual so I think she's said something.

Although it took Lucia a few days to realise that there may have been a misunderstanding between them due to linguistic reasons, when they clarified what Lucia really meant, the situation improved quickly. Their exchange and Mamma's emotional reaction show how close and important their relationship was for both of them. However, Lucia's doubt about whether Mamma was "still in a mood" turned out to be correct as, one week later, Lucia asked me to have another catch-up call with very little notice. One of the reasons she wanted to talk to me was that she had finally managed to completely clarify the situation with Mamma and wanted to explain what had happened in the few days since our last call.

Lucia, Call, 14/07/2020

G- Is Mamma still moody or is she happy again? Have you understood what happened?

L- It's back to normal! Not quite... do you remember that I had said something that she hadn't understood well and so there was this problem, and she was a bit more...not sad, not angry but in the sense that she thought that I had judged their relationship, in the sense that she was really annoyed... I could tell when I said it that she wasn't happy with it, so I thought 'it has to be this', I couldn't think of anything else it could be and so there was an opportunity for me to say that I also am aware of the same situation with my parents, that my mum would say "oh me and your dad are going to this thing or the other, do you want to come with us?" and I'd say yes, and then some time after that I'd say to my mum "you know you invited me to that, are you sure you want me to come? is dad happy that you just invite me and I just say yes without thinking what you want, maybe you want to go together and I don't want to always be the third wheel, if you want to go alone...you haven't invited my brothers, I don't have to go" and my mum would be like "oh, yes, your dad is not bothered blablabla" and so basically there was the opportunity for me to say that I ask the same thing to my parents in this sense, it wasn't anything to do with them, it was just

a general question, and so I basically said this and I could tell straight away that she was much happier with the situation so it kind of was that, so now it's all normal, and it was also one of the reasons I wanted to ring you, we are finally fine!

Parallel to the linguistic miscommunications, Lucia realised that Mamma was upset also because she thought Lucia was judging her relationship with Babbo. This was due not only to the language differences but also to their different backgrounds and past experiences. Therefore, Lucia had to clarify the linguistic meaning of what she meant but she also had to explain where she was coming from with her questions, as they were based on the habits she developed with her own family. This was the biggest challenge in the relationship between Lucia and Mamma, and it seemed to lead to a slight detachment of the two towards the end of Lucia's stay, when they tried to give each other more space and more independence. This vignette exemplifies how pre-departure behaviours, beliefs and communicative approaches can have an impact on the relationships and experiences of the YA, just as much as language can. Furthermore, the misunderstandings between Lucia and Mamma also highlight the importance of looking at 'small cultures' rather than stereotypical cultural differences and going beyond the literal meaning of uttered words. The following two sections explore Lucia's personal and linguistic journey during the months she spent with her host family and the impact it had on her YA experience.

8.4 Lucia's Personal and Linguistic Journey

Moving in with the family was a key element of Lucia's YA and, despite all the ups and downs they experienced, Lucia's thoughts about living with her host family were very positive and she was very grateful about the opportunity she had to stay with them for so long:

"I'm just grateful for everything that they've done for me and that I've come so far in Italian because of them, [...] if I hadn't lived with them and been so involved in their lives and they hadn't said 'would you like to live with us?' [...] I wouldn't be where I am now and I have no idea who I'd be living with now and I'd probably be in England if I didn't live with them." (Lucia, Call, 15/05/2020)

Lucia was "so involved in their lives" that she was always invited to events and commitments, which made her feel welcome and part of the family. However, she

seemed to have mixed feelings about her position, as she explained: “sometimes I don’t mind being like ‘their adopted kid’ and then other times I’m like ‘I want my own life! where is my own life?’” (Lucia, Call, 7/04/2020). Lucia’s feeling of lack of independence is evident from her comment and is discussed throughout this section as one of the main affective challenges Lucia had to face. Lockdown was certainly a contributing factor to the increase of such a feeling but, even before the start of the pandemic, being invited – or rather “told that I’m going” (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020) – to regular and frequent events had its negative sides:

“There have been so many events that I’ve had to go to with the family that everything’s been... it’s either school or an event where I’ve had to be with loads of people that I don’t know that well so...everything is a bit full on, no break, no one I know really really well.” (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

By the end of January, Lucia seemed overwhelmed by the quick pace of her life with the family and her school commitments. On top of that, her final comment about not knowing anybody very well seemed to hint at a lack of friends, which was one of the factors she believed would make her YA unsuccessful (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019). An underlying loneliness seemed to emerge as well, and, as she continued talking about her host family, more affective challenges seemed to come to the surface:

“I know the family well but it’s not the same when you can’t speak your own language so I get on with them really well and I really like them, but it’s never the same as being with your actual family so...but no, it’s ...fine, it’s just ...yeah, I’m definitely going to get a car” (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

Despite knowing the family well, language was still seen as a barrier, hindering her interpersonal connections, and a feeling of homesickness seemed to seep through, accompanying the above-mentioned loneliness. Lucia’s reticence towards the end, may be an attempt at convincing herself to focus on getting a car, a means that she thought would allow her to regain some level of independence. Parallel to feeling lonely and trying to gain some control over her situation, Lucia was worried about her language level, as it seemed to limit her ability to express herself and it was contributing to her ‘feeling like a child’.

8.4.1 Feeling like a Child

After moving in with the host family Lucia felt she did not have enough independence or time for herself, as she was always at school, in the house or at

events with her host family. A further challenge to her situation was the language barrier because she did not feel able to have the kinds of conversations she would like to have. Over her YA in Italy, Lucia put a lot of time and effort into finding ways to practise her Italian: she enrolled on a language course in a city nearby, she used some language apps to talk to Italian speakers online, she had a few private lessons with different teachers before and after lockdown, and she practised with Mamma at home and later on also with me in our calls. All these efforts seemed in contrast with her thoughts in our first interview where she talked about her lack of love for languages and her belief that one could feel Italian even without speaking the language. However, after her first three months in Italy, she explained her situation with the following analogy:

“It’s sort of like being a baby but trapped in a regular body, in an adult body so like I have the brain of a child because I can’t talk enough so I only have conversations that a kid would have but actually I want to have better conversations if that makes sense... because my language skills are not good enough or a lot of the times I’d be in a group and there’s a lot more pressure to say stuff so I’d be more quiet.” (Lucia, call, 16/01/2020)

This inability to communicate as her adult self clashed with her desire to integrate within her Italian reality, and the pressure to talk with the adults she met at the various events only seemed to limit her attempts at expressing herself. Lucia considered herself shy and her tendency to stay within her comfort zone made her even shyer as she tried to avoid feeling embarrassed in public.

“I speak a lot with Mamma but I don’t speak a lot with a lot of other people just because I don’t always understand or I don’t want to have to make that effort to maybe embarrass myself, if you know what I mean, and I think most of the times I’d stay quiet to avoid being embarrassed, which is probably not a good thing but I think that’s probably the reason that maybe I’m a bit bored as well because I don’t talk enough.” (Lucia, call, 16/01/2020)

After the first few months in this child-like phase, Lucia was starting to feel bored, and likely frustrated about her forced silence. She practised her Italian with Mamma at home quite regularly but in our second interview in February Lucia complained: “it’s the language I really need to work on because at home they talk to me a lot in English because my Italian is so shocking” (Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020). Her efforts to practise her Italian, therefore, did not seem to be enough for her to notice an improvement in her language, yet it was not the only

reason why she felt like a child. The behaviours and attitudes that Mamma had towards her, made her feel younger than she was, both in the house and outside:

“Especially if there are events with the church or whatever... Mamma puts me next to her and then I’m with her for the whole evening and I feel about 5...because lots of the time I have no idea and she explains ‘oh this is what’s going to happen now..blablabla’ so a lot of the time I feel really young and almost...that makes me feel in the house sometimes like ...it’s just kind of an odd setup basically, that I feel really young but I’m not young.” (Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020)

Being 26, Lucia was used to feeling older amongst her peers at university, therefore Mamma’s motherly attitudes were unsettling for her. In the same interview, Lucia discussed how this ‘odd setup’ differed from the level of independence she had in the UK, where “I don’t have to rely on anyone because I have my own car, my own life blablabla, even though I live at home”. In our final interview, Lucia reflected on how her perceptions about this child-like stage changed over time, at first finding it “a bit funny for a while” but soon starting to feel bored and frustrated of being treated like a child: “I’m kind of bored of being a baby, not having any idea what’s going on, being looked after, being told things 50 times” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020). This ‘boredom’ and the fear of making mistakes, initially seemed to paralyse her, turning her into the ‘shyer version of herself’:

“I’m sick of being the shyer version of myself because I’m so shy in Italian because I’m always worried about slipping up but I can’t seem to get over it so I’m always in this shyer version of myself and I don’t like it so I like to speak English so that I can feel normal” (Lucia, Call, 7/04/2020)

Lucia’s desire to avoid embarrassment and ‘slip ups’ was stopping her from trying to communicate in Italian. In order to cope with the frustration of not being able to express herself in the foreign language, she took refuge in speaking English, where she could “feel normal”. During lockdown she started speaking more Italian in the house but even then, it sometimes became overwhelming and tiring for her to always speak Italian and she switched to English to release some of the language and social pressure:

“I’m like super shy in Italian so... sometimes I’ll get back to the house and she’ll say ‘how come you don’t speak to me in Italian?’ and I’m like ‘sometimes I want a break from Italian, where I can be just more relaxed’... in English I don’t have to think about what I’m saying so sometimes it’s nice to have a relaxed conversation. (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020)

When speaking Italian started to overwhelm and stress her, Lucia switched to English to relax, but this was not the only solution she developed in her YA. Another coping strategy Lucia adopted when she was surrounded by Italian conversations she did not understand was self-talk, silencing the outside world and turning inwards:

“Rather than being almost like a baby, where you're sitting at a table and you literally have no idea what's going on and then if you say ‘what's going on?’ and then not even understand the reply, you know, there's no point in asking, I may as well shut up [...] I suppose before I'd live in my head a lot, as in [...] there'd be a dinner or something and I'd be sitting at a table and I'd be listening to it for half an hour and then I'd kind of switch off after a certain...I'd be tired anyway and I'd switch off and almost have conversations in my own head about stuff that I was thinking or interested in, rather than carrying on listening to stuff where I just don't understand a thing.” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Having conversations in English or in her own head, soothed Lucia's frustration and allowed her to express herself and entertain herself mentally in the first part of her YA. However, by not being able to express herself with others, Lucia's feeling of loneliness increased, especially – but not only – during lockdown:

“[I'm] having to speak in Italian nearly all the time...but because it's not my language it's like...you don't get the nuances of the language so I can't have the same in-jokes that I'd have with English people and so I feel...I've tried to explain this to Mamma and she doesn't really get it...basically I feel like I'm always alone even if I'm not...so with never leaving the house it can almost feel like I'm almost in the house on my own, even if I'm surrounded by people...I don't know, it's just really hard going at the moment.” (Lucia, Call, 7/04/2020)

Having to stay in the house for more than two months with very limited exceptions was hard for most people around the world, but the language difficulties Lucia was experiencing at the time added a further challenge to her lockdown. Loneliness and homesickness bounced off each other, as Lucia often compared how close her family is compared to her host family, with whom she almost felt alone even in a full house. Banter and jokes were also particularly important for Lucia in the UK, yet she found them difficult to understand and use in Italian, with negative impacts on her interactions:

“A lot of the fun is in chatting with people and having funny conversations and without that sometimes I can feel like I'm denied of having fun so I want to do something that's fun, even if it's playing like a kid...so I don't know...I just feel it's kind of weird and I didn't

expect it so it's something like... learn how important it is to...be able to talk to people properly basically (Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020)

Lucia's idea that she could feel Italian and part of the community without knowing the language clearly changed over her months in Italy. To be "denied of having fun" is a strong statement but it encapsulates Lucia's frustration, and it was likely one of the reasons why she asked Mamma for some boardgames or jigsaws "because without that adult conversation or banter with someone, I want to fill that gap with some form of mental stimulation" (ibid.). This was one of the main steps that Lucia took in order to cope with and overcome her boredom and frustration, and which started her process of personal and linguistic 'growth', moving away from her child-like phase.

8.4.2 Growing Up

After Lucia had the idea of playing boardgames to find some mental stimulation outside of her studies, she bought a card game called 'Dobble' that could be played without the use of language, or with very basic words. During lockdown Mamma and Lucia got into the habit of playing it daily and once Lucia became used to the words on the cards "we decided to make our own version of the game where you can learn new words in English and Italian, and we spent ages making the card game every day" (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020). Tailoring the card game to suit her needs and her gradually improving level of Italian, helped to increase Lucia's confidence in her linguistic abilities, which resulted also in an increased overall self-confidence:

"The more things that we did together, the more relaxed I felt and so the more I would be up for suggesting things or be like 'who wants to go on a walk? who wants to do this? who wants to play a game?'" (Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020)

By feeling more at ease within the family and in her Italian skills, Lucia started to take some initiative, finding her voice and her role in the family. After an initial adjustment to her life in lockdown, Lucia became the member of the household who suggested activities and ideas out of the family routine. She was particularly proud of her idea of a Saturday pizza night, which became a lockdown tradition. Her ideas were important not only because they brought some variety into their lives but because they represented Lucia's voice, her growing agency, and her contribution to the family, marking her integration with them.

“When I first felt lonely and I was slightly upset about it, I ended up spending the whole week speaking to people on FaceTime from home and to be honest, that did actually solve it more or less for a week. And then I think I've just become so used to lockdown and more relaxed within the family that, over time, I've become more kind of confident within the family to say ‘Oh, can we do this?’ or ‘would you like to do this?’...rather than just being on my own and not actually saying... I put my voice forward and say... basically I'm the one who's pushed the pizza night every Saturday evening and I actually love doing it, and before I wouldn't push it I would just be “What's for tea on Saturday?”. Whereas now I'll be “we need to get the ingredients for Saturday otherwise we're not going to have any toppings”. (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020)

Although Lucia was still forced to stay in the house, she found a way to stop feeling as lonely as she was at the beginning. Instead of relying on her UK-based support systems, she became part of the family mechanism and she found “something that I can do in the house, that doesn't involve other people and that I'm entertained by” (ibid.), concluding that her passion for cooking would help her as “I don't feel so lonely if I've got biscuits to do” (ibid.). When I asked her what had made her decide to take action and start speaking up more, she explained her development using the analogy of the baby again:

“I think once you have a certain amount of building blocks of the language, you can start to build on them more. Whereas at the beginning, you don't have anything or it's a lot harder, you kind of remain in that baby stage, whereas once you get those initial building blocks it's like ‘okay let's go with it’ and it builds up pretty quickly.” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Lucia's improvement in the language appeared to happen almost abruptly at some point in May, when she started to speak to me in Italian for hours in our calls. However, it was a much more gradual process as she had already started to switch between English and Italian more often in our exchanges (see section 8.4.2.1). All of her ‘shy’ period had likely been a more passive, preparatory phase, in which she gathered more and more “building blocks” until she felt ready to actively put them into use. Lucia could not pin point the main reason why she started speaking in Italian more, saying “I don't know if it's to do with the language or just like spending a lot of time around lots of people that I don't know” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020) but her personal and linguistic development was evident by the end of lockdown. This further supports the importance of contextual forces actively contributing to the development of one's YA experiences.

8.4.2.1 Translanguaging and Swearwords

Lucia's move from only speaking English with the odd Italian word, to alternating the languages more frequently, and eventually speaking mostly Italian with the odd English word was a gradual process but the developments in her language use can be witnessed over time in our exchanges. A clear early example of translanguaging is in one of Lucia's buddy messages from the end of February, where she inserted some Italian words in one of her WhatsApp texts:

“[...] my family italiana got me a present which was waiting for me at breakfast! So so cute!!!! Italian recipe books! Can't go wrong 🙏🙏😄😄🙏😊... and then I didn't tell anyone at school but my Italian mum told my main teacher and so all the ragazzi sang to me at the beginning and end of the lesson ... so cute!!! Haha... and then abbiamo fatto un passeggiata.. me and Mamma nel pomeriggio... (Lucia, Buddy Message, 26/02/2020)

Writing in Italian was a first step in Lucia's increased use of the language, but it was also an activity that is generally more practised in the university context, compared to speaking. However, our spoken conversations started to increasingly alternate the two languages after the first weeks of lockdown, eventually being carried out almost completely in Italian towards May. Over time Lucia became so confident in her fluency that she also started to use swearwords:

“Perché in questo periodo io trascorro tutto il tempo da sola perché Mamma è di nuovo con la scuola e poi Babbo è di nuovo a lavoro e gli altri fanno i ca**i loro! capito per questo che non parlo più e un po' è un problema.” (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

*“Because in this period I spend all my time alone because Mamma is back at school and Babbo is back at work and the others mind their f*****g business! So it's because of this that I don't speak anymore and it's a bit of a problem.”* (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

Swearwords are something that most students abroad learn one way or the other, but in Lucia's case they also aligned with her desired Italian identity and her identity-related motivation. Similarly, Lucia also started using colloquialisms and regional vocabulary and, as mentioned in section 7.3.4, she was glad that she developed an accent and enjoyed it when her host family noticed it, even though they teased her about it and in some cases discouraged her use of the local non-standard pronunciation.

8.4.3 Feeling like Herself Again

Over the first seven or eight months of her YA, Lucia felt mostly shy and treated like a child rather than as the adult she was. After she started speaking in Italian

more and being less worried of making mistakes, she also started feeling like herself again and enjoying her life in Italy more. In our final interview, only a couple of weeks before the end of her YA, she explained her feelings about her desire to stay longer:

“I feel more like me, which is quite nice, I feel less of a child completely, and I suppose, to a certain extent... Sometimes I think that one of the reasons that I want to stay, is to do with the language in the sense that it's almost like I've had this whole year to progress, and it's almost as in 'it's been kind of a child, up to a certain point, and then it has been not enough adult' and it seems like 'Please give me more adult! I want to be able to have all the conversations that I wanted to have previously that I couldn't have' and almost because of the language you can build relationships quicker [...] like banter and stuff with the family [...] I don't want to go home, there's all this opportunity to have all of these relationships that I couldn't have before” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

The importance that language had for Lucia's experience is evident from this extract and shows her changed perspective about the role language has into making connections and building relationships. Although the turning point for Lucia's change of beliefs is not clear, seeing language as a means to building relationships and expressing her true self is clearly at odds with her initial thoughts about language, and it seems to suggest a relation between the YA experience and belief changes (see also Chapter 9). Her fluency in Italian seemed to grow parallel to her self-confidence and only towards the end of the summer did they start to go in different directions. The following section focuses on Lucia's change of perspective about the role of language in her YA and section 8.5 addresses the 'reverse journey' that took place in her final months in Italy.

8.4.4 Becoming Italian – A Change in Perspective

In our first interview Lucia had explained that she wanted to become Italian and feel like a local but being fluent in the language was not a requirement to reach those goals, as she had already experienced those feelings in her time in Perugia. However, in our final interview I mentioned what she had said and asked her if she still believed the same.

L- I think you become interested to a certain point when you get a certain amount of knowledge about the language [...]. I suppose now looking back when you're saying the language isn't that important, it's almost like... 'How did I even say that?' because it's kind of the opposite...

G - Yes, that's what I thought... it was very weird to hear a student of Italian saying 'Oh, I don't love languages, I love Italy'

L- Yes, I know...Now, I'd say that the two go hand in hand. You can't have one and not the other...just as if you learn Italian and you were completely fluent in Italian but knew nothing about Italy, that's also equally kind of weird. So if you know Italy really well but not the language it's like you're missing a huge part of the overall knowledge. (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Lucia's opinion had clearly changed from our first interview as she saw the knowledge of the language and that of the country as both necessary and almost intrinsically related. In the same conversation Lucia reflected on how speaking a different language can also impact on the way one thinks, seeing language and cultural identity as interconnected factors:

L- [...] you almost have to become Italian to be fluent in Italian...

G- 'Becoming Italian, to learn Italian' so...what comes before: becoming Italian or learning Italian, in your opinion? what is the first step? or do they happen at the same time?

L- It's almost like one and the same thing, so almost as if one comes with the other and you can't really have one without the other in a way, because even the language itself, the way that Italians speak it's partly the way that they act, almost like the language allows the culture to be the way it is... I said this to someone once but I don't know if they thought I was literally mad...I said English is often very long-winded and boring ...all this politeness... like a sentence that in Italian would literally be two words, something like "mangiamo?" or "do you think we should eat?" [...] In Italian it's very direct and easy, so I always think that in a way when you start to speak Italian your brain sort of switches and you become more Italian, because you think slightly differently in Italian... (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Therefore, for Lucia, not only the knowledge of the country and of the language are related but the latter is also closely related to one's cultural identity. Lucia's idea was based on her own experience as the more nuances she understood in Italian, the more integrated she felt, which also motivated her to keep learning. The following section presents the peak of Lucia's personal and linguistic journey and the start of its reverse process.

8.5 The Peak and the Fall – Lucia's Reverse Journey

Lucia had planned to spend the summer holidays in Italy already before the start of her YA, but at that point she did not know she would spend them with an Italian family. Italy lifted its lockdown in May 2020 and after the end of school in June, people were allowed to move more between regions and have some semblance

of normality for the summer months. The period between the end of June and August was a busy time for Lucia, her parents came to Italy twice and she went to stay with them on both occasions, and she also went on holiday with her host family. In the second trip with her parents, Lucia noticed that being in Italy but surrounded by people speaking English was “weird”:

“È la prima volta che mi sembrava che non sono italiana anche perché c'è stato un sacco di volte che i miei hanno parlato in inglese e poi anche le persone hanno parlato in inglese quindi è stato strano di essere in un posto dove quasi tutti parlano inglese, in senso gli italiani, quindi stranissimo, per questo era la prima volta che mi sentivo straniera [...] era difficile di essere tipo italiana” (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

“It's the first time it felt like I wasn't Italian, also because there were lots of times when my parents spoke English and then also the people spoke in English so it was weird to be in a place where almost everybody speaks English... meaning the Italians, so... very strange, for this reason it was the first time that I felt like a foreigner [...] it was hard to be kind of Italian” (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

Even on holiday Lucia wanted to be Italian, but because she was surrounded by people speaking English she felt like a foreigner. It is not clear if she felt like a foreigner because she felt more Italian than the people around her speaking in English, or because she felt English when she was with her parents and English speakers. However, it is interesting to see that by summer, Lucia felt so Italian and integrated in the community that hearing English felt “weird”. Conversely, when Lucia went on holiday with her host family and four other families (friends and relatives of the family), she was surrounded by Italians, with a few children who did not even know English. In that case a different picture seemed to emerge as Lucia explained:

“A me fa proprio fatica con i bambini, non so perché, ma quando è con adulti loro mi aiutano mentre con i bambini....anche perché qualche volta devo dire qualcosa che sono io adulta e questo switch dove invece di ...non so, io dico spesso “posso fare questo?” e in questo modo è me che sono i bambini un po', mentre con loro dico “scendi!” o qualcosa così che mi fa fatica perché non dico mai questo qua, “non fare questo”, e quindi dopo un giorno di questo è duro... ma è stato bello.” (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

“It's hard for me with the kids, I don't know why but when I'm with adults they help me, whereas with the kids... also because sometimes I have to say something because I am the adult and this switch where instead of... I don't know, I often say ‘can I do this?’ and in this way I am the child in a way, whereas with them I say “get down!” or something like that, that is hard because I never say this

“don’t do this”, so after a day of this it’s hard... but it was nice.” (Lucia, Call, 12/09/2020)

The new kind of interactions with children forced Lucia out of her comfort zone, not only because she had to step up and be ‘the adult’, but she also had to adjust linguistically, using the imperative form to give orders rather than asking polite questions as she was used to do. Although mentally tiring, the new linguistic challenges did not paralyse her as they had done in the past, and she adapted to them quickly.

“Io devo immediatamente parlare e rispondere e [...] non sono abituata per fare così e quindi anche per la lingua è stato molto interessante.” (Lucia, Call, 22/09/2020)

“I have to speak and answer immediately and [...] I’m not used to doing that and so also for the language it has been very interesting.” (Lucia, Call, 22/09/2020)

This proactive attitude is very different from the shy Lucia who avoided to speak for fear of slipping up and embarrassing herself. This also emerged from her accounts of a later ceremony she was invited to for the communion of Mamma’s niece and where she was put at the table with the kids rather than with the adults for lunchtime. In this case Lucia saw this as a cultural difference between the UK and Italy and, paradoxically, as an opportunity not to be treated like a child:

“In realtà ho preferito di fare così, non lo so, di solito sono sempre con gli adulti e sono sempre come un bambino che ...non lo so, è una cosa molto italiana secondo me che quando uno è grande ma non è grande grande, sei ancora una bambina...fa ridere questa cosa

G- Ma per l’età o la lingua?

L- Perché sono giovane e per me questo mi scoccia un po’ perché secondo me non è così in Inghilterra, è molto italiana questa cosa... è una cosa che non ho incontrato in Inghilterra” (Lucia, Call, 15/10/2020)

“Actually, I preferred it that way, I don’t know, usually I’m always with the adults and I’m always like a child that... I don’t know, it’s a very Italian thing I think, that when one is old [lit. “big”] but not old old, you are still a kid... it’s funny...”

G- But for the age or for the language?

L- Because I’m young and I find it a bit annoying because I don’t think it’s like this in England... it’s a very Italian thing that I haven’t encountered in England.” (Lucia, Call, 15/10/2020)

Despite her improved fluency Lucia was still considered younger than she felt and treated in a different way from what she was used to in the UK. Her language confidence allowed her to take this event as an opportunity not to feel like a child

surrounded by adults, as it often happened at the beginning of her YA. However, it is also worth noting that towards the end of her YA Lucia started to select her language according to the situation, opting to use English in order to establish her position in the conversation.

8.5.1 Regaining Control by Speaking English

A clear example in which Lucia purposefully chose to speak English was in her relationship with the daughter, with whom she had tried to make friends since she moved in with the family. According to Lucia, by speaking in English with her, she was able to feel more in control and more herself:

“Con la figlia va bene, ci ho parlato un po’ in inglese e secondo me qualche volta è meglio perché quando parlo in italiano mi sento più piccola e invece quando parlo inglese ho più... forse in generale, quando parlo italiano mi sento molto bambina, specialmente con la Mamma, perché per la lingua è più facile che parla con me come se fossi una bambina quindi forse è questo condizionamento della Mamma ha avuto un effetto che anche la figlia mi vede più piccola e quando parlo inglese mi sento più grande e quindi va meglio che mi sento più grande di lei, sembra più giusto perché in realtà sono molto più grande di lei quindi sì, quando parlo in inglese sembra che ho più controllo della situazione in generale e quindi penso che va meglio.” (Lucia, Call, 15/10/2020)

“With the daughter it’s going well, I spoke with her a bit in English and I think sometimes it’s better because when I speak in Italian I feel younger. Instead when I speak English I have more... maybe in general, when I speak Italian I feel very much like a child, especially with Mamma, because for the language it’s easier if she speaks with me as if I were a child, so maybe this conditioning of Mamma has had an effect so that also the daughter sees me as younger, and when I speak English I feel older and so it’s better that I feel older than her, it seems fairer as actually I am much older than her so yes, when I speak in English it seems like I have more control of the situation in general and so I think it’s going better.” (Lucia, Call, 15/10/2020)

The prolonged conditioning to feeling like a child when speaking Italian with Mamma seemed to have had a backlash on Lucia’s interactions with the daughter, therefore she decided to speak with her in English in order to avoid feeling like a child with her. This resonates with Lucia’s idea of a connection between one’s identity and the language used, in this case not from a cultural point of view but from an age and role perspective. Lucia’s use of English increased with the start of the academic year and her online lessons, but also because she spent more time alone at home whilst Mamma and the daughter

were at school and Babbo at work (as seen also in the extract with the swearword). At the same time, she noticed that she was not speaking Italian very often and her accuracy was worsening. She still felt mostly good about her Italian and her fluency but sometimes she noticed that, despite speaking quickly, she did not always express herself clearly:

“Sto andando benissimo in italiano in realtà, ho sentito qualcuno oggi in questa classe di business italiano ...è un po' cattivo ma lui sembrava una persona del primo anno quindi non so come sono gli altri... anche se in realtà in questo periodo parlo molto veloce ma a volte non mi sento che è giusto per niente, ho detto qualcosa molto velocemente ieri e la figlia ha detto “eh?!” nel senso che ‘questo non vuol dire niente anche se sto parlando molto velocemente’ quindi non sono molto brava io non so...” (Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020)

“I’m doing very well in Italian actually, I heard someone in this Italian business class... it’s a bit mean but he seemed like a first year so I don’t know how the others are... even though in reality, in this period I speak very fast but sometimes I don’t feel like it’s right at all, I said something very quickly yesterday and the daughter said ‘what?’, as in ‘this doesn’t mean anything even though I’m speaking very quickly’ so I’m not very good I don’t know...” (Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020)

Whether her Italian actually worsened or whether it simply stopped improving at the same rate as it did during lockdown is not clear. However, with fewer exchanges in Italian and having a lot to do for her university assignments, it seemed normal that her improvement rate may have slowed down compared to the peak of her learning curve, maybe reaching a plateau, as I discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Stricter national restrictions were applied again towards the end of October 2020 and, although it was not a lockdown, Lucia explained that schools went back online “so *Mamma and the daughter are at home, which is weird because it’s like lockdown*” (Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020). This lockdown-like period did not have the same positive effects for Lucia’s language improvement because everybody, including her, was busy. In addition, as she attended more of her lessons online, she started to notice she was enjoying listening to English speakers again:

“La lezione che ho è con un insegnante inglese e in realtà mi piace tantissimo perché è proprio facile, mi sono scordata di come è quando non devo pensare per niente e una cosa che proprio mi manca dell’Inghilterra e non pensavo mai [...] A questo punto mi sento abbastanza italiana e so che a qualche punto devo ritornare e quindi forse quando parla [the English teacher] penso che non sarebbe male, e mi piace stare qui ma mi rendo conto che ci sono delle cose che mi mancano...anche perché quando faccio qualcosa

all'università online che non mi piace, se è in italiano è difficile seguire e invece se è in inglese, anche se non mi piace, è più facile seguire" (Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020)

"The lesson I have is with an English teacher and I actually really like it because it's so easy, I had forgotten how it is when I don't have to think at all, it's one thing I really miss about England and I never thought I would [...] at this point I feel Italian enough and I know that at some point I have to go back so maybe when he speaks English I think that it wouldn't be bad, and I like to be here but I realise that there are some things I miss, also because when I do something at university that I don't like, if it's in Italian it's hard to follow, instead if it's in English, even if I don't like it, it's easier to follow." (Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020)

When she went on holiday with her parents, hearing people speak English seemed "weird", whereas towards the end of her YA she liked it and enjoyed not having to think about what she heard or what she had to say. This may be because she was starting to feel mentally tired and maybe homesick, especially considering she had spent almost 14 months in Italy, 10 of which consecutive; or maybe it was a way to psychologically prepare herself to leave Italy, by gradually distancing herself from the language. The inversion in her language use, moving from speaking Italian most of the time to a more frequent use of English and a less accurate Italian, would suggest a sort of reverse language journey. This may be based on a mixture of factors and will be discussed more in the next chapter.

The past two sections have explored Lucia's personal and linguistic journey from the beginning of her YA until its end, showing the changes in her perceptions and beliefs. The following sections will focus on three important elements that were part of Lucia's life over the course of her YA: religion, her experience of Italian courtship and her work at the school.

8.6 Religion

From our first exchanges Lucia had expressed her curiosity about religion and Italian traditions in that field. Despite not being actually religious, Lucia kept a rosary in her car, had the habit of collecting religious ornaments (e.g. pictures of the Virgin Mary to keep in her car) even before her YA, and she liked to visit Italian churches whenever she went to Italy on holiday. However, Lucia believed that "religion was slowly dying everywhere" (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019), therefore when she first started living with the host family, she was surprised to see that they were very religious. Because of her prior belief, she found the

family's religious habits unusual, and she wondered if all Italians were so devoted. The most representative example of the family's religiousness was Mamma's habit to say a prayer in the car on their way to school, especially when she was giving lifts to other pupils who lived near the family. When asked about the differences she had noticed in her life in Italy, compared to her expectations, Lucia could not think of anything particular, except religion.

“One of the big things that I didn't really appreciate that much and I sort of naively thought that it wasn't much of a thing...was religion! And I don't know if this is general or particular to certain areas, but I find it quite interesting that [...] quite a few people asked whether I am catholic, and the family that I live with, they are very religious and that was one of things that I did not expect.” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

Lucia's trips to Italy had prepared her for many of the cultural differences and habits she would encounter during her YA, but she had never experienced religion so closely in her host country. Not being a religious person, Lucia found it “interesting” that religion was so present in her day-to-day conversations, and when we met in Rome in November, it was one of the main topics we talked about. Although not religious myself, part of my family are firm believers, so I could relate to some of Lucia's experiences. However, her host family seemed to go beyond my family's level of religiousness, therefore I found myself having to balance my personal opinions and avoid imposing my ideas and potential prejudices on Lucia's views. I explained that it was not something I had experienced to that extent in my life in Italy, so I suggested she asked Mamma to see whether maybe it was a tradition in her family or in the area where they lived. Soon after returning from her trip to Rome, Lucia sent me a voice message explaining what Mamma had told her about her question on religion and its diffusion in Italy:

“Mamma told me that hardly anyone is religious, so we were right! She said that everyone is religious culturally as in Christmas and Easter and whatever and nearly everyone is baptised, but she said that at the school hardly any of the kids go to church and that hardly any of the teachers do really so...we were right that I managed to pick a family that was very religious! (Lucia, Voice Message, 22/11/2019)

Although Mamma confirmed what Lucia and I had hypothesised, the fact that her host family were very religious became an important element in Lucia's YA experience. She attended numerous events with the church community, was

invited to charity activities, and her social exposures were mainly with the group of people that attended the same church as her host family. From only being a personal interest, religion became an integral part of Lucia's life and routine in Italy, and with time she gradually became used to the family's habits, so much so that she explained:

"We usually take two other kids to school and usually Mamma does the prayer in the car with the other kids...and this morning those kids didn't come with us in the car and I was like 'Oh, you can do the prayer on your own if you want!' and she was like 'Oh, thanks!' and I'm not creeped out by it anymore so it's almost like 'when's the prayer happening?' or 'you can do the prayer now if you want', so I'm kind of used to it, I just think it's fine." (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

After a few months with the family, Lucia had started to adjust to her life with them and to their habits, including the religious ones. From being "creeped out" by the daily prayer in the car, she became the one asking for it. The reason behind this change may be less straight forward than just an adjustment to the family habits. One factor involved may be Lucia's identity-related motivation as, in order to feel more part of the family, she may have felt the need to also be part of, or at least show interest in, the religious aspects of the family's life. Another possible element contributing to Lucia's change may be her love for routines, that she mentioned on many occasions during lockdown. However, one particular factor that may be involved in her interest towards religion is her relationship with Mamma and her desire to please her. This seemed to emerge also from other experiences Lucia recounted, for example the time she went to church on her own:

"L- I went to church... [*laughs*]

G- You? On your own?

L- I know! I know! I get brownie points though! When I got home my Italian mum was like 'where have you been?' and I was like 'I went for an ice cream and then I went to church' and I can tell she enjoys the fact that I've been to the church." (Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020)

Lucia's attempts to please Mamma were regular throughout her stay with them: she cleaned the house, helped with the cooking, she got Mamma presents every now and then, and she took her side when Babbo and the daughter did not seem to treat her well. These actions and the extract above reiterate the closeness of their relationship and how it seemed to border co-dependence, as mentioned in previous sections. Towards the end of lockdown, I asked Lucia how she felt about

religion at that point, and she replied: “Yes, now it’s more normal, before it was very strange in my opinion but now I like it, it’s kind of welcoming” (Lucia, Call, 15/05/2020). The welcoming feeling Lucia mentioned, resonated with a later conversation we had where she explained her mixed feelings about the church and the religious aspects of her life with her Italian family:

“Actually I’m sorry that I feel like this about the church because...I don’t know, because in a way I like it and in another way I don’t, so it’s weird... I like the feeling of community, yes mainly this and I don’t know, I quite like rules, so some of the rules I like and I like traditional things so like doing certain things at certain times of the year, Easter and Christmas, even if I’m not religious they’re important to me so...I don’t know, I just like traditional things usually so... but when it gets a bit weird I don’t like it like the communion, or there’s this thing where you have to make a cross on your forehead, a cross somewhere else and a cross here [indicates the heart]... weird.” (Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020)

Her conflicting feelings (or cognitive dissonance) about the church seemed to reflect the contrast between her desire to become part of a community she liked, and the “weird” sides of the religious habits she experienced, which put a limit to her willingness to merge with the church community. The pervasiveness of religion in most aspects of her life was evident also in her social encounters, which were often related to religious events or charitable activities organised by the church. Lucia defined these events as “very eye-opening into their beliefs and how they operate as a family” (Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020) and led her to meet a variety of people, amongst whom she also found an admirer.

8.7 An Italian Admirer – ‘Flirty Guy’

In our second interview Lucia mentioned that one of Babbo’s friends, a member of the church group, had unexpectedly started to show some interest towards her:

“There’s this guy and when I first met him he came round to the house for dinner and I just thought nothing of it [...] to me he seemed quite old... I don’t know... maybe it’s because I’ve got younger brothers and I feel younger than I am... but I imagined he was kind of forty, which I think he might be and to me it’s quite obvious...he’s got grey hair! Do you know what I mean?!” (Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020)

Lucia was clearly not interested, especially due to the age difference, but communicating that to him was not easy for her, both because of the language and because of his perseverance. He invited her to different events, especially to his birthday party soon after they had met for the first time, he got Lucia a present

for her birthday, and over lockdown he sent her a few messages. Her slow and brief replies made him desist, at least for a while, but this unexpected interest had some effects also on Lucia's relationship with the family as she did not feel at ease talking to them about it at first:

"I find it a bit too persistent and I don't really know what to say and I don't want to tell my Italian family because they keep saying 'oh, because you're so interested in Italy and stuff we're going to get you married off', so I don't want to tell them because they'd be like 'oh, go go!' even if I'm not interested... they can be quite insistent."
(Lucia, Interview 2, 3/02/2020)

The admirer's insistence seemed to match the host family's in Lucia's opinion, but eventually she told Mamma about the situation. When lockdown was lifted, he started to contact her and invite her to a few events organised in the area, but Lucia declined or tried to attend with other people. The situation became more complex when a woman Lucia met at a dinner with Babbo started pushing the subject of 'boyfriends' and the unimportance of age difference in couples. Lucia started describing the event by saying: "I got lectured! I got a lecture on 'finding a boyfriend', why is it so Italian? why is anyone else's business?! I always get lectured but now I got lectured on the *flirty guy* thing!" (Lucia, Call, 14/07/2020). By having spent so long feeling like a child, 'being lectured' was not a novelty for Lucia, but the topic of the lecture seemed to trigger a chain effect in her. Soon after the 'lecture', she spoke with Mamma about it and found out that the 'lecturer' was the admirer's aunt, which helped them understand why she may have insisted so much, but left Lucia wondering whether it was a cultural tendency to address such personal topics so directly:

[...] we basically had a conversation in the car and I was like 'I don't know why there is this thing in Italy where people are allowed to talk about people's relationships or pressure people into going out with people...In England I've never ever been asked by anybody or pestered by people or pestered by my friends about going out with people. To me in England it's your business and no-one else's. And then she was 'Yeah, it's very Italian' and I was like 'In England it would be considered rude', 'Yes, in Italy it would be considered slightly rude but in the sense that no-one cares, and everyone does it anyway!' (Lucia, Call, 14/07/2020)

Lucia and Mamma's views may both be based on stereotypical and personal convictions and their conversation seemed to evolve into a gender-related discussion, in which Lucia addressed the topic more directly than she had ever dared to. Despite their different mindsets, Lucia managed to speak up for herself

and explain her point of view to Mamma, which reinforced her already-growing confidence:

[...] in the car I was ‘so how come *flirty guy* is single?!’ and she was ‘Lucia, this is not a very nice thing to say!’ and I was ‘the reason I’m saying it, is because for some reason it’s fine that *flirty guy* is single but it’s not fine that I’m single, how is it that I need to find someone when *flirty guy* is forty and hasn’t found anybody?’ and she was ‘ah, yeah, I see your point’ so I was ‘so basically it’s my choice and not other people’s choice’, and she was backing down [...] usually I’m kind of ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’ and don’t really say anything and then in the car I was ‘No, I’m finally saying my own thing because I’m sick of this’ [...] ‘I don’t mind *flirty guy* as a person, I would be happy to go for a coffee or for an ice-cream with him but just as friends’ and she was like ‘but with the language barrier and the fact that he likes you it’s probably not a good idea’ and I was like ‘Finally!’ (Lucia, Call, 14/07/2020)

Being able to express herself openly with Mamma and finally managing to explain her point of view was an important event for Lucia and marked the end of the lectures and discussions on the topic. The extract depicts a very different Lucia compared to the shy, child-like version of her who had trouble expressing herself. Her confidence and agency developed noticeably, and she managed to speak up for herself and find her voice. Despite not returning his interest, towards the end of her YA, Lucia accepted to go on a local trip with her admirer and a socially distanced group, partly to gather some information that may potentially be useful for her university assignments and partly to give Mamma some time for herself and show her that she could be independent. One last aspect of Lucia’s YA is her professional life and her experience teaching at the local school, which are the focus of the following section.

8.8 School

Lucia taught in a technical high school and assisted three teachers with different classes and approaches. Teaching was particularly difficult at the beginning as Lucia shortlisted the school to be her number one challenge in one of our exchanges in November 2019. She explained that she felt the pressure of being the only English-speaker and being expected to be omniscient:

“The hardest thing that I find is actually the school, I find it hard to be the only English person, so you’re always put under pressure to know everything about England, everything about English and the reality is that I don’t know everything.” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019)

Lucia defined the three teachers she helped as “horrendous” when moaning to Mamma, but she felt under pressure especially with one of them. This teacher carried out frequent “interrogazioni”, which are individual oral tests done in front of the rest of the class (similar to the idea of continuous assessment), and this is how Lucia described her lessons:

“She’ll ask me to prepare stuff and then I prepare it, she never uses any of it and then will ...you know this thing in Italy that you have the ‘interrogazione’, that doesn’t exist in England and I hate it because I feel like I’m interrogated every time I go into her lesson [...] I dread her lessons because I can basically be completely shown up and embarrassed in front of the whole class and they find it funny as well if they know something I don’t know...so...not a fan” (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

The pressure to know everything and the public embarrassment in front of the students made Lucia “dread” this teacher’s lessons and her ‘interrogazioni’, especially since Lucia described herself as being quite shy. However, because these lessons were so stressful for Lucia, she found the other two teachers’ lessons less of an issue:

“[The second teacher] hates teaching, she wishes she wasn’t a teacher, and she has two hours with the second year and I’m only in her lesson for the second half of the lesson, so the second hour, so by the time I arrive, the class is completely wild so I have no chance of controlling them, so I do the whole lesson and she just sits there or marks homework or does interrogations and then I do the rest of the class and so that never really goes ...I mean, I don’t mind doing it because at least I’m not put under pressure as in the other lesson, but it’s just a different type of pressure, to be able to control the whole class so...it’s ok, I don’t mind these lessons, it depends how wild they are... (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

Having to control “wild” students was less problematic than feeling interrogated by the first teacher, but it seemed to link to one of Lucia’s pre-departure worries for her YA about her students being “rough”. However, when I asked her about how she felt about her worry in hindsight, looking back at the lessons once school had finished, she explained:

“Thinking ‘oh, the kids are going to be rough, blablabla’ I think that went away pretty quickly, the feeling that the kids were going to be scary, because they definitely weren’t” (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

In this case, her worry did not turn into reality, and she did not have problems with the students, although she never really bonded with them. This seemed to be partly because of the few hours she taught them, partly due to the pandemic

interrupting face-to-face lessons, and maybe also because of the wider age gap she had with them compared to June. The third teacher Lucia described was her favourite, although it was not easy to prepare for her classes:

“I actually really like her but she doesn’t prepare anything for the lesson, she doesn’t care, I turn up to the lesson and she’s like ‘oh, what can we do today?’ and so her lesson can be very very easy, we’ll do the whole lesson from the textbook and we do translation from Italian into English and it’s like A2 level so it’s not that hard, or it can be like where she’ll say ‘Oh, I’m going to go and print loads of stuff, could you just read this passage?’ and this will be with the 19-year-olds and it will be a passage I’ve never seen before [...] so the fact that I’m never prepared in the sense that they never give me the work before the lessons so I’m always put on the spot in the lesson so... I like her but she never prepares anything.” (Lucia, Call, 25/01/2020)

In all three cases, Lucia had a different role and a different level of involvement in the lesson, but the common denominators were the feelings of ‘being put under pressure’ and not being able to prepare in advance. Furthermore, although Lucia was expected to speak only in English, the teachers used a mix of Italian and English, often speaking very fast in Italian. This actualised one of Lucia’s pre-departure worries as she was afraid she would be in situations where she could not understand what was being said. These uncomfortable feelings made classes stressful for Lucia, so when lockdown started and all lessons were moved online, Lucia eventually enjoyed them more. Towards the end of February 2020 schools were closed for a couple of weeks, and after going back for a few days, the national lockdown was announced and all teaching moved online. Initially Lucia described the online lessons as “a complete waste of time” (Lucia, Buddy Message, 23/03/2020) but she gradually started to appreciate them more and focused on the positive sides of being online:

“...lessons online are not scary in the same way in the sense that if I don’t know something and if I’m doing Google classroom, I can just look it up and it’s absolutely brilliant! [...] *now it’s really* relaxed, chilled... I think if I’d had to do lessons face-to-face I would have carried on feeling a bit tense every time I had a lesson in the sense that a lot of the time I’d be told to read things I have never seen before or talk about a topic that I’ve never... [*trails off*]” (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

Lessons became more relaxed once they moved online, and Lucia avoided being embarrassed in front of the students by keeping an online translation tool at hand whenever in class. The diminished pressure, together with the improvement of

her Italian, helped Lucia to understand more of what was being said in class and appreciate online teaching more. Despite missing seeing the students' faces, she explained:

“I grew to enjoy lessons online way more than the lessons in real life [...] because you can actually hear everybody's voice individually and not everyone talking over each other, you ended up picking up a lot more of how one person speaks rather than how do loads of kids speak over each other” (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

Her listening skills had been one of Lucia's biggest worries from the very beginning but the clarity of sound in online lessons not only helped her practise such skills, but it also allowed her to notice her progress. Therefore, with the move to online teaching, lessons became less scary and Lucia started to find them also more useful for herself:

“With the other teacher where it was always translated really well and clearly, I'd end up feeling like I'd had a few hours of lesson in Italian, just because she'd been speaking both languages for two hours or whatever, so I picked up a lot more doing the lessons online” (Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020)

Moving from feeling tense and under pressure and 'dreading' lessons, to finding them relaxed and helpful for her Italian was a gradual process but lockdown was certainly a key factor in it. Not only did lessons have to be moved online but Lucia also had to be in the house with her host family almost 24/7 for more than two months. Despite the clear impact lockdown had on this process, Lucia was not sure of the kind of relation between her improved Italian and her increased understanding in class:

“The lessons online *with the kids*, they are more boring but they seem better for my Italian but I don't know if that's just because the better I've got in the house the more I understand from the lessons or whether the actual lessons have helped me (Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020)

Whether her Italian improved thanks to the lessons online or to her increased practice in the house is not clear and very likely there was a certain degree of mutual influence of both factors. However, online lessons seemed to contribute to Lucia's confidence in her Italian abilities. The following section focuses in more detail on the all-encompassing impact the pandemic had on Lucia's YA.

8.9 The Impact of the Pandemic

As already seen in June's case, the outbreak of the pandemic abruptly and prematurely terminated the SA experience of most students who were abroad in

March 2020. By choosing to stay in Italy, Lucia provided unique insight into her experience of the Italian first lockdown, and she vividly described the uncertainty and the challenges of the days preceding its official announcement. At first the schools in Lucia's region were only closed for a short time, and it seemed to be a temporary precaution that would not last very long:

“We were off school for just over a week and then during that week it was kind of fun to be at home and fun not to have anything to do with school and it was like a bit of a joke... it felt like nothing was serious, everyone was still doing their normal stuff, no one wore masks and it was kind of like ‘oh, it’s not very serious’ [...] so over the first week that we were off school I didn’t think of going home at all and it was only when other people from uni would contact me and say like ‘how long is your school shut?’ and then they were like ‘oh I think I’m gonna go home because my school is gonna be shut for like two weeks but these two weeks are gonna be so boring’ and at the time I was thinking ‘if the schools are gonna be shut for two weeks, I’m not paying for the flights home for two weeks when I’m having a great time not being at school, for me it’s not boring at all!’ and then it was only when I knew that all of them had flown home and that lockdown was becoming serious... but then it was the case that like all changed overnight here where suddenly at one point there were red zones and then the whole country was a red zone! and so it was almost like overnight, it was scary and it almost felt like then I didn’t have a choice so...one minute I could potentially fly home and then the next one it was the case of like ‘you have to have a reason for leaving your region’ and then it felt like scary.” (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020)

Lucia's words likely resonate with the experiences of most SA students who found themselves in the middle of the outbreak of the pandemic whilst abroad. The uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen and the initial feeling of hope that the school closure would only be a temporary measure and the situation was ‘not very serious’ were certainly shared by many people at the beginning of March 2020. Similarly, when the situation began to appear more serious, it became scary and difficult for many and in many ways. Lucia's friends and classmates with whom she was in contact all eventually went back home but, despite the scary and uncertain situation, she did not want to go back home and delayed taking a decision. As discussed in Chapter 2, Italy was one of the most affected countries at the start of the pandemic and the government issued several changes in regulations in a very short period of time, making Lucia (and likely many other people) feel as if ‘all changed overnight’. When lockdown was confirmed, Lucia was scared and unsure of what to do, yet still not eager to go

back home, so she spoke with her family in the UK and her Italian hosts to seek advice.

“I never really had the full desire to go home and I spoke to my parents and my dad was like ‘well, we don’t think it will last that long, just stick it out, it will probably be three weeks’ [...] so it seemed like a bit of a waste of time to basically go from one quarantine to another [...] So uni sent me an email basically saying that I had to go home and I basically said to Mamma, and it had never really been spoken about before, it was just the case of like... life was just continuing and that’s how it felt, and then I basically said to Mamma ‘I’ve had this email from uni, what do you think?’ [...] and she was like ‘well, it’s completely up to you, you can try and find flights, or you can stay... you’re very welcome to stay’. So, that’s more or less how it happened.” (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020)

The risk of going from one lockdown to the other and Mamma’s offer to let her stay made Lucia’s decision easier, although the university guidance invited her to return to the UK. In the same exchange Lucia also added that “if I didn’t have them, I would have had to be at home by now so the fact that I’m continuing to learn from them because they said I could stay is like...ideal”. This is one of the main positive sides Lucia appreciated about the lockdown experience and she attributed to it some of the success of her YA:

“I think it’s been better for my YA to have the lockdown than not have it, so if I think if I had carried on as it was before [...] I wouldn’t have got closer to the family, at school it would have been very similar... *I don’t know what else*, it would have just been the same, whereas this way I got closer with the family [...] my Italian is a lot better and the things with the family are just a lot better and I think it will be longer lasting because of that, they even said that if there’s no uni in October, if I want I can stay for the whole year.” (Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020)

The extract shows how important her relationship with her host family was and how the pandemic actually helped her develop it further than it would have if she had continued to live her pre-Covid ‘normal’ life. By the time of this call, Lucia felt more confident in herself and her Italian, and the idea of being allowed to stay in Italy for another year made the uncertainty of the future turn from ‘scary’ to potentially very exciting. Lucia’s unique experience represents a silver lining in the negative atmosphere created by the global pandemic and further supports the key role played by the context in shaping and actively influencing one’s experiences (with both negative and positive results). Her linguistic progress and the closer relationship with her host family were two of the main positive effects that the lockdown had on Lucia’s experience, and she expressed her satisfaction

and gratitude about them in almost all of our exchanges during and after the lockdown. Her Italian identity also benefitted from the forced time in the house with her host family as it allowed her to get accustomed to the typical every-day phrases and be immersed in an Italian-speaking environment almost 24/7. Reflecting on how this impacted on her experience, Lucia explained:

“At school I would spend most of the day speaking English or at least all morning, so I don’t know if that taking away the English aspect altogether and putting my brain only in Italian, made me progress quicker... so I think if I’d stayed at school...maybe I would have been kind of saying... Italian but with an English brain.” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

Lucia’s motivation was always very driven by her desire to become a local and achieve her Italian identity and by summer 2020 she had fulfilled her dream. However, in her opinion the lockdown played a big part in her success and without it she may have risked feeling like an ‘Italian with an English brain’ instead of feeling fully Italian. The positive sides of the pandemic were definitely more prominent in my conversations with Lucia, but they were accompanied by some negative aspects as well.

The earlier sections in this chapter have repeatedly addressed Lucia’s increased sense of lack of independence and loneliness in the first half of the lockdown, and its restrictions and the national health and safety regulations had some more practical implications on her life and our interactions. Apart from not being able to see her students or the school staff in person, in the early day of the lockdown Lucia talked about its impact on her mental health saying that “it’s good for studying although staying sane is difficult when you can’t leave the house 😊😞😞😞😞😞😞😞” (Lucia, Buddy Message, 18/03/2020). Not being allowed to leave the house soon started to take its toll on Lucia’s well-being and contributed to her feeling of lack of independence. This also had an impact on our exchanges, as the Italian lockdown was very strict, and people were not supposed to leave their houses unless they had a serious reason and a written self-declaration about it. Nevertheless, Lucia did not manage to resist her confinement in the house and used to go for walks around the area to get some fresh air and talk to her family with some privacy. She also used these ‘illegal walks’ to speak with me as she did not feel at ease talking in the house:

“I was going to speak to you on the balcony but everyone is gonna hear everything you say and even though they’re always like ‘oh if

it's in English we don't understand anything' but [...] I just feel I can't say what I want with people listening to me...even if it's true but... so I came out" (Lucia, Call, 7/04/2020)

This lack of privacy and personal space was widely shared during lockdown and most of those living in a household with multiple people have likely experienced Lucia's frustration. This more limited availability of opportunities Lucia had to speak with me, paradoxically contributed to making our exchanges more frequent during lockdown as they gave Lucia a reason to leave the house. However, her walks were not always well-seen by her host parents and Lucia had to reach some compromises with them about leaving the house:

"They are just like really paranoid about me going out...I feel like they just don't like people going out really so I kind of like break the rules and go out, that's the main thing...so it' like the case of 'ok, you can go out but don't go out for very long'...I don't like having strict rules" (Lucia, Call, 7/04/2020)

Despite Lucia's dislike for strict rules, the circumstances made them more relevant, and she had to find some agreements with her host family. Like many other people in the world, they got into the habit of wearing masks everywhere in the rare occasions they left the house (mostly for food shopping), they disinfected the groceries as soon as they got home and limited the walks to short and not overly frequent ones. On the other hand, her 'real' family found some of Lucia's habits too strict compared to the regulations in the UK and Lucia explained that "I don't think it, but my mum thinks that I've become a sort of coronavirus rule Nazi" (Lucia, Call, 5/05/2020). Therefore, even though she went on some 'illegal walks' Lucia abided by the rules and followed the family's habits and decisions, reinforcing Lucia's Italian identity and sense of belonging. The pandemic affected everybody's lives but the way in which it seemed to (mostly) positively impact on Lucia's experience is unique and its implications are discussed in Chapter 9, also critically comparing it to June's experience and the limited research currently available on the matter. Before moving to that, a final section addresses Lucia's idea of success and what made her YA successful.

8.10 What Makes the YA Successful?

Most of the factors involved in Lucia's perceived success have been already discussed in the chapter and, similarly to June's case, Lucia's idea of success was based on her objectives – both those she had before and those that developed during her YA. Her pre-departure objectives were "to become fluent,

to become a local, to visit lots of places and to make friends” (Lucia, Questionnaire, 18/09/2019) and in our final interview she confirmed she had achieved them, but she refers the fourth more to her friendship with the family. When I asked her what were the factors that made her believe her YA was successful, she replied:

“Definitely the language, and then I'd say my relationship with the family, to a certain extent, because I think it would have been completely different if I had just made friends my own age. Even though there would be complete positives to that as well if I'd like got a huge group of people my own age, but to have a family actually feels like I have another family, so it's kind of cute [...] you never get the same experience with friends as you do with the family so like all the things that I've learned to do with... all the things I'm interested in... So like food, all that kind of stuff... that comes from the family, it doesn't come from friends. So that's like a huge plus, like having gone on holiday with them...and you get to know all like the habits of Italians in general and I know that it's a stereotype that everybody is the same because it's not the same in England either, but like, I don't know, just that insight that you don't get, if you are with friends.” (Lucia, Interview 3, 12/11/2020)

During her YA and especially after the lockdown was lifted, Lucia had met other young adults of a similar age to hers, but she always seemed to prefer spending time with her host family. The importance she gives to her close relationship with them confirms the key role they played in making her YA successful. However, the fact that she initially lived alone and only later met Mamma, confirms the unpredictability of experiences abroad, as well as the impact the environment has on the individual's perceptions of them. Although Lucia acknowledges that different circumstances may have led to a positive experience, she reiterates her belief that living with the host family made her YA more successful for her as it gave her “insight that you don't get, if you are with friends”. Living with a family and seeing their daily routines also aligned more closely with her desire to feel like a local and become “more knowledgeable about the average Italian” (Lucia, Voice Message, 15/11/2019). The extract also shows a development in Lucia's awareness about generalisations and stereotypes, although this may be limited to certain aspects of life as she still made some other essentialist references in the same conversation. Lucia perceived her YA experience to be a success and over her months in Italy she managed to fulfil her objectives, but she also stated that if she had gone home before lockdown she “wouldn't have known anything! I think it was almost during lockdown... at some point it changed” (Lucia, Interview

3, 12/11/2020). This not only shows the positive impact that something so inherently negative as the pandemic had on Lucia's YA, but it also suggests that the length and conditions of a SA experience may have an impact on the sojourners' perceptions about its success.

8.11 Case Summary

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 presented Lucia's case, starting with her pre-departure experiences and mindset (RQ1a), setting the scene for her YA in Italy. I then introduced her social and professional life, her personal journey from 'feeling like a child' to feeling like her adult self again, and her linguistic journey towards becoming fluent and feeling Italian. Some of her beliefs showed clear changes over her 14 months in Italy and others remained closer to her initial ideas. An example of the former is her belief about the (un)importance of knowing a language in order to feel like a local, which noticeably changed after lockdown. Other more essentialist beliefs seemed to remain unchanged or to have a less homogenous development, but this may be due to the circumstances in which they were triggered or to their being more deeply rooted in Lucia's cognition. An example of this was her belief on the 'Italian' bluntness and intrusive attitudes around romantic relationships, which seemed still strong at the end of her stay, despite some increased awareness on determinism and generalisations on other less personal topics (as seen in the previous section).

The main challenges for Lucia were often linked to her initially limited proficiency and her feeling of not being able to express herself, which led to her feeling lonely, homesick, treated like a child and lacking independence or time for herself (RQ2). Her initial coping mechanisms were to isolate and remain silent, soothing herself by self-talking in her mind or calling their friends and family in the UK or even me. However, with time and driven by her strong identity-related motivation, Lucia managed to find her voice, and develop her agency, self-confidence and proficiency. This was a gradual process, involving the use of games or manual activities that required limited or no language, slowly decreasing her co-dependence with Mamma, and starting to allow her to talk through issues to solve misunderstandings and find compromises. Similar strategies were also applied at different times and with different purposes and outcomes, for example Lucia's use of English, which initially helped her to feel less overwhelmed because she did not speak Italian well enough, and later was purposefully used to project her

desired identity with the daughter. Speaking English therefore became a tool rather than a necessity, and although it is not clear what led to the changes in beliefs and coping strategies, a gradual self-development seemed to take place and the context seemed to play an important role in Lucia's YA. Her host family, lockdown, her lessons, their holidays and her parents' visits, were some of the external factors that impacted on (and were impacted by) Lucia's experiences. Overall, the multiple coping strategies implemented and the mutual interactions between internal and external factors, seemed to help Lucia achieve her objectives and have a successful YA (RQ4), even despite the pandemic.

The following chapter discusses the significance of my findings and their theoretical implications. It situates my research within the broader SA scholarship and suggests new possible developments within and beyond this field, proposing a model to better understand intercultural experiences.

Chapter 9 Discussion

The present discussion moves beyond my findings to provide new theoretical and practical avenues for research inside and outside the SA field. I focus on two core themes that will usher the reader towards my answers to the research questions that guided this study, and which are addressed more specifically in the following chapter. Firstly, I present my re-conceptualisation of ‘culture shock’, critically discussing some of the limitations of previous conceptualisations of the topic and providing a new model to better describe the process of acculturation. I then focus on the contextual elements of my research and contend that context has an active, agentic role in SA experiences, supporting recent developments in the field (Cots et al., 2021). A more comprehensive list of the themes identified in my analysis is provided in the thematic maps in Appendix N.

9.1 A Re-Conceptualisation of ‘Culture Shock’

SA experiences have often been associated with U- or W-curve models representing the phases of the students’ stays and their ups and downs. These generally included an initial elation, a stage of distress and discomfort, followed by a final stage of adaptation to the host culture, plus the re-entry shock and re-adaptation in the W-curve model (Adler, 1975; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1995). However, more conceptualisations and representations of these ‘culture shock’ phases have been suggested in view of the critique to the U- and W-curve models (Kim, 2012; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Ward et al., 1998; Ward et al., 2001) and I have discussed my standpoint in relation to these and to the terminology in section 3.3.3. There I have explained my move from ‘culture shock’ to ‘the process of acculturation’ and ‘intercultural adaptation’, and my liquid approach to the concept (Dervin, 2011). Although I did not directly mention or address the idea of ‘culture shock’ or acculturation in my exchanges with June and Lucia, the experiences they reported seemed to show a pattern in their acculturation journey.

The existing model that appeared to resemble my participants’ experiences more closely was Murphy-Lejeune’s (2002) wave-like pattern. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the author states that “(t)he ups and downs are a function of outside events or incidents and demonstrate the fluctuation, the ebb and flow between strangeness and familiarity” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p. 134). This definition acknowledges the

impact that external, contextual factors can have on one's SA experience and I discuss and bring this forward in the second part of this chapter. Furthermore, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) also believes that previous experiences abroad can reduce the initial period of elation, making personal, internal(ised) factors part of the forces at play in the acculturation (or 'discovery') process. In particular, she suggests the possibility of a negative correlation between one's 'mobility capital' (i.e. experience of foreignness and adaptation, and the diversity, duration and number of previous stays abroad) and the perception of an initial phase of euphoria. She explains that the more mobility capital one has, the less likely one would be to experience feelings of elation at the start of one's stay as proposed in traditional models. Although this may be a helpful relation to take into account, also including past experiences, I would refrain from applying such a fixed correlation to all SA and YA stays, even if limited to the European context as in Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) case. I argue that the above-mentioned 'mobility capital' as defined in Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) study, includes only some of the several factors involved in the perception of one's initial SA period. I suggest that a more beneficial lens for SA research would be to use cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and a liquid (Dervin, 2011), small-cultures approach (Holliday, 1999) to better understand 'culture shock' or the acculturation process – as well as considering the context as an agent (see section 9.4). The concept of cognitive dissonance refers to the psychological discomfort created by the clash between one's cognition and one's behaviour or environment, as explained in section 3.3.4, and is discussed in reference to my re-conceptualised model of 'culture shock' in section 9.2. As noted by Mitchell and Paras (2018), cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) has rarely been applied to SA research and, in fact, I did not consider it for my research until later in my analysis. The only exception I found in the literature was a study by Difruscio and Rennick (2013), yet the authors applied the theory to a traditional conceptualisation of 'culture shock', from which I tried to move away. Cognitive dissonance theory and its framework seemed to lead to a deeper understanding of my findings, and its application to SA research may provide a new and helpful perspective on the acculturation process.

Going back to Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) definition of her wave-like model, I contend that it is the unique interaction between the specific contextual elements

and the individual, internal factors (forming one's cognition) that determines what feels 'strange' or 'familiar' – or in other words, dissonant or not – in each individual SA experience. Furthermore, the wave image did not seem to be fully representative of the nuances of my participants' SA journeys; therefore, I propose a new imagery to better fit those and my re-conceptualisation of the process of acculturation.

9.2 The Wonky Steps Model of Acculturation

Rather than a series of waves, I argue that the process of acculturation may be more similar to a staircase with 'wonky' steps. Before I explain the reason for such 'wonkiness', I would like to clarify my main critique of the wave-like model: its semi-constant baseline. To help the readers understand my thought process on this matter, Figure 4 and Figure 5 provide some simple graphic representations of the wave model and my staircase one.

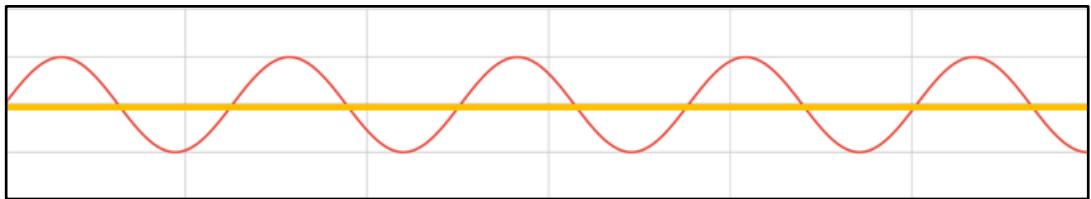


Figure 4 – Wave-like Model Based on Murphy-Lejeune's (2002) Study of Student Mobility in Europe.

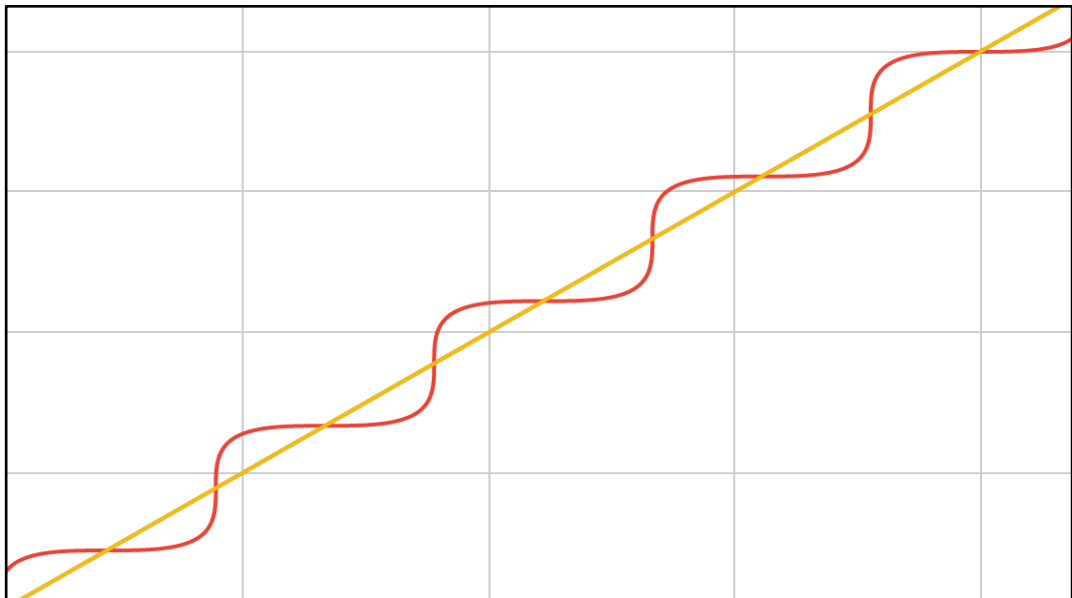


Figure 5 – My Re-Conceptualised Staircase Model of the Acculturation Process.

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) did not provide specific graphic representations of her model, therefore, Figure 4 depicts a general wave-like curve for ease of understanding. Visualising the wave pattern is important to follow my argument as Murphy-Lejeune (2002) did not specify what the wave baseline (the yellow line in the graphs) represented in her model, yet it has some conceptual implications. Indeed, if the ebb and flow of the waves depict the ups and downs in the students' journey – "between strangeness and familiarity" (ibid., p. 134) –, it could be argued that the baseline would likely stand for their comfort zone, a state of absence (or limited presence) of cognitive dissonance, or the participants' perceived adaptation to the host culture. The wave idea suggests that – albeit with higher and lower tides – the baseline is generally at the same level from the arrival in the SA destination to the return home. This did not seem to be the case for my participants, nor for Murphy-Lejeune's (2002), who appeared to demonstrate a gradually increasing level of adaptation over their months abroad. Their accounts, and those of numerous SA students in other studies (e.g. Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016; Pedersen et al., 2021; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Trenchs-Parera & Juan-Garau, 2014), report experiencing personal growth and increased confidence over their stays, which seemed to develop in parallel to their feelings of adaptation. Therefore, although the wave-like pattern is more apt than the U- or W-curve models to represent the process of acculturation, it is still too static compared to the dynamic and evolving nature of intercultural adaptation. For this reason, I propose an inclined baseline, transforming the waves into a set of steps, steeper or less steep depending on how each student perceives their own unique SA experience. I chose the metaphor of a staircase rather than an escalator because of the students' intentionality to work through their challenges, which makes the effortless and linearity of an escalator deceiving and not representative. It should also be noted that the graphs presented in Figure 4 and Figure 5 are only ideal, approximate illustrations of the process of acculturation, which is not linear nor neat and precise as computer-designed graphs, hence the wonkiness of the steps in my model.

From my epistemological standpoint, one's reality is based on one's perception of it, which makes every SA 'staircase' different and unique. To discuss the nature of the acculturation process from this perspective it is helpful to look at the height and width of the steps (represented in Figure 6) and their implications.

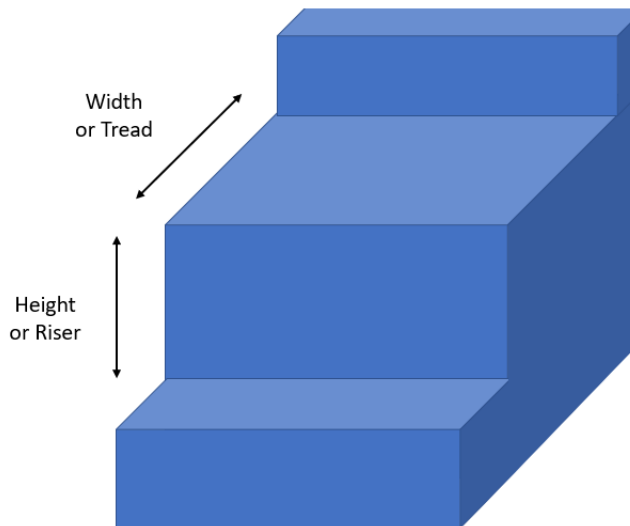


Figure 6 – Height and Width of the 'Wonky Steps'

9.2.1 Height

The height of the steps, or 'riser' in step-related terms, could be compared to the degree of cognitive dissonance perceived by the individual. The stronger the dissonance, the higher the step and the bigger the challenge to face. According to cognitive dissonance theory, every individual perceives reality and its dissonances in a personal way, depending on the context of origin and destination and on one's beliefs and cognitive systems (Festinger, 1957). When dissonance is perceived, the automatic psychological response is to reduce it and return to a state of consonance. The magnitude of the dissonance perceived is subjective and based on a number of factors, but scholars generally agree that "(t)he greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 3).

The significance of this dimension of the acculturation steps is that sojourners faced with challenges will feel compelled to put in place coping strategies to help reduce their cognitive dissonance. This may seem obvious, yet the focus on coping strategies has been very limited in SA research and more attention to them has been recently recommended (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Therefore, my research contributes to expanding our understanding of this under-researched aspect of SA and cognitive dissonance theory application. Furthermore, Maertz et al. (2009) posit that different response mechanisms to dissonance may lead to different levels of intercultural competence. Therefore, it is arguable that some

coping strategies may be more beneficial than others for one's acculturation journey, as suggested also by Mitchell and Paras (2018). Based on the range of coping strategies used by June and Lucia during their months in Italy, I would argue that different coping mechanisms may help sojourners at different times in their time abroad. Nonetheless, the same strategy may not have the same effects if used by different individuals or in different environments and situations.

9.2.1.1 Coping Strategies and Their Cognitive Dissonance

Conceptualisation

June and Lucia implemented a range of coping mechanisms over their time in Italy and they seemed to adapt their choice of strategy to the context and to the level of cognitive dissonance they were experiencing at that particular time. Some examples of these were already reported in SA literature (see section 3.4.2), such as: isolating and retreating in oneself (Kinging, 2008), avoiding or selecting certain situations (Pellegrino Aveni, 2006), calling and seeking support from family and friends (Hannigan, 1997; Tanaka et al., 1997) as well as using one's more familiar language(s), and self-talk (De Guerrero, 2018). Isolation and avoidance seemed to be implemented when the dissonance perceived felt paralysing and the use of these mechanisms may be related to limited previous experiences abroad or of a specific situation. These two coping strategies were particularly frequent for Lucia in her first months in Italy as she tended to stay quiet and keep to herself, trying to avoid making mistakes and being overwhelmed by the linguistic barrier. June acknowledged that these were her typical instinctive responses to stress (or dissonance) as well, but she had implemented them in her SA in France and decided to try and force herself to get out of her comfort zone more often during her time in Italy. This conscious effort supports the distinction between instinctual responses and coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and shows the development of coping strategies and their adaptability, reiterating the importance of more consistent investigation of prior experiences and beliefs in SA research.

Another coping strategy that both participants used throughout their months in Italy and that showed clear developments over time was self-talk. Using Maertz et al.'s (2009) terminology for dissonance-reducing methods (see section 3.3.4), self-talk could be included within the 'self-affirmation' method. This was particularly noticeable in June's self-soothing and self-reassuring thoughts, also

based on her acknowledged pre-departure objective to be kind to herself. Lucia's self-talk was not always positive, but it was consistent with her self-beliefs, and therefore it still re-established some degree of cognitive consonance. Further supporting the context-dependency and adaptability of coping strategies, Lucia's self-talk developed over the course of her YA. When her confidence and linguistic competence increased, her self-talk mirrored her progress and became more self-affirming, acknowledging her improved proficiency and also using Italian more frequently. Lucia's use of Italian is particularly interesting not only because research on self-talk has traditionally had a monolingual focus but also because it has been suggested that the use of L2 in self-talk may be connected to increased language proficiency (De Guerrero, 2018). Therefore, more attention to this 'self-affirmation' strategy may benefit this area of SLA and SA research.

Lucia also implemented what Maertz et al. (2009) defined as 'host values/beliefs/attitudes/norms rejection' methods, for example in relation to the (allegedly) typically Italian habit of asking about personal romantic relationships. In that situation, choosing to distance herself from that custom and increasing the importance of the (allegedly) less inquisitive UK manners helped Lucia reduce her perceived cognitive dissonance. This may be relevant for future research as rejection methods have been connected with lower identification with the host nationals and may lead to increased numbers of dissonance-inducing experiences (Maertz et al., 2009). Although I cannot confirm or refute such hypotheses, Lucia's ongoing desire to become Italian and to feel like a local seemed to suggest a relativity of the former proposition, and therefore the effects of rejection methods may depend on one's overall cognitive system rather than specific coping strategies used. Furthermore, the conversation she had on the topic with Mamma actually seemed to strengthen her confidence in herself and in her ability to express her opinions, which may not necessarily have contributed to increased numbers of dissonant events. However, this exchange took place in mid-July and, soon after that, the overall circumstances changed due to the return to work and school for the host family, the start of Lucia's lectures online and the possibility of another lockdown; therefore, it is hard to gauge the connection between that conversation and later experiences of dissonance. More attention to the different coping strategies would certainly benefit this under-researched aspect of SA (Mitchell & Paras, 2018), but in Lucia's case, by rejecting the host

attitudes in this specific context, she gained confidence and managed to let her voice be heard. From a broader perspective, whether this represented a step up or a step down on her acculturation journey would depend on Lucia's idea of acculturation and what her objectives were, as I discuss in section 9.3.2.

The context-dependency, mutability and individuality of the choice and effects of coping strategies presented in this section make them less generalisable and eschew a one-size-fits-all approach. However, increasing awareness about the possible mechanisms one may implement to face dissonance could help sojourners develop a wider 'coping strategies toolkit' before their stay abroad. This may have implications for educators, institutions and future SA students, as it may provide helpful guidance for pre-departure courses.

Height is an important aspect of the staircase model, but it is not the only one to consider. In some cases, indeed, the dissonance may be too strong – or the step too high. This forces sojourners to remain on the same step for longer, until they find a way to reduce the dissonance, which leads me to the discussion of the dimension of width of the acculturation steps.

9.2.2 Width

The width, or the tread, of the steps is the flat part on which one steps, and its temporal connotations are to be understood as relative. This means that the time spent on the same step by an individual may not coincide with actual time, but it is rather a personal perception of it. For example, the months of lockdown experienced by Lucia (and many people would likely agree) made her lose track of time and at times they seemed never-ending, whilst at the end they seemed to have flown by. Similarly, although my research has focused on a specific timeframe (the YA), the acculturation journey does not start when the sojourners arrive in the host country, and it does not finish when they leave. It is a continuous process, which may start at different points in life, it may slow down or stop on a wider step at different stages depending on internal and external circumstances, but it may also potentially never end till the end of the individual's life. Up until there is cognitive dissonance related to different cultures, countries, values and behaviours, there are steps to take on one's acculturation staircase. Time in this model is therefore seen as relative and context-dependent, as discussed in more detail in section 9.3 also in relation to the impact of hindsight.

Regardless of the actual time, the wider the step, the longer it feels to reach the next one. The perceived permanence on the same step represents the experiencing of a similar situation or similar level of dissonance. These may be times of consolidation and settlement after a step up in the individual's acculturation journey and may be accompanied by limited cognitive dissonance. However, wider steps (which may also resemble landings in some cases) may be perceived as a time of paralysis and lack of growth or progress, in which the individual may feel stuck. This period can be compared to a 'plateau' phase, widely researched in language learning and which refers to a perceived temporary lack of linguistic progress (Richards, 2008). This also resonates with one of Lucia's analogies comparing her linguistic progress to building blocks and emphasising the need to reach a certain number of blocks before one can move forward (see section 8.4.2). Despite its specific language focus, the concept of plateau is still relevant to my model as SLA is an important aspect of SA experiences and students' objectives. Research has provided examples of plateaux in both SA students and control groups in the home country, with SA students – on average – managing to overcome their plateau more than their counterparts in the home institutions (Vande Berg, 2009). However, Vande Berg (2009, p. 19) warns that "being exposed to a rich learning environment is for many study-abroad participants a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for improving beyond the proficiency plateau". Therefore, due to the multiplicity of factors involved in their learning process – from a linguistic point of view – learners may not always overcome their plateau phase simply because they are abroad. Because my model reflects my holistic perspective on the SA experience, it is not limited to the linguistic side of it. To better understand this, it may be helpful to imagine the line depicting the steps in the model as representing an average of a number of lines involved in the acculturation process – not limited to one's linguistic progress. These lines may be conceptualised as macro areas of one's experience (e.g. linguistic, personal, professional, social aspects) or, looking at the micro level, each line could be seen as a sequence of dots, representing single events or more specific aspects of the macro areas (e.g. fluency, accuracy, specific relationships, perception of the workload, dinner table interactions). Each aspect of one's experience is represented by a different line (or dot) and, based on one's perception of the evolution of such aspects, the lines may or may not follow the same path over time (in fact, they rarely do). Therefore,

the line in the graph in Figure 5 is only rounding up holistically and approximately a combination of lines, or dots, of different aspects of life, which may not coincide. Lucia's experiences after summer 2020 provide a good example of this complexity. By the end of August, Lucia felt like a local and was well-integrated within the family, feeling confident in her interactions with both family members and family friends, and finally feeling more like herself. These personal and social aspects of her experience could be imagined as easy steps or a wider step (or a landing), on which Lucia could enjoy her achievements and consolidate her progress. On the other hand, around the same time she started noticing that, despite her increased fluency, her accuracy seemed to be worsening. Based on Lucia's accounts and perceptions, her linguistic progress seemed to have halted, if not regressed, which could be represented by a wider step, maybe inclined downwards, or even some downstairs steps depicting a descent in her linguistic journey. The bi-directionality of the Staircase Model allows to represent and visualise the fluctuation and mutability in the array of factors involved in every individual's experiences. For example, it is not uncommon in language learning to witness ups and downs in fluency, accuracy or motivation, and it did not come as a surprise in Lucia's case, especially given the fewer interactions in Italian she had after summer ended. However, by seeing Lucia as a 'whole person', and looking at her experience holistically, the average line in her steps at the end of summer would likely still be somewhat similar to Figure 5.

Because of the multiplicity of factors involved in one's experience and based on the dynamism in my participants' accounts (even during lockdown), I contend that these wider steps do not represent a period of immobility, even though the individual may feel stuck and on a plateau. In these situations, the lack of progress and increased width of the step may be a consequence of stronger cognitive dissonance, which could make the following step seem too high to reach. If the perceived height of the step ahead seems unsurmountable, the individual's usual coping strategies may not work as they did with previous weaker cognitive dissonances (or smaller steps). This may be paralysing initially but the psychological need to reduce dissonance does not stop until consonance is achieved again (Festinger, 1957). During these periods in between steps, individuals may require extra time to develop new coping strategies or adjust known ones, as mentioned in the previous section on the developmental nature

of coping mechanisms. They may also feel frustrated as they experience cognitive dissonance related to their current reality: they are not exactly the same as they were when they climbed up on their current step (otherwise they would not experience cognitive dissonance) yet they are not fully ready for their next one.

When sojourners reduce their cognitive dissonance enough to step up the staircase, at the same time they re-define and adjust their cognition and/or their behaviours. As explained in Chapter 3, I conceptualise identity as partly defined by one's beliefs about oneself, and I understand beliefs to be interconnected with and mutually influenced by behaviours, attitudes and emotions. This also implies that by adjusting one's cognition in order to step up the acculturation staircase, sojourners may also re-define their identity (to a more or less noticeable extent). However, when they reach the next step in their re-defined Self, new interactions with the environment and new cognitive dissonance lead to the need to adjust again, in an iterative re-negotiation of the Self at each step. Therefore, throughout their experience abroad sojourners are continuously re-defining themselves in their environment, moving from one Self to the next in what could be compared to a hybrid or 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994).

9.2.2.1 The Space Between the Steps

As introduced in section 3.3.3.2, the concept of Third Space allows to move beyond the conceptualisation of 'cultures' or 'self' as bounded and categorical systems, seeing them as more permeable constructs. Despite the apparent move away from essentialism though, the very concept of thirdness implies the existence of two separate systems (e.g. the coloniser and the colonised, the host and home community) between which there is a Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), or 'third culture' (Kramsch, 2009), where their boundaries 'blur'. Although Holliday (2011, p. 165) acknowledges that the concepts of Third Space and hybridity have "massive potential for theorizing cultural creativity", he also criticises their neo-essentialist implications. He argues that "[o]ne does not have to be in-between. People have the power to be several things at once" (ibid.). Whilst I acknowledge and agree with Holliday's (2011) argument, I still decided to apply the concept of thirdness – although re-conceptualised – to my staircase model to underline the changes and evolution in my participants' intercultural adaptation. Indeed, because the steps represent the acculturation journey of my participants, I

applied to them the same liquid conceptualisation I explained in section 3.3.3.1, seeing the process as an interaction between sets of 'small cultures' rather than 'cultures' in essentialist terms. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section, the steps are seen as representing the average of the trends and evolution of all the different aspects of my participants' lives. The 'third space' between the steps in my model then becomes a sort of trail of the changes in the sojourners' experience, not implying distinct and separated large-culture constructs but rather the liquid and ever-changing nature of individuals' identity and their evolving small-culture baggage.

I had initially planned to use the term 'third spaces' (plural and not capitalised to distinguish it from Bhabha's conceptualisation) to indicate the multiplicity of these moments between steps, moving beyond the limiting linguistic and cultural focus of the concepts of 'third culture' (Kramersch, 2009) and Third Space (Bhabha, 1994). However, by using the plural, the conceptualisation of my 'third spaces' seemed to also hint at a multiplicity of boundaries around each of these spaces. Therefore, the linguistic plurality seemed to lead to unwanted conceptual implications that contradicted my liquid perspective. For this reason, I decided to use the term 'third space' in the singular and non-capitalised form. My idea of liquid 'third space' represents the negotiation of difference and identity re-definition that sojourners experience at every step of their 'staircase'. In the space between one step and the next, individuals hybridise and in this temporary third space they can express who they have become 'without being hostage to their previous Self or their future Self' to paraphrase Kramersch's (1993) definition of 'third culture'. Whether sojourners are consolidating their progress or stuck in an apparent lack of it, visualising these times as wider steps or landings where the sojourners keep walking until they are ready to step up, can help to frame these as periods of re-definition and adjustment, rather than a vacuum where nothing changes. By acknowledging these in-between identities, or 'third space', as a part of the journey, the staircase model becomes even more relevant to SA research because it provides a new perspective to frame 'plateau' periods going beyond their traditional linguistic focus, and it re-affirms the multi-layered nature of each SA experience, making these moments of apparent stillness meaningful.

My concept of fluid 'third space' may also help researchers to better understand the bigger overall identity changes that can be noticed between the start and the

end of a SA. Although these identity shifts have been to some extent investigated (Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2004; Smolcic, 2013), Smolcic (2013) notes that little attention has been given to how individual learners (and I include sojourners more holistically) experience Third Space. Furthermore, she suggests that apart from language abilities, the sojourners' experience of the Third Space may be influenced by their motivation to go abroad and their different personal histories and intercultural baggage. My participants' detailed descriptions of their experiences over their months in Italy and their pre-departure beliefs and prior stays abroad provide insights into this aspect of SA, even though Third Space was not the focus of my research. Through their constant re-negotiation of identity, sojourners can be seen as hybrids, moving through this liquid 'third space' in continuous transformation, and each step allows the individual to move from the current Self to one's future Self.

9.2.2.2 A Sociocultural Perspective on the Space Between the Steps

An interesting perspective suggested by Kramsch and Uryu (2020) is to compare the concept of Third Space to the Vygotskian concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Vygotsky et al., 1962). The ZPD has been defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, p. 86). The focus of the concept was on the understanding of child development, hence the reference to "adult guidance", yet the ZPD has been expanded to learners more broadly and it has since been applied to other disciplines, including teacher education and SLA (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Ohta, 2005). The guidance (from adults or "more capable peers") has also been re-framed as 'scaffolding', seen as a collaboration with others or even reached through self-reflection (self-scaffolding; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011). From this sociocultural perspective, the 'third space' in my model could be seen as the individuals' ZPD, and moments in which they try to step up on their acculturation and self-redefinition journey but require extra efforts. The role of scaffolding echoes the function of coping strategies whether they involve others or not (e.g. support networks, self-talk) and reiterates their relevance in SA research, as already discussed in section 9.2.1. For the purposes of this thesis I shall not go into too much detail about Vygotsky's work

and its critique (Crawshaw et al., 2001; Gillen, 2000) but the concept of ZPD resonates with my model's idea that individuals may not be able to step up on their next developmental step if it is perceived as too high. Vygotsky also believed that participation in social activity is at the base of the formation of one's cognition (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007; Vygotsky et al., 1962), which aligns with my philosophical standpoint and fits in well with cognitive dissonance theory (if one lived in a vacuum without interaction there would be no dissonance). However, I would argue that not all development in one's acculturation journey requires external inputs from other 'more capable' individuals, and the recently conceptualised self-scaffolding (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Ohta, 2005) could be a helpful concept to develop further and introduce in the SA research.

This staircase model of acculturation combines elements from cognitive dissonance theory and sociocultural cognitive development with the more traditional linguistic and cultural frameworks applied to SA research, creating a new interdisciplinary model that may allow for a deeper understanding of the many layers involved in one's SA experience and developmental experiences more broadly. The following section addresses the main theoretical and practical implications of the staircase model before moving on to the second part of this chapter.

9.3 Implications of the Staircase Model

My staircase model provides a new framework for the understanding of the acculturation process and SA experiences, and it has the potential to be applied also to other forms of social development and learning. However, it has some theoretical and practical implications to consider. Theoretically, by describing the process as a series of uneven steps, the model reinforces the idea that SA experiences are unpredictable and unique, describing a journey different for each individual and influenced by a multiplicity of factors that may not make it possible to prepare for SA experiences (or more general prolonged sojourns). However, by re-conceptualising 'culture shock' in this multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and liquid model of acculturation within a cognitive dissonance framework, it may be easier to see more of the factors involved in one's experience abroad and bring forward research on acculturation. In more practical terms, by deepening our knowledge on the process of intercultural adaptation, current pre-departure courses may be re-designed to increase awareness on coping strategies and

potential causes of cognitive dissonance in the SA context, as well as drawing more attention to the role of prior experiences and beliefs. Two particular underpinnings of this model that are worth discussing in more detail are hindsight and the telos of the staircase imagery.

9.3.1 Hindsight

When one's SA comes to an end and individuals reach the top of the acculturation steps related to that particular experience, hindsight may filter memories and alter one's original perceptions about it. Reflecting on past experiences and putting them into perspective may result in smoothed and blurred edges, so that when sojourners look back at their experiences from the top of the staircase, the tallest and hardest steps may not look so challenging. It has been suggested that the time lag between sojourners' experiences and their reports about them may 'embellish' some of the less positive events (Csizér & Kálmán, 2019, p. 240). This is not to say that recalled experiences are not worthy of attention. Indeed, retrospective data is used in much research (e.g. biographical studies, reflexive and reflective research) and in many cases it is the only possible way to access data (e.g. June's third interview almost five months after leaving Italy). However, it is important to acknowledge that one's accounts at the moment of recall may not have the same flavour, meanings or features as when the individual experienced them in the first place. This is why I tried to have relatively frequent exchanges with my participants, adding the Buddy System and its almost monthly check-ins to the three key interviews at the start, middle and end of their YA.

Time lag is not the only element to factor in when considering potential recall bias, indeed the circumstances at the time of retrospection may impact on one's perceptions. A clear example of the contextual impact on the recalled experience of my participants was June's admission in her final interview that her feelings of regret about missed opportunities were also based on the fact that at the time of the interview she had been in lockdown for months. By rationalising her thoughts in hindsight she reached the conclusion that she had done the best she could during her time in Italy and was happy with her experience overall. However, this reflexivity and rationalisation may be related to the months that had passed since her time in Italy, which allowed her to be detached enough to rationalise her experiences and emotions. June's perceptions about her YA and its success may have been very different if she had discussed them soon after her return in the

UK. At the other end of the spectrum, my conversations with Lucia became almost weekly during lockdown and I was able to see different events develop almost concurrently (e.g. the misunderstanding with Mamma, the loneliness when Mamma went to her parents). Although I believe it is important to acknowledge the possible impact of hindsight on my participants' perceptions of their experiences abroad, I also maintain my philosophical stance, which sees their retrospective accounts as still representative of their perspective.

One last point related to the impact of hindsight on my participants' accounts is on the challenge to discern it from other forms of change or from personal development. For example, in Lucia's final interview in November 2020, she completely disagreed with her initial opinion on the importance (or lack thereof) of knowing the language in order to feel like a local in Italy. She did not remember she had expressed such an opinion and could not believe that she used to think that being able to speak Italian would not be necessary for her to feel like a local. Was her drastic change of opinion only based on hindsight? Was her initial answer an attempt to say something she thought I would approve of and not actually her belief (Mills et al., 2006)? Or was her change of mind based on her acculturation journey and her overall development? The reason may be a mixture of these options (and more), and future research should try to investigate the effects of acculturation – as well as hindsight – on sojourners' belief changes with more qualitative longitudinal studies.

9.3.2 Telos and Success

Another conceptual underpinning of my model is the idea of telos, or an end goal, given that generally the purpose of staircases and steps is to allow us to reach somewhere we are not. In the specific context of SA, one's telos may be represented by one's objectives and one's idea of success for that experience, which may be visualised as the final step in one's acculturation staircase related to the specific SA timeframe. As already discussed in Chapter 3, one's acculturation journey is unique and made up of different elements threaded together, and one's idea of SA success is no different. Similarly to one's identity being "socially pressurised to conform" (Badwan, 2021, p. 148), one's idea of success may be based on a number of factors, including peer, societal or institutional influences. This complexity not only leads to potential cognitive dissonance in the individual (see section 9.2.1) but it also implies that sojourners

may not know what they really want to achieve until they are immersed in the context or until the context influences their ideas of success (more on the agentic role of context in section 9.4). Cognitive dissonance and personal development lead to the creation of, or aspiration to, new steps in the acculturation staircase. This imagery creates a sort of never-ending series of steps, where the individual may not always have a clear image of the final steps and what success would mean in their SA journey. In this scenario, sometimes sojourners may not see the end of the staircase, or even the top of their next step (e.g. if they are on a wide step or landing). However, when the time comes to step up, they can always create or build the next step (e.g. those cartoons where the characters build each new step in the air whilst walking on the previous one). Furthermore, because beliefs are dynamic and mutable in nature, it is not uncommon for one's idea of success to change over time, especially if it was initially based on external factors and/or based on more peripheral rather than core beliefs (using Rokeach's, 1970, terms). In my staircase model this may be represented as an unfinished set of steps (as mentioned earlier), or as a staircase in which the steps change direction or shape during the stepping up journey, similar to the staircases in Hogwarts, to reference Harry Potter (Rowling, 1997). Finally, if different beliefs about what should be achieved in the SA clash with each other, the consequent cognitive dissonance may prevent sojourners from achieving their idea of success until the dissonance is reduced. This may be one of the reasons why some of them do not achieve their desired goals, besides setting unrealistic goals (Zaykovskaya et al., 2017). This conceptualisation of success as a set of beliefs may have implications for institutional pre-departure guidelines and criteria on what could make a SA experience successful. Indeed, because there is no one-size-fits-all definition of success, promoting an ideal vision of it may have negative repercussions on the sojourners' SA experiences as it may trigger cognitive dissonance between what they would like to do and what they think they ought to do.

Referring back to my findings, my participants' objectives supported the interest in linguistic outcomes reported in some of the literature (Van Maele et al., 2016; Winke & Gass, 2018; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017) but they also provided insights into more personal objectives, such as "personal growth in a more general sense", "taking advantage of every opportunity presented to me", "[b]eing confident despite any lack of confidence", "being kind to myself" (June,

Questionnaire, 9/09/2019). This broader spectrum of replies may be related to the broader question about what would make the SA a successful experience, without any reference to language or institutional objectives. Indeed, the specific linguistic focus of studies on SA success, may itself be at the root for the imbalance towards language-related goals, parallel to the institutional pressure.

Now that my Staircase Model has been explored in more detail, it should be easier to see the potential to apply this framework beyond the realm of SA and YA experiences to processes of adaptation, social development and learning more broadly. Just like the acculturation steps represent the average of different aspects of life, they can also be seen as one line (or dot) of the many making up a broader set of steps, extending this framework beyond language and SA research as I shall discuss in the Conclusion chapter. The following section addresses one final theme that emerged from my findings: the agentic role of context. In particular, I discuss the impact of the pandemic on my research, the role played by contextual factors in my participants' SA experiences and the implications for research to implement a more ecological approach.

9.4 Context as Agent

Discussions of the effects that the pandemic had on my research have been interwoven throughout my thesis, just as they interwove with and impacted on most, if not all, aspects of people's lives. The outbreak of the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic and its consequent lockdowns not only changed my planned methodology and the reality I investigated (i.e. my participants' SA experiences, and therefore my findings) but also the research context for most disciplines. Despite all the negative consequences this situation has had, one particularly positive outcome that may be drawn from it is the highlighted importance of context in research, and, I would add, even more so in the SA field.

Although researchers in the 1960s started to consider 'context' as an important element to better understand a phenomenon or a focal event (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992), disagreement and lack of clarity characterise the definition and role of 'context'. Context was long seen as the setting in which the events under study occurred or "an obvious backdrop to any discussion of the social world" as reported by Block (2013, p. 127). It was acknowledged that contextual elements could have an impact on what was being researched, yet it still had a very passive

function. Sociological and intercultural studies, which have a history of investigating the relationship between agency and structure (i.e. context), have tended to prioritise the former and neglect the latter (Block, 2013, 2015). Since the 1990s with the social turn in motivation research (and related psychological fields), more attention has been given to the influence that context can have on learner motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Ushioda, 2009). Nevertheless, according to Cots et al. (2021) the focus in SA research has been on the agency of individuals, leaving the role of context in SA under-researched. Some recent exceptions are evident in the work by Badwan and Simpson (2019) on the ecological aspects of the sociolinguistics of SA, and by Cots et al. (2021) on the active role of context in the development of SA students' plurilingual identities. In line with these more holistic and ecological trends in SA research, I argue that context – even outside socio-political and economic crises like the pandemic – is an agentic force in the SA experience and should be researched as such. In this conceptualisation, context is an active agent, interacting with the individuals and impacting on their experiences, whilst being mutually impacted by them. My argument is that context (or 'structure' in sociological terms) has an encompassing impact on the overall SA experience, not limited to specific linguistic or identity-related aspects. A theoretical approach that seemed to reflect my perspective on the role of context is ecology (see section 3.3.4), which investigates the dynamic relationships between the organisms (i.e. individuals, or sojourners) and their environment (i.e. context) (Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017). Ecological approaches are becoming more frequent in SLA and language learning research (Bird et al., 2021; Steffensen & Kramsch, 2017) but they have only recently started to be applied in relation to acculturation and intercultural adaptation (Uryu et al., 2014; Ward & Geeraert, 2016) and are still very limited in the SA context (Badwan & Simpson, 2019; Bird et al., 2021; Cots et al., 2021).

According to Bird et al. (2021, pp. 22-23) “[e]cological study abroad research reveals that the epicenter of potential cultural, linguistic, and personal growth on study abroad lies at the interaction of the sojourner and aspects of the study abroad environment”. This interaction is mutual and ongoing, making SA (and intercultural experiences more broadly) a complex context to research as its components cannot be isolated from each other or taken out of it without losing part of their meaning and identity. In ecological approaches, therefore,

“interaction is not merely unfolding on a microsocial timescale, and it does not constitute a situation that can be isolated from trans-situational characteristics” (Uryu et al., 2014, p. 56). Just as one cannot take events and interactions out of their context, the context cannot be separated from the events and interactions occurring with and within it, without losing meaning. Carrying out longitudinal studies and collecting rich contextual data would not only allow researchers to better understand the evolution of interaction within the context under study over time, but also to shed light on the active agentic role of the context, moving away from its static and passive conceptualisation.

In my research, the focus was on my participants’ personal experiences; however, context soon started to become a co-protagonist in their stories. Due to the pandemic, no contextual data could be gathered in first person although it had been planned initially, and yet the influence of the context in June and Lucia’s experiences permeated their accounts. The context of their YA appeared to be co-creating their reality and influencing both their perceptions and their actions in their lives in Italy. In particular, as also reported in Cots et al. (2021), context seemed to be actively interacting with my participants and influencing their perceived identity and their agency in their YA. Particular aspects my research focused on were the affective challenges and coping strategies of my participants, and the pandemic certainly became a source of distress and a trigger for the implementation of coping mechanisms. One example from my findings is Lucia’s experience of lockdown, which created what could be compared to a ‘pressure cooker effect’. Lockdown became a context with the potential to maximise the effects of a ‘normal’ YA experience, but also the risk of ‘explosion’, which seemed likely in Lucia’s first few weeks. After an extreme ‘bubbling up’ of emotions, homesickness, loneliness, stress, tiredness and boredom, Lucia managed to adjust to the pressure(s) and take advantage of it, eventually fulfilling her objective to feel like a local. Witnessing how Lucia adapted to the extreme situation reinforced my belief that the YA is co-constructed by the mutual interaction of internal and external factors. Furthermore, although she managed to adjust and maximise the potential of such a unique situation, not everybody would have coped in the same way, having to spend months in the same house with a host family they had met only a few months before, and who spoke a different language most of the time.

I am aware that Cots et al. (2021) criticise research limited to case studies based on participants' reported data and call for more contextual elements. Although the pandemic did not allow me to collect any first-hand contextual data, the rich interview data provided by my participants elicited some of the impact their YA context had on their experience and their personal development. In particular, despite the limiting circumstances, my findings seemed to suggest a connection between context and June and Lucia's agency and identity development. Because of the pervasive impact of the pandemic, I also argue that it had strong enough effects on everybody around the world that it could be considered to some extent as a globally shared context. Therefore, my findings, despite the lack of first-hand data on the specific environments of my participants' YA, support the importance of context as an agentic force actively involved in the YA experience and echo Cots et al.'s (2021) call for more holistic methods, also including *in loco* data collection on contextual elements.

In the following final chapter I summarise this thesis, address my research questions and present the main contributions of my research, as well as indicating some of its limitations and some suggestions for future research, concluding with a final reflection on my PhD journey.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

10.1 Thesis Summary

This qualitative, longitudinal case study set out to investigate the personal experiences of two UK language undergraduates who went to Italy as teaching assistants for their YA. I focused on their perceived affective challenges and the coping strategies they implemented, and by looking at my participants as ‘whole people-in-context’ (Coleman, 2013; Ushioda, 2009) rather than reducing them to language learners and de-contextualising their experiences, my research has tried to provide a deeper understanding of the personal journey of YA sojourners. It also aimed to offer new insights into the impact of pre-departure beliefs on one’s perception of the YA experience and the implications this can have on the perceived affective challenges and the consequent coping strategies adopted. Based on my findings, I argue that the relationship between prior beliefs and the SA experience is one of mutual influence in an ongoing, situated, iterative, and not necessarily linear process. Therefore, SA has the potential to alter sojourners’ beliefs (as discussed in past research, see Chapter 3) but, at the same time, beliefs have the potential to alter the sojourners’ perceptions of the SA experience both in beneficial and detrimental ways. The complexity of SA experiences is understood through the multi-dimensional combination of prior beliefs and individual factors interacting with contextual elements, ecologically seen as transcending their traditional role of passive background setting and instead becoming active agents within the researched experiences. By applying cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) to my liquid conceptualisation of acculturation (Dervin, 2011), my research tried to deepen our current understanding of SA experiences as perceived by the sojourners. Finally, despite the disruption caused by the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic, my research provides timely insight into the impact this had on my participants’ YA reality and their perceptions of it.

10.2 ‘Answers’ to My Research Questions

Before moving on to answering the questions that guided my research, I would like to clarify that my ‘answers’ are really only a reflection of my participants’ experiences and my interpretation of them in a co-constructed fashion. Despite my attempts at letting their voices speak for them, my voice is also included in

my analysis and interpretation of the data as we co-created our reality during the data generation, and this permeated my writing. These answers should therefore be read as reflections on my research questions and my findings rather than categorical answers, and thus in line with my methodological and philosophical standpoints. Furthermore, I address below each question individually but because of the complexity and inherent intertwined nature of the different aspects of SA, some overlap amongst the answers is inevitable.

1a) What are sojourners' prior beliefs on the YA?

Both my participants had mostly positive beliefs about their YA country and people, as well as some stereotypical, large-culture views about its culture. Their initial worries about their linguistic skills seemed linked to their learner beliefs, which evolved and became more positive over time. Language-related concerns were particularly noticeable in Lucia's case, who also had the highest (possibly most unrealistic) objectives, such as that of becoming fluent and feeling like a local. These objectives and Lucia's actions to achieve them seemed based on pre-departure experiences and beliefs she had developed before her YA. June had fewer negative learner beliefs and more realistic expectations about her language progress, likely to be also based on her previous SA experience. Overall, prior beliefs formed part of the participants' cognition and were closely linked to their perceptions of the YA experience. This suggests that more attention to prior beliefs, personal background and pre-departure cognition would be beneficial for a clearer understanding of the interconnections between beliefs and behaviours on SA.

1b) How do these beliefs impact on their experience?

June explained that her SA in France partly prepared her for her YA in Italy and taught her helpful lessons, which seemed to influence some of the beliefs she held before going to Italy. From a cognitive dissonance perspective, her two months in France seemed to create high levels of dissonance, pushing June to adapt her coping strategies. Those experiences also led to the formation of positive beliefs and expectations about her upcoming YA in comparison to her SA and, once in Italy, June seemed to be more used to dealing with cognitive

dissonance abroad. She was able to rely on a range of coping mechanisms developed in her SA, allowing her to express more agency in her YA, generally reflected in her attempts to go out of her comfort zone. On the other hand, Lucia's pre-departure beliefs about her shyness, her low proficiency and what 'the real Italy' was seemed to lead to her tendency to avoid the unfamiliar and limit her interactions. Lucia initially retreated into herself and stayed quiet, similar to what June described to be her attitudes in her first SA experience. Lucia's beliefs and behaviours changed after several weeks in lockdown and with her increased competence, her learner and identity-related beliefs became more empowering. Lucia started to be more communicative and proactive in her interactions, demonstrating increased agency and confidence, and achieving her pre-departure objectives of feeling like a local and becoming fluent. Although Lucia and June's pre-departure beliefs were different, their perceptions of their YA were indeed influenced by them in many ways.

2) What affective challenges do sojourners face during their YA?

Both my participants experienced loneliness and homesickness, lack of confidence in their linguistic abilities and the misrepresentation of their identity, especially in the initial period in which they felt overwhelmed and unsettled. Sensory and cognitive overload has been acknowledged as a common response to an unfamiliar environment (Goldstein, 2017), and in a YA context the immersion in the host country and its cultural differences can also contribute to such sensory overload. This combination of stressors can lead to changes in one's mood and increased anxiety and sadness, amongst other things (Goldstein, 2017). The re-framing of affective challenges within cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) seemed to lead to a broader and deeper understanding of my participants' experiences. The new, unfamiliar environment (e.g. accommodation, different country, different cultural norms, new routine) was certainly a factor contributing to June and Lucia's challenges and sensory overload, but to that, several other elements were added. For example, from the start of their YA in September 2019 their new role in the school context and the related teaching responsibilities led to numerous interpersonal encounters. These impacted not only on their confidence but also on their identity, creating an initial clash between their achieved identity and their attributed identity

(Blommaert, 2006) and, consequently, a strong cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Furthermore, the initial lack of language proficiency contributed to their feeling overwhelmed and to their perception of language as a limitation and hindrance to socialisation (particularly in Lucia's case) as they could not express themselves fully, causing further cognitive dissonance in relation to their identity. Although unplanned, a further affective challenge in both of my participants' experiences was the pandemic and its pervasive consequences. Despite the undeniable negative effects it had worldwide, from Lucia's perspective lockdown was in fact an essential factor for her personal and linguistic development. This may be an extreme case, but – in line with Coleman's (2013) warning not to neglect the historical setting in SA studies – it reiterates the importance of researching affective 'challenges', and SA experiences more broadly, as individual and context-dependent, as they may be perceived differently by different people or in different circumstances and historical moments.

3) How are the sojourners' prior beliefs on the YA related to the way they deal with these challenges?

Prior beliefs are formed on the basis of pre-departure experiences, where coping strategies are also developed in response to the cognitive dissonance perceived. As discussed in relation to my staircase model, sojourners are faced with new dissonance – or new steps – in all aspects of their life abroad and, in order to overcome such a dissonance, they need to adjust their coping strategies. From this perspective, prior beliefs are the starting point of sojourners' cognition on their SA-related staircase and will influence the choice, as well as the available range, of coping strategies they can implement to step up and overcome dissonance. Depending on the individual experiences and the dissonance perceived, the sojourners' initial 'coping strategy toolkit' may not be enough to step up on the SA staircase, which often leads to an adjustment of beliefs and/or strategies.

Applying this to my participants, Lucia for example, despite her love for Italy, believed that her Italian was not good, her listening skills were non-existent, and she considered herself a shy person. Based on these prior beliefs, her coping strategies included: trying to avoid overwhelming situations, silence (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005), isolation (Kinging, 2004; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005), self-talk (De

Guerrero, 2018; Hardy, 2006), and using her L1 as comfort zone. As mentioned in the previous 'answer', once she became more confident and her beliefs about her proficiency more positive, she started to initiate communication and express her opinions, turning to more agentic coping strategies. One particular example of this is her choice to use her L1, not for safety (using Pellegrino Aveni's, 2005, framework), but to gain control and reinforce her status in her relationship with the daughter. Looking at June's case, her prior beliefs were that people in Italy would be generally nice, laid-back, and she knew from her SA experience in France that she 'needed people' even though she considered herself an introvert. She enjoyed teaching and believed that students would be curious about her, which positioned her on a higher level of the school hierarchy in her mind despite her age, physical appearance or L2 competence. Her coping strategies included: keeping connected with her family and friends (Kinginger, 2008; Tanaka et al., 1997), attempting to surround herself with people and to expand her comfort zone combining the familiar and unfamiliar (i.e. dance and church groups in the host country), and she focused on aspects of life where she had more control and she felt able to project a more adult-like, powerful identity (i.e. teacher in the school). Coping strategies in the SA context deserve more attention and my model of acculturation and my interdisciplinary approach combining ecology and cognitive dissonance theory may help investigating this under-researched aspect of SA research.

4) What makes the Year Abroad (YA) (un)successful from the sojourners' perspective?

As discussed in sections 3.2.1.5 and 9.3.2, success is a very individual aspect of SA experiences and, like other beliefs, those beliefs about the contributing factors to the success of one's SA may evolve and change over the course of one's SA. Therefore, SA success should not and cannot be generalised or de-contextualised. Amongst the factors mentioned by my participants, the following were the most relevant for the success of their YA: creating social bonds (host family for Lucia; dance, school and church connections for June), language and confidence improvement, personal growth, and forcing oneself to step out of the comfort zone (increased agency). These success factors seem to support the findings of some of the studies in the SA scholarship (Van Maele et al., 2016;

Winke & Gass, 2018; Zaykovskaya et al., 2017); however, some of my participants' ideas of success were very specific to their experiences, and future studies on this aspect of SA may reveal more and further expand our understanding of success in the SA context.

10.3 Original Contributions

This thesis offers original contributions to knowledge both methodologically and theoretically. I discuss these below and hope they will provide a springboard to further research on the SA experience.

10.3.1 Methodological Contribution

By adopting a longitudinal approach I responded to Kinginger's (2013b) call for more longitudinal case studies in the SA field and I was able to collect in-depth data at different times over 14 months. Thanks to this approach, my findings have shown some of the changes in my participants' identity, beliefs and intercultural adaptation over their time in Italy, which may have been missed in shorter studies. Furthermore, my longitudinal perspective allowed me to witness the impact of contextual factors on my participants' experiences and their perceptions on them, including but not limited to the Covid-19 pandemic. This reinforces the rationale for implementing ecological approaches to SA research, considering the context as an agentic force in the SA experience rather than a passive background (see also Cots et al., 2021). Ecological perspectives are still very limited in the SA context (Badwan & Simpson, 2019; Bird et al., 2021), yet the inherent nature of SA as an immersion in a new environment makes ecological approaches even more appropriate. By looking at the contextual elements in my participants' experiences as active agents, I was able to notice the mutual impact between sojourners and their context, and future longitudinal ecological studies could shed more light on this interactive relationship.

A further methodological contribution is my 'Buddy System'. Although methods such as journals or diaries have been used in SA research (see section 4.3.4), messaging methods are less common. The flexibility, informality, and friendliness, as well as the familiar format through text messages, made the Buddy System an optimal methodological instrument to promote rich data. The regular buddy messages I exchanged with June and Lucia were likely the main reason why my relationship with them became so friendly and open. They knew

they could contact me when they needed an Italian perspective on their SA experiences and their messages did not have to have an academic purpose or a schedule. This contributed to making the Buddy System mutually beneficial for both me and my participants and probably also less daunting than having to commit to a certain number of diary entries over a long period of time. Furthermore, my participants (especially Lucia) seemed to gradually show more agency through the use of this collaborative tool; this may have been linked to their overall agency development, but further research could investigate the potentially agency-promoting qualities of this method. Had I only scheduled the interviews and not planned any buddy exchanges in the time between them, my data would be much less insightful, especially since the messages helped to fill in the gaps between interviews and contributed to richer longitudinal data. The Buddy System could therefore be implemented across disciplines in most studies with an interest in the perspectives of their research participants, and it could promote deeper and more open exchanges with them. The use of a Buddy System would be particularly significant in longitudinal studies, where other methods such as interviews, or observations, may be perceived as too time consuming to be carried out multiple times or at close, regular intervals.

10.3.2 Theoretical Contributions

As discussed in section 3.2.1.4, the different impact SA experiences can have on sojourners' beliefs has been researched in several studies, yet the reverse relation has been neglected. Following on Zaykovskaya et al.'s (2017) work, I moved beyond their linguistic focus and researched pre-departure beliefs and their impact on the sojourners' perceptions of the SA more holistically. As explained in the 'answers' to my first and third research questions, prior beliefs seemed to be influencing not only my participants' perceptions of their experiences during their YA but also their coping strategy selection. This provides a new avenue for SA research that may lead to a deeper understanding of the factors at play in the sojourners' experiences abroad and what may impact their perceptions of them. Furthermore, the evolution of my participants' beliefs (and identity) and the impact these had on their experiences confirmed the dynamic, interactive and situated nature of beliefs, and call for more longitudinal studies investigating the pre- to post-SA beliefs and their development.

A further theoretical contribution of my research is my proposed Staircase Model to re-frame acculturation. I have explained my re-conceptualisation of the process in more 'liquid' terms (Dervin, 2011), seeing acculturation as a fluid interaction between sets of 'small cultures' (Holliday, 1999), rather than an integration between bounded (solid) cultures. By applying a liquid meaning to acculturation, my Staircase Model provides an interdisciplinary re-framing of sojourners' SA experiences and their acculturation journey during their time abroad. The imagery of the wonky steps represents the individuality of the trajectory of every sojourner and the ups and downs they may experience during their SA. The implications of this model have been explained in the previous chapter, and its key tenets combine a holistic view of sojourners with cognitive dissonance theory and an ecological approach to SA. By incorporating different theories and disciplines, I have tried to move beyond the essentialist conceptualisation of acculturation still dominant in SA research and offer a new model, which could be applied in a range of disciplines investigating intercultural adaptation or broader processes of adaptation, development or learning. This model provides a deeper and holistic understanding of experiences, be them abroad or not, in their complexity, multiplicity and bi- (or multi-)directionality. Its focus on affective challenges and coping strategies broadens our knowledge of these topics in the SA context and beyond, and may contribute to raising awareness about them. Finally, my application of cognitive dissonance to SA research may be seen as a starting point to bridge the gap in the literature on this interdisciplinary path. In my re-conceptualisation of acculturation I move away from traditional views on 'culture shock' that cognitive dissonance theory has been applied to (Difruscio & Rennick, 2013) and I provide a timely response to Mitchell and Paras's (2018) call for the implementation of such a theory in the SA field.

As well as my methodological and theoretical contributions presented above, the pandemic has also contributed to the originality of my research. Lucia's decision to stay in Italy during lockdown (as well as for the eight months following that), made her accounts unique and insightful. Her experience was particularly revealing because it opened a window into the life of a UK sojourner in Italy during a time of global lockdown. No research to my knowledge has reported the direct experiences of UK sojourners living in their SA destination during the pandemic, yet such insider perspectives may help us learn about how sojourners cope in

moments of extreme crises. Whilst I hope no further worldwide pandemic or emergency disrupts our lives, the insights into these extra-ordinary circumstances may be applied to more ordinary situations in which sojourners experience particularly strong cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, Italy is still an under-researched country in the SA literature (Kinging, 2013b), and it was amongst the most highly affected by the virus (Freedman, 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). Therefore, my research provides unique and cutting-edge insights into the less researched Italian SA context before and during the pandemic, expanding our knowledge on the effects lockdown had on sojourners.

10.4 Limitations

Alongside the contributions my research offers, it is important to acknowledge some of its limitations. These were mostly methodological, and I present them below.

1) Although I have already mentioned the methodological contribution represented by my Buddy System, I recognise its unfeasibility in larger-scale studies. The strength of this method is the researcher's involvement in it, and I am aware this cannot always be guaranteed or possible. Nonetheless, I would still recommend it in smaller-scale research investigating individuals' personal experiences or perspectives.

2) As explained in Chapter 3, researching beliefs can be hard and, even though my analysis seemed to show examples of a wide range of beliefs, some may have remained under the surface. Implementing different methods and/or analytical approaches may provide a broader picture of sojourners' belief systems. Similarly, due to the impossibility to travel during the pandemic, my research could not include any first-hand data. This does not reduce the insightfulness of my participants' accounts and the value of reporting their experiences as I never aimed at generalisations, yet the answers to my research questions may have differed had the pandemic not disrupted my data collection and my participants' YA half-way through. Further research should combine both individuals' perspectives and contextual data, as already suggested by Howard (2021). This would also allow the investigation of the repercussions the pandemic may have had on SA contextual factors for sojourners.

3) All data was self-reported and, as such, it represents my participants' perceptions of their experiences specifically at the time of reporting them. As explained in relation to my staircase model, hindsight may modify one's perspective on an event, blurring or exaggerating details. I did not consider recall bias as a methodological issue because my aim was to research my participants' perceptions of their reality and data reported in hindsight is not less representative of that. Nonetheless, the implications of self-reported data and hindsight must be acknowledged.

Besides these methodological limitations, I am also aware that the imagery of the steps is only one of many possibilities to picture the acculturation journey, which could also be imagined as a simple walk where sometimes the ground is very smooth and at times one can find some stones, sometimes it goes uphill and others downhill. Maybe this unpaved path could be more representative of the later stages of one's acculturation journey, when the dissonance is less striking or frequent and one has developed more tools to face challenges.

10.5 Implications

My research focused on the personal experiences of two sojourners and this thesis has tried to tell their stories from their perspective. Nonetheless, my findings also have some implications beyond the individual level.

Neither Lucia nor June felt well-prepared by their institution before going on their YA and their pre-departure beliefs were mostly based on personal experiences or previous trips, except for some of their linguistic expectations. Although this is not uncommon and the idiosyncratic nature of SA experiences may not allow for a complete preparation for them, more awareness of the challenges and the factors involved in SA would benefit the sojourners. This has implications for HE institutions and educators, as they should promote SA as an all-encompassing experience, moving away from the neo-essentialist and disembodied discourses currently dominating the SA marketing and promotional strategies in HE (Collins, 2018; Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2012). By acknowledging the complexity of SA experiences and re-framing acculturation as a fluid and evolving process through sets of 'small cultures' rather than contributing to the diffusion of large-culture values and comparing culture against culture, institutions and educators may be able to raise awareness about these issues in the sojourners. For the inherent

aims of the marketisation of HE it is unlikely that changes in this direction would happen overnight (or at all!), yet preparation courses for SA should aim to expand the upcoming sojourners' toolkit for dealing with cognitive dissonance abroad. Indeed, pre-departure preparation courses have been shown to have beneficial effects on the students' resilience, development of intercultural competence and adaptability, and on the decrease in stereotypical conceptualisations of the host country (Goldstein, 2017). The implementation of a Buddy System could be another beneficial application of my research to SA programmes. It would be unfeasible to match every sojourner with a researcher or even a student of the nationality they will find in the host country, yet courses may prepare staff and/or students to be more aware of the complexities of SA experiences and intercultural adaptation, so that they may be partnered up with sojourners and provide the friendly ear they may need during their time abroad. Language Buddy Systems are already implemented in some institutions (Coleman, 2015), yet a more holistic approach to the sojourners and appropriate preparation for the 'buddies' would likely promote collaborative practices and agency amongst sojourners. Future research on the application of a Buddy System in SA programmes would shed light on the positive impact it may have on sojourners' wellbeing and stress levels, as suggested by Krzaklewska and Skórska (2013).

Acknowledging the complexity of SA and re-framing the conceptualisation of acculturation would not erase the destabilising effects SA can have on one's identity (Block, 2002) or even one's understanding of language (Badwan, 2020) yet, through awareness of the possible challenges SA may present them with, sojourners may be able to find more and better ways to deal with their cognitive dissonance and move beyond stereotyped ideas of culture(s). This brings me to a final implication for sojourners, as I see them as 'whole people' (Coleman, 2013) with agency in their SA experiences: besides possible pre-departure courses, Buddy Systems, and educators' attempts at preparing them for SA, they should in first person try to engage with non-essentialist discourses of culture and implement reflexive practices to become aware of their biases and pre-departure beliefs. By presenting a more complete and realistic picture of what a SA experience may entail, sojourners may feel better prepared before arrival in the host country. This may even benefit SA marketing strategies as it could have repercussions on the students' satisfaction and potentially on their interest in

languages and intercultural experiences even after the end of the SA (as was the case for some of my students in my years of teaching).

10.6 Future Research

My research has tried to contribute to remedying the dearth of studies focused on the impact of prior beliefs and prior experiences on the sojourners' SA, but more attention to these would be beneficial to expand our understanding of the extent of such an impact. Broadening Güvendir et al.'s (Güvendir et al., 2021, p. 54) focus on linguistic aspects of SA I join their call for more attention to "how learners' pre-sojourn beliefs regarding study abroad are constructed" and "identify how much and in what direction these factors influence L2 learners' pre-sojourn beliefs and the influence of the pre-existing system of learner beliefs on study abroad". In relation to this and based on my findings, I would also recommend investigating the impact that one's family and personal background may have on the formation of prior beliefs. This was not the focus of my study but the close family bond both participants had (especially with their mothers) and their personal pre-departure life experiences, seemed to have a certain degree of influence on the way my participants perceived their YA reality and also on their resilience. A clear example is the way they used past experiences and family connections as important coping systems during their YA. Therefore, more research is needed on the impact that family and personal background can have on SA experiences, as they have the potential to be important pre-departure factors. Institutions will not be able to change these but by acknowledging them and informing students of the impact such elements may have on their SA experience, they would increase their awareness and promote students' self-reflection in preparation for their SA.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I explained the value of researching my particular participants as belonging to an under-researched SA population, in an under-researched SA context. Nonetheless, because both my participants went on their YA as teaching assistants, their experiences were likely very different from those students who had chosen to go on SA to study at an Italian university. Recruiting sojourners going on a study SA or a work placement would allow for a broader range of insights and perspectives. This would also address potential connections between the type of YA and the beliefs and perceptions before, during and after the experience abroad.

Due to time and wordcount limitations I could not focus extensively on Lucia's translanguaging practices, yet they seemed to be an example not only of increasing proficiency but also linguistic agency. In the future, I shall revisit the data and give more attention to Lucia's linguistic developments, and I hope to see more research investigating the developments of agency (linguistic and not) over the course of SA experiences. For similar reasons, the concept of reverse or re-entry 'culture shock' was not discussed in this study, but my Staircase Model could be applied in future research to see whether it may apply also to such a concept. This would also allow researchers to investigate the bi-directionality of the staircase and whether it might go 'downwards' after the end of the YA, or whether the sojourners may go back on the steps they had created and step down on their metaphorical acculturation staircase. Although the image of one-way staircases may resonate with the Covid-19 restrictions, more longitudinal research could shed light on this potential reverse stepping process. For example, by considering Lucia's experience in the final two months of her stay, it would not be unreasonable to imagine her overall acculturation staircase as going downwards or reaching a landing. Her increased use of English, reduced interactions with the family members and self-reported lower accuracy may have eventually won over her feelings of satisfaction in her progress, her re-defined role within the family, and her ability to have adult conversation and use humour. Finally, due to the pandemic, my member checking had to take place after the end of my participants' YA and in a period of social unsettlement and challenges, therefore my relationship with my participants had cooled down and the circumstances made it hard for them to provide long commentaries. I would recommend that future studies applying my Staircase Model or implementing cognitive dissonance theory to SA research try to carry out member checking closer to the end of the data collection. In addition, I would suggest taking a more dialogical approach, talking 'with' the participants in order to make it "a more collaborative, more ethical alternative to member-checking" (Harvey, 2015, p. 35), which would likely promote deeper reflections from the participants.

10.7 Research Final Reflections

I set out to do this research in order to understand why my students came back from SA with such different perceptions of their experience abroad. Along the way many more questions developed in my mind and the combination of cognitive

dissonance theory and the liquid and ecological view of acculturation has given me a helpful lens to look at my inquiry differently. Reading, talking to June and Lucia, discussing my ideas with fellow researchers, or presenting them at conferences allowed me to reflect on my own stereotyping practices, often hiding behind some neo-essentialism even after almost a decade of language teaching. Whilst looking at June and Lucia's acculturation staircases I too was stepping up on mine, coming to terms with cognitive dissonance emerged from our discussions and my self-reflection. Although this thesis and my PhD journey may be over, I look forward to the steps ahead and the new awareness they will bring.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethical Approval

The Secretariat
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT Tel: 0113 343 4873
Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Giorgia Faraoni
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

**Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics
Committee
University of Leeds**

4 June 2019

Dear Giorgia,

Title of study: **The Year Abroad experience from the student
perspective: affective challenges and coping strategies
of UK language undergraduates in Italy.**

**Ethics
reference:** **LTEDUC-108**

I am pleased to inform you that the above application for proportionate (light touch) ethical review has been reviewed by a representative of the Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
LTEDUC-108 Giorgia Faraoni - Light Touch Ethics Form (22 May 2019).doc	1	22/05/2019
LTEDUC-108 Giorgia Faraoni- Documents attached to Ethics Form.docx	1	22/05/2019

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted at date of this approval, including changes to recruitment methodology. All changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation.

The amendment form is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment>.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as other documents relating to the study. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited, there is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits>.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Blaikie

Senior Research Ethics Administrator, the Secretariat

On behalf of Dr Kahryn Hughes, Chair, [AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee](#)

CC: Dr Judith Hanks

Appendix B – Introductory Email and Participant Information Sheet

The Year Abroad experience from the student perspective: the case of UK language undergraduates in Italy

Dear students of Italian,

I am Giorgia Faraoni, a first-year PhD student at the University of ****. My research project looks at what students really think about the Year Abroad – before, during and after – and tries to identify the factors that make it a successful or unsuccessful experience from the students' personal point of view.

I would like to invite you to take part in my project and below you will find a more detailed explanation of what it is about and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask me if there is anything unclear, or for further information.

What is the purpose of the project and why should I take part?

My research project seeks to give a voice to the student perspective about the Year Abroad in Italy. This particular context has often been neglected in previous research, and your participation would provide new insight and would help to shed light on what students really think and experience during their months abroad. My findings may benefit both you and the students who will study abroad in Italy in the future, and will hopefully lead to ways to improve the student experience there.

What would I have to do?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you take part and to what extent. The first step is a completely anonymous **questionnaire** about your thoughts on the Year Abroad (around 15-20 minutes). At the end you will be asked if you want to take part in either/both of the following two steps:

1) Three **follow-up interviews**, in person or via Skype/video call (at the start and end of your Year Abroad, and during the Christmas break, lasting 20-25 minutes each)

2) **'Buddy system'**: a way to make this project mutually beneficial. Basically, we would become sort of long-distance buddies, with the advantage of me being Italian and accustomed to your host country. It would be a very informal and friendly form of support ☺ :

- **You** could email, or message me via WhatsApp or SMS, at any point throughout the year in case of any potential cultural misunderstanding, problem, or simple curiosity.

- **I** would contact you only once every four to six weeks, nothing too formal or complex – a simple catch up on how your Year Abroad is going.

NB: The buddy system would not replace your tutor or any other support provided by the University as I cannot help with academic or bureaucratic issues nor am I a qualified counsellor. It is designed to be an extra support to help you with matters specifically related to culture and your experience abroad in a friendly, informal way.

What will happen to the information I provide?

All the information you provide will solely be used for the purpose of this research. All data will be anonymised in any reports resulting from this research and will be securely stored on the University of **** server, only accessible to myself and my supervisors. The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. In case of publication or appearance on academic articles, anonymity shall remain, and no confidential data will be made public.

What if I decide to take part and then change my mind?

The questionnaire is anonymous so once it has been submitted you are in effect giving consent that the information provided can be used for the sole purpose of the study. Should you decide to take part in the interviews and/or the buddy system, you may withdraw at any point without giving any reasons.

Please note that you would only be asked to share information you feel comfortable sharing and, should you become distressed during any of the steps of the project, you could stop at any point and I would direct you to the most appropriate support provider (The Residence Abroad Support Team- *email address*).

I want to take part, what do I do now?

In the link below, you will find the consent form followed by the questionnaire. Please take time to decide if you wish to take part in my project and, if so, in which steps. The link below will be active from now up until September 15th, 2019.

[*Link*](#)

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [*email address*](#). Thank you for taking the time to read through this information sheet.

Kind regards,
Giorgia ☺

Appendix C – Consent Form

Consent to take part in the PhD project "The Year Abroad experience from the student perspective: the case of UK language undergraduates in Italy"

I confirm that I have read and understood the information in the email dated 15th August 2019 explaining the above research project and have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

** Required*

Yes

No

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

** Required*

Yes

No

I understand that once I submit the questionnaire I am giving consent that the information provided can be used for the sole purpose of the study.

** Required*

Yes

No

I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and only accessible to the researcher and her supervisors.

** Required*

Yes

No

I understand that the data collected from me will be securely stored and may be used in relevant future research in an anonymised form.

** Required*

Yes

No

I agree to take part in the questionnaire.

** Required*

Yes

No

Name of participant: * *Required*

Participant's electronic signature: * *Required*

Date: * *Required*

Dates need to be in the format 'DD/MM/YYYY', for example 27/03/1980.

(dd/mm/yyyy)

Next >

Appendix D – Questionnaire

Personal Details

Date of birth:

Dates need to be in the format 'DD/MM/YYYY', for example 27/03/1980.

(dd/mm/yyyy)

Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

Languages you are studying at the University of

What is your first language?

Year Abroad destination in Italy:

[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)

Past experiences abroad

Did you go on a study abroad experience before the upcoming one to Italy?

Please select ▾

< Previous

Next >

Yes →

You went on a study abroad experience before:

Where did you go?

How long did you stay there?

How was that experience for you?

Was there anything unexpected or different from what you had imagined before going there? (please provide some details)

What did you think of the host country, the locals and the host culture in that context?

< Previous

Next >

No →

You didn't go on a study abroad experience before...

Have you ever been abroad for a prolonged period of time (three weeks or more)?

Please select ▾

< Previous

Next >

Yes →

You have been abroad for a prolonged period of time:

Where did you go?

When and for how long did you go?

What was the main purpose of that experience abroad (e.g. linguistic improvement, holiday, job, temporary move)?

What did you think of the host country, the locals and the host culture in that occasion?

< Previous

Next >

No → Automatically re-directed to the next section.

The Year Abroad in Italy

Based on what you have heard, studied or simply based on your opinions, what do you expect your destination to be like?

Based on what you have heard, studied or simply based on your opinions, what do you expect the locals there to be like?

If you think of "Italian culture", what are the first thoughts that come to your mind? *(Please give as many details as possible)*

Do you expect to see examples of these in your Year Abroad?

Is there something about this experience in Italy (culturally and personally speaking) that you are particularly looking forward to?

And, is there something you are particularly NOT looking forward to?

What would you say are the four main personal objectives you have for your Year Abroad in Italy?

What are your greatest worries about your Year Abroad in Italy (if any)?

< Previous

Next >

The Year Abroad in general

Based on your previous experience and/or your personal opinions, what may prevent the Year Abroad from being a positive, successful experience?

What would contribute to making the Year Abroad a positive, successful experience?

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Next >

The next possible step(s)

Should you wish to be involved further in the project please tick the box of the step (or steps) you would like to take part in and provide your name and preferred contact details to arrange the next steps:

3 Follow-up Interviews: Each interview would only be 20/25 minutes and would take place in person or via Skype/video call: 1) Before the start of your classes in Italy, 2) At some point during the Christmas break, 3) At the end of your Year Abroad. I would only ask about your personal experience and perceptions/opinions about the Year Abroad :-) * *Required*

- Yes
 No

Buddy system: This is for you to have an Italian "buddy" to help with culture-related things when you need or want. I would only contact you once every 4-6 weeks to ask "how is it going?" and similar questions. Short and simple :-) * *Required*

- Yes
 No

If you agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews **and/or** the buddy system, please provide your name and preferred contact details :-)

[< Previous](#)[Finish ✓](#)

The End!

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire and all the best for your Year Abroad!

Giorgia Faraoni :-)

Appendix E – Prompts for the Three Interviews

Depending on how the interviews went and how much the students spoke (and what they said) without prompts, not all the questions/prompts below were used.

Interview One – At the beginning of the Year Abroad (before they start their classes in Italy)

Hello ***, and thank you again for taking part in this project!

Following up on what you wrote in the questionnaire ...

Past experiences abroad

You said you went on study abroad to ****, how was it when your first arrived?

Was it easy/difficult to settle down/get used to the new environment?

You mentioned *** as being unexpected or different from what you had imagined, were there any other similar instances?

You didn't go on study abroad but you went to *** for a prolonged period of time, did you notice any differences in the culture or habits/manners in your experience?

What effects did those have on you and your experience in that country?

Year Abroad in Italy:

How/why did you choose your destination?

You said that locals may be ***, can I ask why do you think so or if you have already experienced something similar?

What do you think are the greatest differences between British and Italian people?

You mentioned **** among the first thoughts about Italian culture, can I ask why/if you have any experiences/how do you know about it/if anybody told you?

If you had to think of the greatest cultural differences between Italy and the UK, what would you say?

Among your objectives you have ****, may I ask why/how do you plan to achieve it?

Your worries are understandable, but if **** actually happened to you, how do you think you would react?

Year Abroad in general:

You mentioned *****,

Is it based on your personal experience?

Could you give me some examples of that?

How were you prepared for the Year Abroad at University? Was it useful?

Interview Two – *During or just after the Christmas break (after the first 3-4 months in Italy)*

How have these first months been so far?

Is this Year Abroad experience in Italy as you expected?

In what ways? // What was expected and what wasn't?

If you had to choose the 3 (or more) most memorable events (in a good or bad way) that you have experienced (or seen) in your months in Italy, what would they be and why?

What were the greatest challenges that you faced in these months abroad?

Would you say you have learnt something so far from this experience? (...for example...?)

Have your aims/objectives changed so far?

Do you have any new or different ones for the second part of your Year Abroad?

Interview Three – *At the end of their Year Abroad (due to the pandemic this was not in June 2020 as expected but August for June and November for Lucia)*

Now that you have experienced a whole academic year in Italy, what do you think about your Year Abroad experience overall?

What do you think are the most important factors that contributed to your experience?

Do you think your thoughts about Italy, Italians and the Italian culture have changed over these months? If so, in what ways?

The fears that you mentioned in your first (and/or second) interview... (*examples*), did they actually materialise/happen? If so, how did you face them and overcome them?

Do you think you fulfilled/reached your initial hopes/objectives?

- ➔ Yes: in what way? /what do you think was the key to your success?
- ➔ No: how come?(in your opinion)

Looking back at your Year Abroad experience in Italy ... (*one of the following*)

- Is there anything that you would have liked to know before this Year Abroad?
- If you could go back in time and meet the “you” who was about to arrive in Italy (or had just arrived), what advice would you give her/him to live this experience to the fullest?
- What advice would you give to future students coming to Italy for their Year Abroad?

Thinking of the Year Abroad more broadly from the university point of view, is there anything that you would do differently in the preparation to the Year Abroad in Italy or anything that you would add to it?

Appendix F – Prompts for the Buddy System

NB: emails would be formatted slightly differently but would be still kept friendly and informal

First message(s) – *Between four and six weeks after the first interview or the questionnaire (NB: had the buddy not been an interviewee, some extra questions from the first interview schedule would have been added here to better contextualise the messages)*

Hello *name*, how are you?

How have these first weeks been?

How is the settling in going? / How are you settling in?

Have you met any Italians or made any friends in general?

Has anything nice/not nice happened in your 'Italian experience' so far?

What do you usually do in your free time?

Middle message(s) – *Every four to six weeks after the preceding message or interview (between November and May – this timeline changed due to the pandemic but the questions remained similar, with the addition of lockdown- and pandemic-related conversations)*

Hello *name*, how are you?

How has this month gone?

Has anything particularly memorable/noticeable happened?

Have you found out anything new about Italy/the Italian culture/Italians?

How are things going at university? And outside?

If you had to tell me the best two or three events/things (or more!) that happened and two or three "not so nice"/negative events/things so far...what would they be?

Last message – *Planned to be in May or June 2020, four to six weeks after the previous message and BEFORE the final interview – Due to the pandemic, I only used some of these questions in messages with Lucia towards the end of her stay in October/November 2020, but I could not ask some to June (e.g. she did not have a chance to say goodbye or celebrate) therefore I only asked her those I could, during our final interview.*

Hello *name*, how are you?

How is this final month going?

It's almost over, how do you feel about it?

Will you do anything to celebrate/say goodbye?

Has anything particularly memorable/noticeable happened in these past weeks?

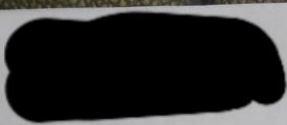

What are the best two or three events/things (or more!) that happened?

And two or three "not so nice"/negative events/things happened in these weeks?

Thinking ahead, what will you miss the most of the Year Abroad once you are back home (if anything)? And what will you not miss (if anything)?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix G – Example of Interview Notes from the Pilot



 VA finished
 => final B

• There are NO right or wrong answers
 • REC
 • Should you want to stop at any point or not answer to anything you know you can, so feel free to tell me

Interview Three – At the end of their Year Abroad (either just before or just after their return to the UK)

- Now that you have experienced a whole academic year in Italy, what do you think about your Year Abroad experience overall?
- What do you think are the most important factors that contributed to your experience?
- Do you think your thoughts about Italy, Italians and the Italian culture have changed over these months? If so, in what ways?
- The fears that you mentioned in your first (and/or second) interview... (*examples*), did they actually materialise/happen? If so, how did you face them and overcome them?
- Do you think you fulfilled/reached your initial hopes/objectives?
 - Yes: in what way? /what do you think was the key to your success?
 - No: how come?(in your opinion)


Looking back at your Year Abroad experience in Italy ... (one of the following)

- Is there anything that you would have liked to know before this Year Abroad?
- If you could go back in time and meet the "you" who was about to arrive in Italy (or had just arrived), what advice would you give ~~to~~ him to live this experience to the fullest?
- What advice would you give to future students coming to Italy for their Year Abroad?

Thinking of the Year Abroad more broadly from the university point of view, is there anything that you would do differently in the preparation to the Year Abroad in Italy or anything that you would add to it?

Spoke a lot, I let him talk
 No interfered (diff ma ✓ xp), Qs already answered
 - No asked
 - asked retired "already mentioned, but just to see if you have anything to add"

Would you like to add something else?

- What do you think. idea. BUSY?
 - Good in principle
 - Ss might take advantage
 - Ss may drop out & No follow thru 2 yr.
-  ? Qs kept to refl on your own exp
 relaxed, open ended
- Ties?

Accommodating, hard / working food, diving, character
 one of the few Erasmus Ss education system interface bureaucratic side accommodation
 L Basics
 like-minded ppl
 successfully live in & experience a cultv ≠ usual one

Appendix H – Detailed Data Collection Timeline

Data Collection Timeline – June

Data Type	Date
Questionnaire	9/09/2019
My first message (intro+Interview) + her reply	27/09/2019
Interview 1	27/09/2019
My first buddy message	01/11/2019
Her reply (weekend in Venice, had wobbles/slump, “the teacher”, worried about her Italian not improving, trying to cope with stress by going out)	11/11/2019
My reply + follow up questions about Venice, teacher and dance classes + question about memorable events	13/11/2019
Message exchanges about Rome	19/11/2019
Her reply to my follow up questions	23/11/2019
My reply	03/12/2019
My message about 2nd Interview	23/12/2019
Her reply with her availability	03/01/2020
My reply and hers to decide day for interview	04/01/2020
Message exchanges to arrange a time	05/01/2020
Second Interview	05/01/2020
My message to check in about the Covid situation	28/02/2020
Her reply – “post-apocalyptic zombie film”	06/03/2020
My reply & buddy message + asking for representative pictures	07/03/2020
Her reply + pictures	08/04/2020
My reply for Easter + follow-up questions	12/04/2020
Her reply and clarifications on the pictures	15/05/2020

My reply	16/05/2020
Her reply (feeling “blessed and privileged” about her living circumstances, asked about me too)	21/05/2020
My reply & questions on the online teaching	01/06/2020
My message to check in and ask about 3rd Interview	30/07/2020
Her reply (in her new uni accommodation, a few busy days ahead but happy to do the interview later)	04/08/2020
My reply + asking about pseudonym	05/08/2020
Her reply (interview arrangements +pseudonym)	11/08/2020
My reply to arrange to the day after the one she suggested	12/08/2020
Her reply to agree and confirm her availability	13/08/2020
My reply (decision for final interview date)	15/08/2020
Exchanges about her sister’s GCSEs results and interview arrangements	16/08/2020
Exchanges about Zoom for interview	17/08/2020
Third Interview	17/08/2020
My message to check how year had started	13/10/2020
Her reply (“I must admit that final year is kicking my butt at the moment 😊😊”)	21/10/2020
My reply	24/10/2020

Specifics on the Spoken Exchanges with June:

Spoken exchanges	Date	Duration (minutes)
Interview 1	27/09/2019	62.41
Interview 2	05/01/2020	73.12
Interview 3	17/08/2020	142.37

Total minutes: 277.9

Total hours: 4.631666667

Data Collection Timeline – Lucia

Data Type	Date
Questionnaire	18/09/2019
Message exchanges to arrange the first interview	20/09/2019
Message exchanges to confirm details of interview	22/09/2019
Message exchanges to help recognise each other	23/09/2019
Interview 1	23/09/2019
Lucia's message asking about half-term in Italy "Ciao English friend" (Flying to Italy the day after but already trying to sort out trips around)	27/09/2019
My reply + many exchanges about holidays in Italy (NB: Lucia started writing in (mostly) Italian already)	28/09/2019
My first buddy message (how has this first month gone?)	01/11/2019
Her reply ("What do you want to know?? Haha 😊😊 I could be here all day")	08/11/2019
My reply with the questions I would have liked her to focus on	08/11/2019
Lucia's Voice Buddy Message reply Part 1 & 2	15/11/2019
Lucia's message checking if I had received her voice messages the day before	16/11/2019
My reply - would listen to them later that evening as I had just arrived to Rome	17/11/2019
Exchanges about Rome, typical desserts/food to try (Lucia sent me a picture of the Amatriciana Pasta), and arrangements to meet up in Rome the following day	18/11/2019
More exchanges to discuss meeting details + the British Council course not very interesting for Lucia, messages throughout the day until we met	18/11/2019

Meeting in Rome (dinner, building rapport, found out June was there too but not joined us, religion, fashion, accents, age, general chat about her life with the family and her relationships with the various members)	18/11/2019
More messages after dinner	18/11/2019
My message to reiterate confidentiality and repeat the suggestion to delete messages after we finish conversations + more exchanges about her going back to the family with presents	19/11/2019
Lucia's voice Buddy Message	22/11/2019
My reply + happy to receive any representative pictures if she had any	01/12/2019
Her reply + mentioned if I wanted to meet up in the UK now that she had come back (a couple of days before this)	18/12/2019
My reply and availability	20/12/2019
Lucia's Merry Christmas message	25/12/2019
Lucia's Happy New Year message and my reply + more exchanges about a UK meet up	01/01/2020
Exchanges about meeting/ flights (but too difficult to arrange in such a busy time)	02/01/2020
More exchanges and mentioning of a video call in the future	03/01/2020
My reply about the video call and asking about plans for the Epiphany	05/01/2020
My reply and what I did for the epiphany + availability for the video call	06/01/2020
Lucia's reply and availability + My reply, no rush to video call (my house move going on too)	07/01/2020
Lucia's reply and asking to video call there and then as she was walking home from school + My reply + exchanges to video call	16/01/2020
Call	16/01/2020

More messages and mentioning of future calls also practising Italian	16/01/2020
My message to arrange interview 2 (before 31/01= my rescue dog would be home) + exchanges and attempt at a video call there and then	25/01/2020
Call	25/01/2020
My message to postpone interview for teaching commitments + picture of my dog (Lucia had asked for one)	28/01/2020
More exchanges to re-arrange interview + Lucia's fear of forgetting Italian and grammar	28/01/2020
Exchanges about grammar exercises I could give her (and did), her need to study, Marvin.	30- 31/01/2020
Exchanges about Marvin and availability- ended up doing the interview that same afternoon	03/02/2020
Interview 2	03/02/2020
Messages about grammar exercises	7- 11/02/2020
Exchanges about schools closed but not lockdown yet, fear of Covid started (Lucia not too worried)	26/02/2020
Exchanges about situation in the house and online teaching (plus pet rabbit death)	28/02/2020
Exchanges about Instagram (Lucia back at school)	2- 3/03/2020
My message to check in on Lockdown situation	12/03/2020
Exchanges about the situation	13/03/2020
Lucia's reply on difficulty to stay sane without leaving the house + asking me about me and my family	18/03/2020
My reply+ mentioning of 'orecchiette' on her IG stories+ idea for quarantine journal (not done) and potential pictures with commentaries (done)	20/03/2020

Call	15/05/2020
Call	02/06/2020
Messages to arrange call	12/06/2020
Call	12/06/2020
Call	07/07/2020
Call	14/07/2020
Messages to arrange call	12/09/2020
Call	12/09/2020
Call	22/09/2020
Call	29/09/2020
Call	15/10/2020
Call	03/11/2020
Interview 3	12/11/2020

Specifics on the Spoken Exchanges with Lucia:

Data Type	Date	Duration (minutes)
Interview 1	23/09/2019	77.53
Voice Buddy Message	15/11/2019	7.18
Voice Buddy Message	15/11/2019	6.45
Voice Buddy Message	22/11/2019	3
Call	16/01/2020	11.23
Call	25/01/2020	30.33
Interview 2	03/02/2020	71.5
Call	07/04/2020	37.31
Call	05/05/2020	132.19
Call	15/05/2020	115.19
Call	02/06/2020	103.37
Call	12/06/2020	85.04
Call	07/07/2020	73.02

Call	14/07/2020	59.11
Call	12/09/2020	46.36
Call	22/09/2020	97.41
Call	29/09/2020	77.58
Call	15/10/2020	97.23
Call	03/11/2020	73.01
Interview 3	12/11/2020	188.24

Total minutes: 1392.28

Total hours: 23.20466667

Appendix I – Example of Interview Preparation Notes

Example 1 – Interview Schedule with prompts, reminders and notes

No wrong answers & No silly Qs!

SINGLE HONOURS Ita?

Why Ita?

Interview One- P2

Perugia x 2m + 1m

why there?

Bologna deft "CULT"

Past experiences abroad

You didn't go on study abroad but you went to *** for a prolonged period of time, did you notice any differences in the culture or habits/manners in your experience?

What effects did those have on you and your experience in that country?

Year Abroad in Italy:

How/why did you choose your destination? *[redacted]*

(altro posto: no proprieta ma dove ti sarebbe piaciuto andare? why?)

You said that locals may be ***, can I ask why do you think so or if you have already experienced something similar? *Locals ~ in England mix*

What do you think are the ^{these are} greatest differences between British and Italian people?
From your exp in Per/Bologna

You mentioned *** ^{the importance of family} thoughts about Italian culture, can I ask why ^{what do you hear in perugia?} if you have any experiences/how do you know about it if ~~anybody~~ ^{anybody} told you?
in what way do you think it's ≠ do UK culture

If you had to think of the greatest cultural differences between Italy and the UK, what would you say?

Among your objectives you have *** ^{to become a local what do you need e why?}, may I ask why/how do you plan to achieve it?
e how?

Co, vocale, mix & forgetting Eng

Your worries are understandable, but if *** normally happened to you, how do you think you would react?
the teenagers actually were naughty / rough

Year Abroad in general:

You mentioned ****, ^{worries} & worries

Is it based on your personal experience? *what are they based from*

Could you give me some examples of that?

How were you prepared for the Year Abroad at University? Was it useful?

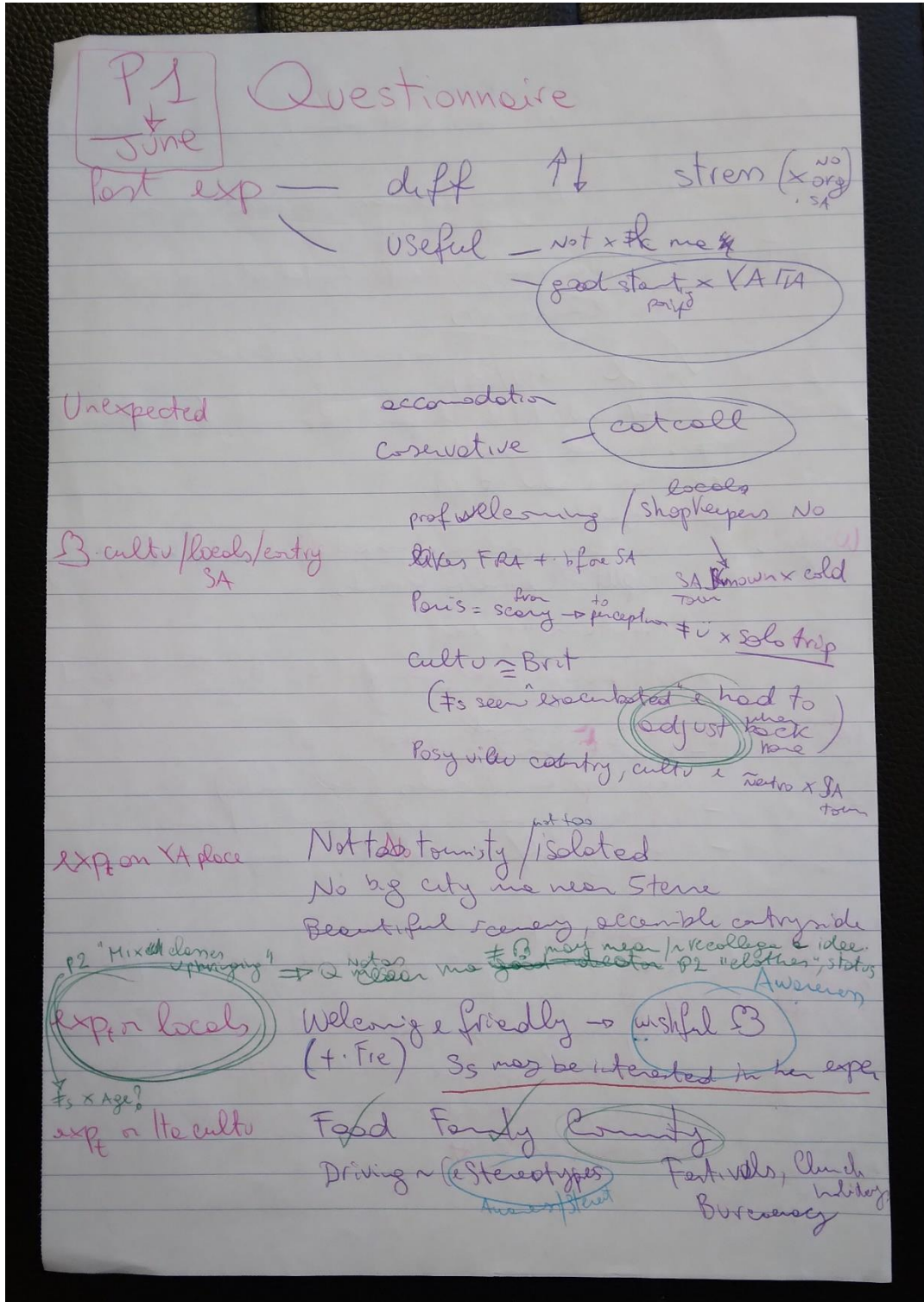
When are you going? Found accom?

Any Qs?

Buddy System = 10 4-6 weeks as ~ cm ve e noticeable events

OK on che se no risp subito e ≡ I may not reply subito

Example 2 – Notes on June’s Questionnaire in preparation for Interview 1



exp to see examples
met (the culture)

✓ Festivals, food community + bureaucracy

Looking forward?

L laid backness, travel, sightsee
exp Italy +++

NOT ↑

Bureaucracy, lack digital options → social situ

loelines

+ spec & realistic

4 Aims

✓ 1 L (→ B2/C1)

✓ 2 friends (ITA) & part community (school, church)

≠ 3 Personal growth

~ 4 Taking adv. of opps

WORRIES

NOT being able to

• Managing loelines → bad off or mental health → less likely
to get out & make friends

• Maintaining diet

• Not being good enough at the start & end

what prevent screen

- Stuck in head
- No ^{initiative} ~~but~~ ^{→ retrieving xer} ~~comp zone~~

Neg exp on locals (cost calls)

++ personal
NO dep det
xt factors

- Not taking care self (mental/phys)

- Allowing self to isolate & shy

What would help making success

very self focussed
on her response / reaction to events

Confident (despite not being)

"dearly to swim" owning the 10 out. depth

Kind to self

adjusting my exp to the reality. situ

Not letting negative exp tarnish exp

Getting involved in community & ppl

Saying yes to it

Appendix J – Original Extracts

<u>Lucia, Call, 12/06/2020</u>
<p>Original - “queste palme grandi... è strano e all’inizio ho pensato ‘questa non è Italia per me’”</p> <p>Translation - “<i>these big palm trees...it’s weird and at the beginning I thought ‘this is not Italy for me’</i>”</p>
<u>Lucia, Call, 14/07/2020</u>
<p>Original G- La mamma è ancora moody o è tornata felice? Hai capito cosa era successo?</p> <p>L- È tornata normale! Non proprio...tu ricordi che io avevo detto qualcosa che lei non aveva capito bene e quindi c’era questo problema, [...] e lei è stata un po’ di più...non triste non arrabbiata ma in senso che lei ha pensato che io avessi giudicato their relationship, in senso che lei era proprio...le scoccia...I could tell when I said it that she wasn’t happy with it, quindi ho pensato ‘it has to be this’, I couldn’t think of anything else it could be e quindi...</p>
<p>Translation</p> <p>G- <i>Is Mamma still moody or is she happy again? Have you understood what happened?</i></p> <p>L- <i>It’s back to normal! Not quite... do you remember that I had said something that she hadn’t understood well and so there was this problem, and she was a bit more...not sad, not angry but in the sense that she thought that I had judged their relationship, in the sense that she was really annoyed... I could tell when I said it that she wasn’t happy with it, so I thought ‘it has to be this’, I couldn’t think of anything else it could be and so...</i></p>
<u>Lucia, Call, 3/11/2020</u>
<p>Original - “quindi mamma e figlia a casa, che è strano perché è come lockdown”</p> <p>Translation - “<i>so Mamma and daughter are at home, which is weird because it’s like lockdown</i>”</p>
<u>Lucia, Call, 15/05/2020</u>
<p>Original - “Sì, adesso è più normale, prima era stranissimo secondo me ma adesso mi piace, è tipo accogliente...”</p> <p>Translation - “<i>Yes, now it’s more normal, before it was very strange in my opinion but now I like it, it’s kind of welcoming</i>”</p>
<u>Lucia, Call, 2/06/2020</u>
<p>Original - “In realtà mi dispiace che mi sento così proprio a chiesa perché bo non lo so...perché in un modo mi piace e in un altro modo non mi piace quindi è strano...”</p> <p>Translation - “<i>Actually I’m sorry that I feel like this about the church because...I don’t know, because in a way I like it and in another way I don’t, so it’s weird...</i>”</p>

Appendix K – Examples of Transcript and Preliminary Analysis

Examples from the extracts presented in my Supervision on March 16th 2020

Extract from the First Buddy Message (1-11/11/2019- Texts)

JUNE: Hi!! First of all I'm so sorry this message is quite late, I was on the way to Venice for the weekend (which was amazing!!) when I got it and I've had a busy few weeks since then! All in all I'm generally okay, **I had quite a few wobbles** last week because our **family dog died** and I had a few **public transport mishaps!** I think **I definitely started to feel myself having a bit of a slump.** But this week **I'm feeling more positive** 😊 the **first month has been very intense!** I had a few **problems with one particular teacher** which was really **stressful** but I've **mostly** managed to resolve that now. I'm really enjoying teaching the **majority** of the classes, the students are **generally** really lovely and enthusiastic, and even when they're not so enthusiastic they're still **fairly** responsive 😊 I'm also getting used to the early mornings (**mostly** 😊) as well as planning lessons etc. My main concern at the moment is that **I'm not speaking enough Italian.** Obviously at school I speak English 90% of the time, and when I'm not at school it's very easy to let lesson planning completely dominate my work/study time rather than factoring Italian study time in for myself! **Trying to balance this out and get more study & speaking time in is my main goal for this month** though so we'll see how it goes ☺ I go to contemporary **dance lessons on Mondays** (which has been a very interesting experience!!) and yesterday I went to a **church** that I think I'll start attending regularly from now on. When I get stressed about things I can have a **tendency to retreat while I panic** sometimes, so **I'm trying really hard to do the opposite of that and be proactive about taking action and finding more opportunities to speak!** There was a lunch after church yesterday so I spoke with quite a few people - it often turned into a mix of Italian and English as one man in particular was quite keen on trying to practice but all the same I think it was a **good way to ease myself into that community and speaking Italian with them as I was already nervous about meeting so many new people!** I hope that makes sense 😊 I hope you're well!! 😊

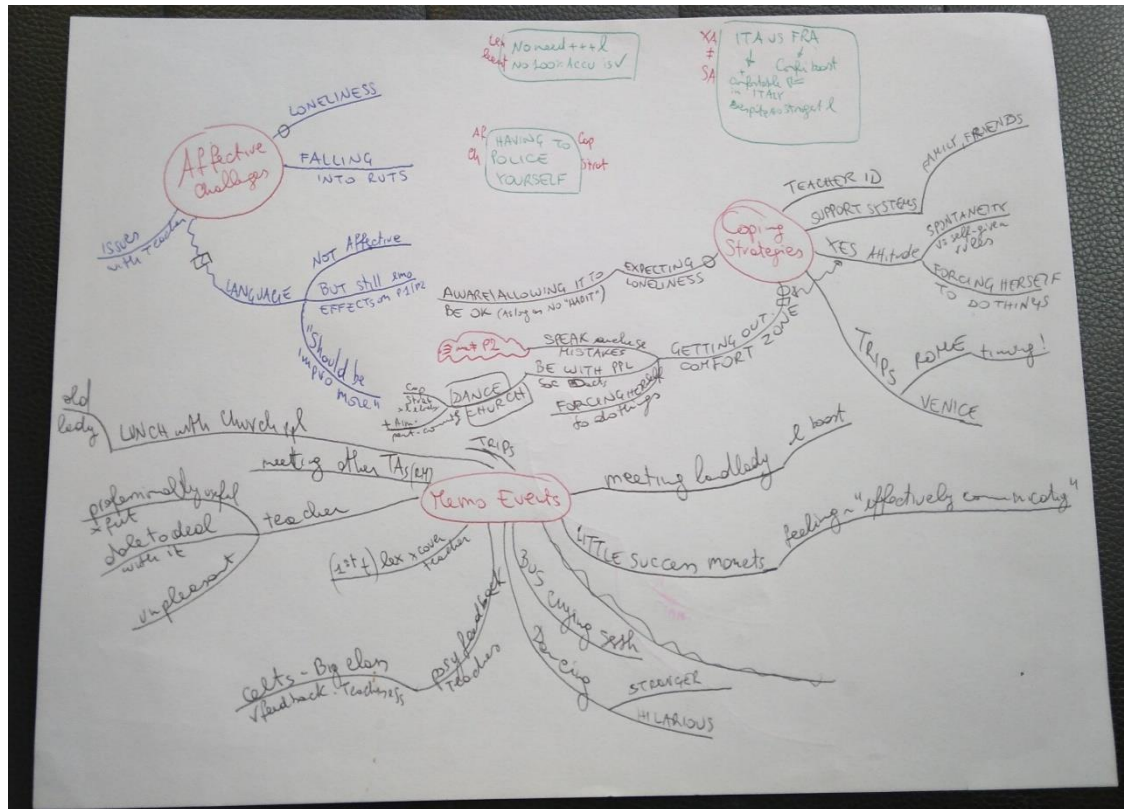
*Here JUNE shows that she has travelled (as she said she wanted to do in the questionnaire) and that she has enjoyed her solo trip (linked to **Independence** and similar to LUCIA before moving in with the family). On the other hand she is also aware of her mental attitude (**Self-awareness**) and is open about her difficulties. However, it's also worth noticing that in her "slump" period she didn't contact me and*

got back in touch when “feeling more positive” whilst, on the contrary, LUCIA texted me and called me in a moment of **boredom/dissatisfaction** and shared her negative thoughts with me at the time of their occurring. JUNE reports hers back, which means they may be less vivid (and she is probably more detached from them) and she may word them in a way that reflects more what she thinks I’d want to hear rather than her actual thoughts. This difference may be a reflection of their **Coping strategies** (isolating for JUNE, talking about it for LUCIA) but it could also be partly due to the difference in the relationship with me, which is a factor that needs some attention (should this be a theme? I’m thinking about it, if not a theme, there will have to be a mini section/paragraph somewhere). LUCIA speaks to me more but she doesn’t necessarily give me relevant data all the time. On the other hand, JUNE’s fewer exchanges are always very rich and focused so overall the amount of relevant data may be similar.

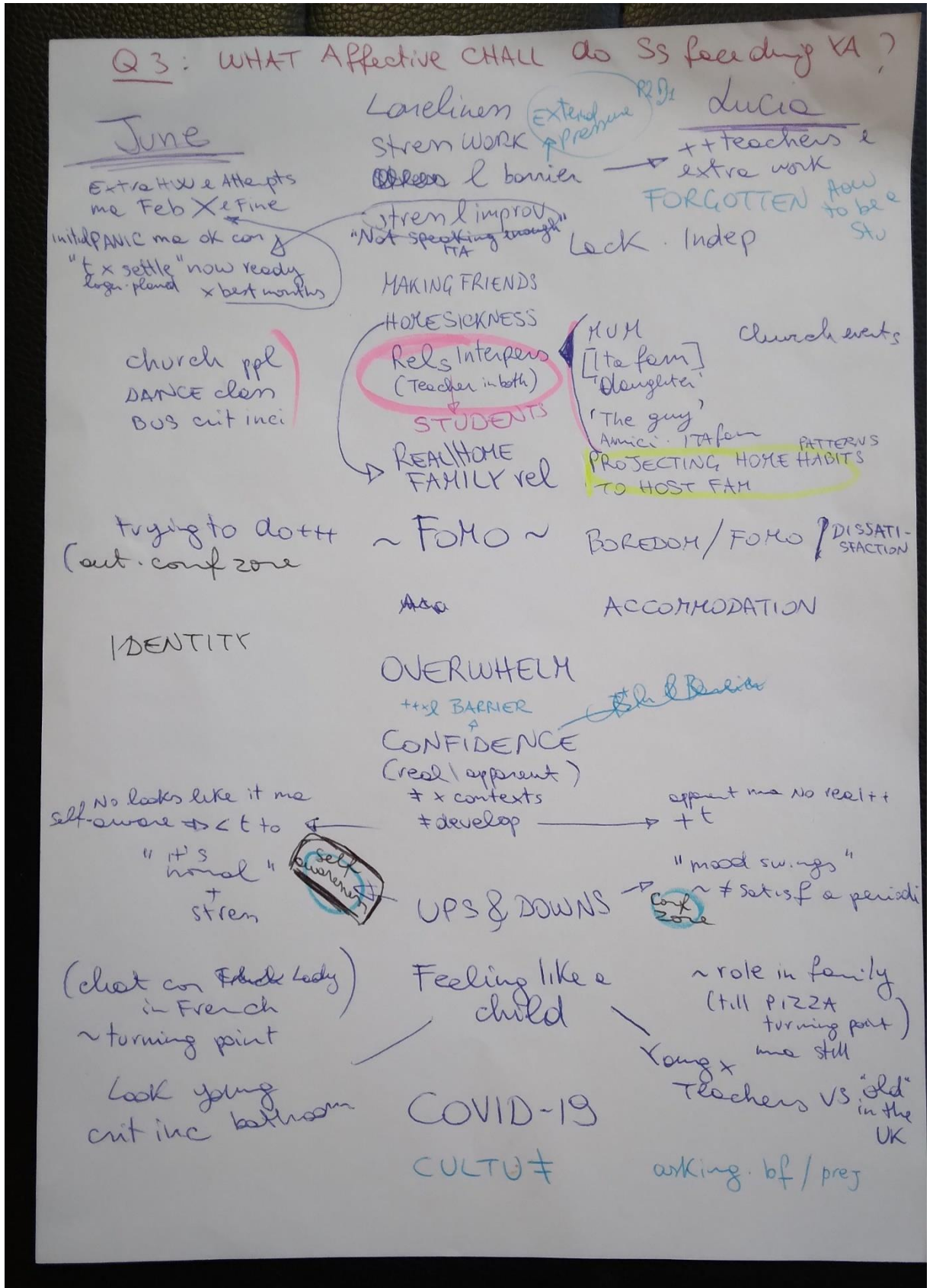
The “**Not speaking enough Italian**” (temporary title) is recurring in both and high in their priorities (although LUCIA says she is more interested in becoming Italian than in the language itself). That “**one particular teacher**” is not a theme (for now) but it is the key element of an important critical incident (or series of them). **Stress** is another recurring theme in JUNE’s case and it directly refers to my RQ3 but I’ll see how it evolves as it may end up being combined with other themes. **In the section highlighted in yellow JUNE really seems to be trying hard to see the positive side of the not-so-positive situations she’s faced.** Again, this could be a sign of her **Coping strategy** of looking at the bright side and focus on the positive, but it could also reflect her attempts to tell me what she thinks I want to hear. **Both JUNE and LUCIA gave themselves short-term linguistic goals like this,** although they didn’t always manage to achieve them. The way they reacted to the ‘not achieving them’ is also different as it seemed that, in hindsight, JUNE had a more ‘philosophical view’ of it -as a necessary step to get where she is (see Int2). On the other hand, in the same timeframe, LUCIA seemed quite dissatisfied with it. However, there are so many other factors involved in this aspect that I won’t take it as a fixed way in which they react, it’s worth noticing it but I’ll keep an eye to see if there are other similar instances. More examples of JUNE’s **Self Awareness** and her **Coping strategies**, plus **Church critical incidents** (which relate to the broad-for-now theme of **Social Interactions**). This mix of Italian and English is present also in LUCIA but their attitudes differ as LUCIA explicitly says that feels like a child and she doesn’t speak when in group situations as she feels uncomfortable. JUNE mentions the same feeling of discomfort but also says that she’s learnt from her SA in France that it’s better if she speaks and makes mistakes rather than staying quiet for fear of feeling awkward (see Int1). This relates again to the themes of **Previous Experiences**, **Language barrier** and also to my RQ4 and the different ways in which they cope with the linguistic challenges.

Appendix L – Examples of Preliminary Manual Thematic Mapping

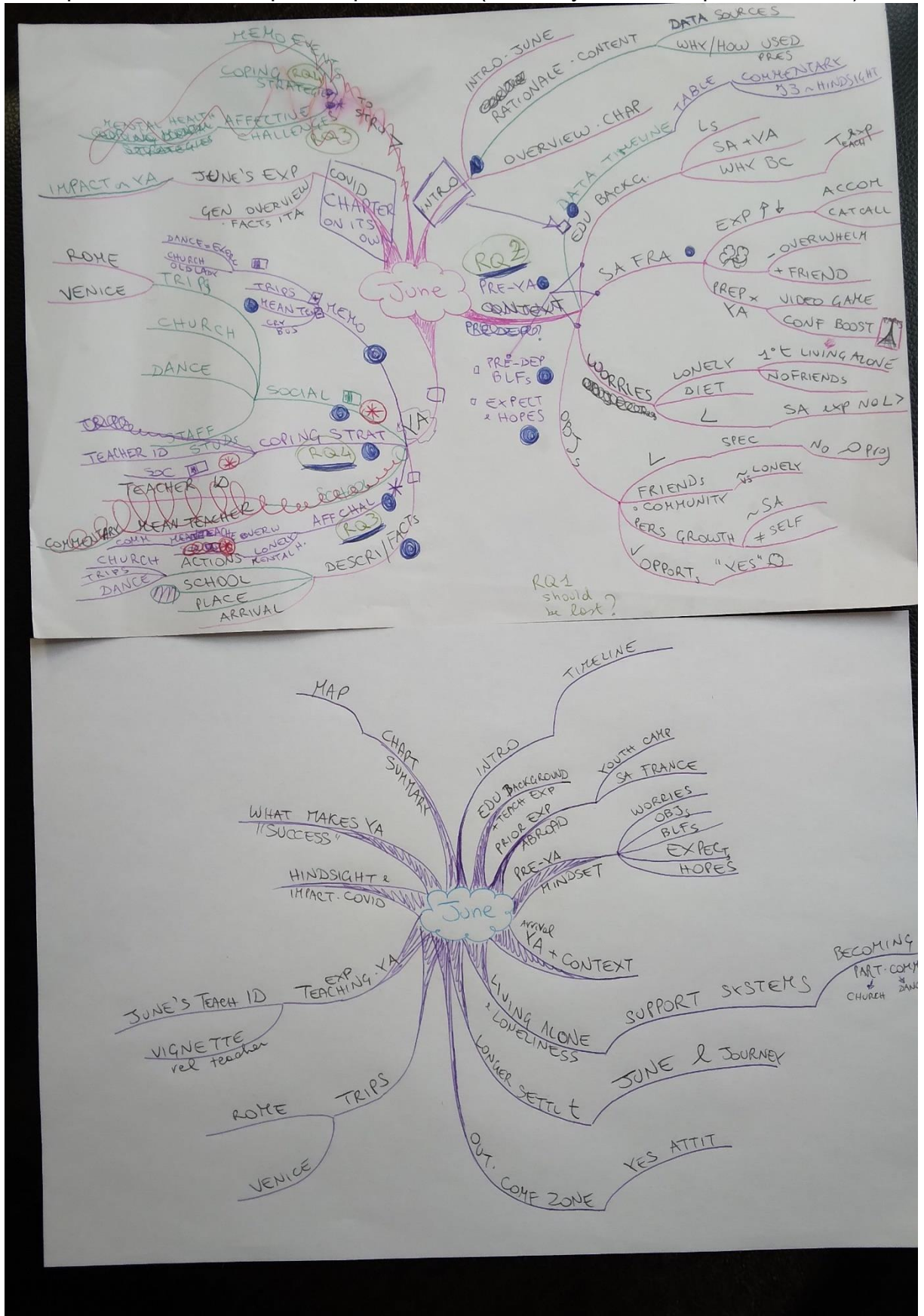
Example 1 – Based on critical incidents and descriptive codes (June's case)



Example 2 – Starting from the Research Questions (RQ3 in the picture)

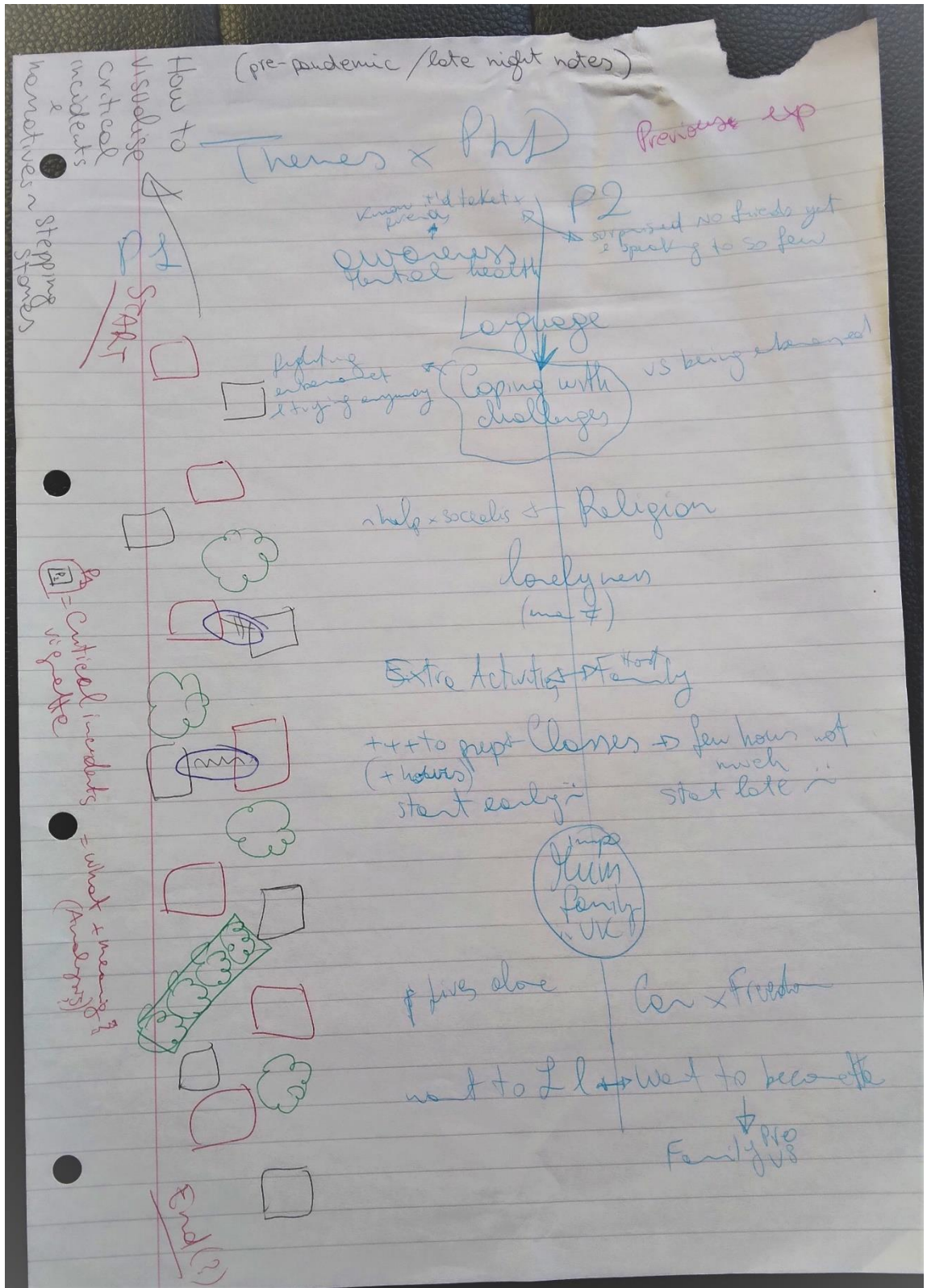


Example 3 – June's Chapter Map evolution (February 2021 – September 2021)

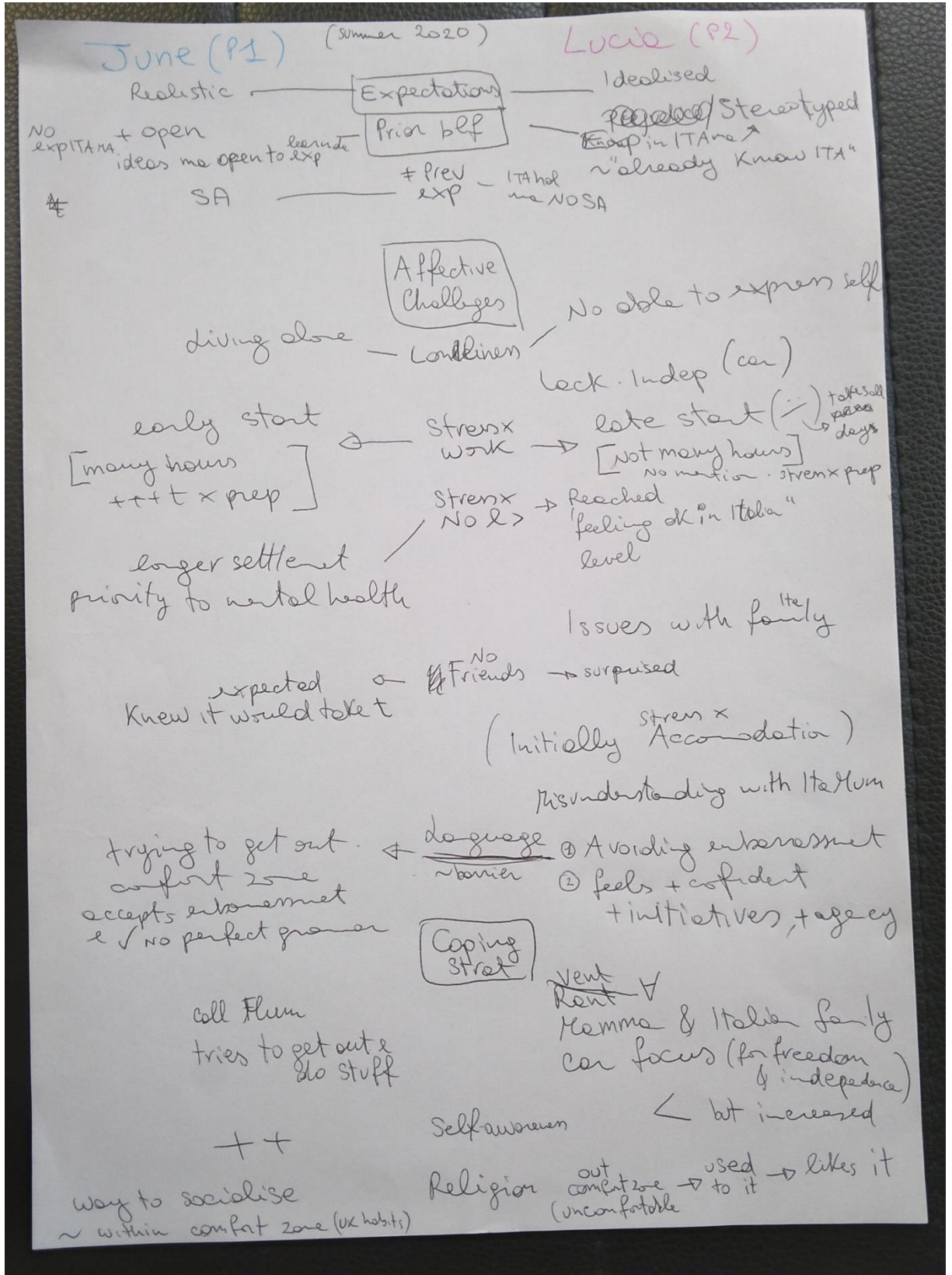


Appendix M – Evolution of Themes

Examples 1 – Preliminary Themes (before the pandemic started)

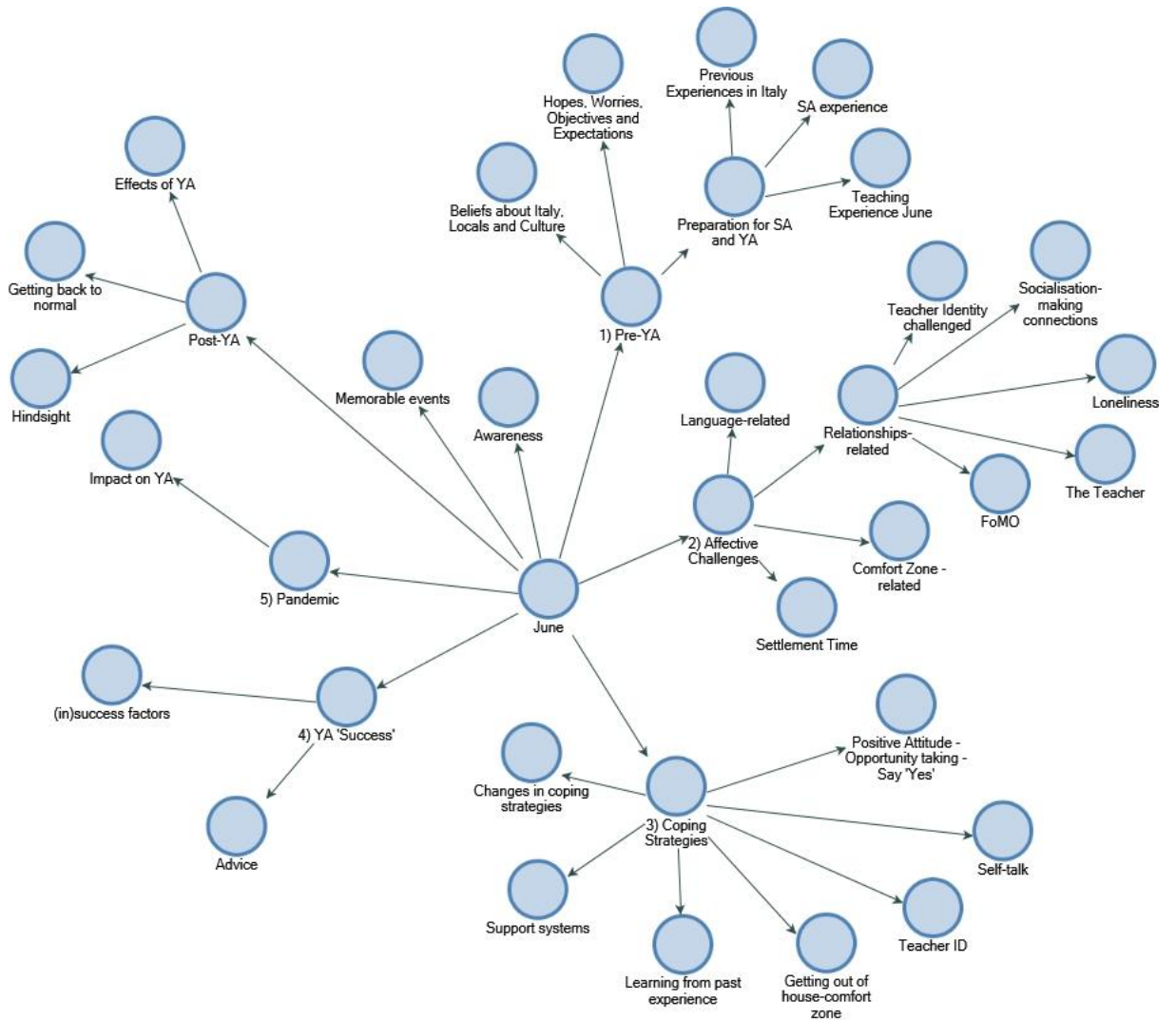


Example 2 – Preliminary Themes (summer 2020)



Appendix N – Thematic Maps (Nvivo12)

Example 1 - Thematic map on June



Example 2 - Thematic map on Lucia

