

Predictors of Language Learning Achievement: Study Abroad Programs as Language Learning Contexts (Part II)

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Abstract

The second part of this paper is a review of ten empirical studies that study language gains in Study Abroad sojourns, five of them focusing on the development of written skills and five focusing on oral skills. The study finishes with conclusions about the importance of Study Abroad programs in the 21st century and how they are being promoted by universities as ideal opportunities for second language learning and personal development.

Keywords: Predictors of Language Learning, Study Abroad, Learning Contexts

Título: Factores para Predecir el Aprendizaje de Lenguas: Programas de Estudio en el Extranjero y Contextos de Aprendizaje (Parte II).

Resumen

La segunda parte de este artículo es una revisión de diez estudios empíricos sobre los beneficios lingüísticos que se producen tras una experiencia en el extranjero: cinco de ellos se centraron en la expresión escrita y otros cinco estudiaron el desarrollo de la expresión oral. El estudio termina con unas conclusiones sobre la importancia de los programas de estudio en el extranjero en el siglo XXI y sobre cómo las universidades los están fomentando como una oportunidad ideal para el aprendizaje de segundas lengua.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de lenguas, Contextos de aprendizaje, Estudio en el extranjero.

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INTRODUCTION

Having dealt with a synthesis of research findings of potential language learning predictors and how they apply to SA in Part I of this study, Part II contains a review of empirical studies on SA dealing with productive skills, both writing and oral, and how they may be affected by a study abroad experience. The ten selected articles have been published in prestigious venues in the field of Applied Linguistics and five of them focus on the development of written skills, whereas the other five focus on oral skills. This second part of the paper reviews the central elements of these empirical studies, namely: aims and research questions, methodology, results and discussion.

PART II: RESEARCH ON STUDY ABROAD. A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

II.1. Overview and criteria

For this second part of the work, nine empirical articles that deal with SA and how it affects L2 learning and language skills have been thoroughly analysed. Four of them focus on the development of writing skills, four on oral skills and one deals with both skills, resulting in five papers dealing with each skill. They have been published in prestigious venues in Applied Linguistics, including in *RESLA* (Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada), the *EUROSLA Year Book* (European Second Language Association), the *Modern Language Journal*, *Foreign Language Annals* as well as in edited books published by prestigious publishers (John Benjamins, Multilingual Matters). In order to simplify the analysis and in order not to quote the authors repeatedly, here is the list of articles and an identification number:

Writing skills:

- (1) Llanes & Serrano (2011)
- (2) Pérez-Vidal & Barquin (2014)
- (3) Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau (2009)
- (4) Sasaki (2007)
- (5) Sasaki (2009)

Oral skills:

- (6) Freed (1995)
- (7) Llanes & Serrano (2011)
- (8) Martinsen (2008)
- (9) Muñoz & Llanes (2014)
- (10) Valls-Ferrer & Mora (2014)

Apart from the main distinction between studies that focus either on writing or oral skills, there are three types of study in this list: articles (1) and (7) compare participants in SA experiences of different lengths, a 2 month sojourn and a 3 month one; articles (4), (5), (6) and (9) compare SA participants to participants who have stayed AH, receiving formal instruction; and articles (2), (3), (8) and (10) are longitudinal studies that focus on how participants have developed their skills after a SA experience. It should also be noted that Llanes and Serrano (2011) is numbered (1) and (7) since it studies both written production and oral skills. Another relevant aspect of this body of work is that (2) can be viewed as an extension of (3) as both studies used similar data collection procedures and instruments and coding although the number of participants increased substantially, among other differences. Similarly, Sasaki (2009) also doubled the amount of participants and modified some aspects of the study carried out years before (Sasaki, 2007). In what follows, these empirical studies will be analyzed in terms of their aims and research questions, main methodological characteristics and main results obtained.

II.2. Aims and research questions

The first five articles of the list deal with SA and how it affects the students' writing skills so written production, sometimes specified as academic, is the main focus of the research questions of all five articles. As mentioned in II.1., Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) and Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014) are related. On the one hand, both looked into long-term retention and investigated if students maintained what they have acquired while abroad months after their return. On the other hand, they collected data at four different points both before and after the SA experience, thereby trying to compare the gains of the SA period and the periods of formal instruction. Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) also tried to identify individual features that could affect written production, an aspect that was not studied in Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014) but that was included in Sasaki (2009), who investigated how motivation could affect the development writing skills. Finally, although all articles deal with written production, (2), (3) and (4) focused on the manner in which SA affects writing abilities and strategies such as fluency, planning, or organization.

In terms of oral skills, the five articles analyzed are more varied in their aims. While Llanes and Serrano (2011) and Martinsen (2008) dealt with general improvements in oral proficiency, such as fluency, complexity, lexical richness or accuracy, articles (6), (9) and (10) are more specific: both Freed (1995) and Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014) focused on changes in fluency and Muñoz and Llanes (2014) focused on perceived foreignness of accent (FA) and how it develops after a SA sojourn. Apart from those main aims, articles (8), (9) and (10) dealt with factors and individual differences that may affect the development of oral skills. Both (9) and (10) study how input and the amount of contact with native speakers during the SA experience may have affected their development of fluency and FA, with the first article dealing with the factor of age and the latter focusing on how initial fluency may have influenced in their development.

II.3. Methodology

The analysis of the methodological characteristics of the studies under review will be approached globally, i.e. without distinguishing between those articles focused on written production or those that investigated oral skills.

II.3.1. Participants

First of all, the number of participants is an aspect that varies greatly across articles, with article (4) including as few as 13 participants and article (2) with 73 participants and 28 native speakers. The number of participants is in direct relationship with the comprehensiveness of the research reported and, while having more participants may make the research more difficult to carry out, it will also make results more generalisable. As mentioned in II.1., articles (1) and (7) compared participants who have been abroad either 2 or 3 months and there was almost the same number of participants in each case. Articles (4), (5), (6) and (9) compared participants in a SA context to participants AH and included a similar amount of participants in each learning context, except for article (5), in which only 5 participants stayed at home and 17 went abroad. Finally, articles (2), (3) and (9) included an important number of native speakers in their research (28, 19 and 18, respectively), who provide a "useful way to operationalise language proficiency. Thus, they were used as baseline data against which to measure developmental changes" (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009, p.276).

As for the participants' L1 and L2 studies (1), (2), (3), (7), (9) and (10) included participants who were bilingual in Spanish and Catalan and whose L2 was English. Conversely, both articles by Sasaki (4 and 5) featured participants whose L1 was Japanese and their L2 English. Furthermore, participants from both articles (6) and (8) had English as their native language but those in Freed (1995) were learning French and those in Martinsen (2008) were learning Spanish as their L2.

In terms of gender, five of the ten articles reviewed (1, 5, 7, 8 and 9) did not mention whether their participants were male or female, either because they decided it was not relevant for their results or because they did not collect that data in the first place. The rest of articles reveal a clear preponderance of female participants, while articles (6) and (10) included three times as many female participants as male ones, articles (2) and (3) include ten times as many female participants, 67 females and 6 males in the case of Pérez-Vidal and Barquin (2014). While statistics show that more female students than male ones enrol in SA programs, it could be argued that the same differences in attitude and beliefs that make more female students take SA courses could be what makes them participate in these studies more than their male counterparts, but this is just a conjecture and suggestion for a dimension that could be looked into in future research.

In terms of L2 proficiency level, articles (2), (3), (4), (6) and (10) may use different frameworks but they all specify the level of proficiency of their participants, ranging from low to advanced. The rest of articles, however, do not provide a specific level and instead describe for how long they have studied the L2, varying from months up to 8 years in the case of Llanes and Serrano (2011).

Finally, as for the participants' age, there is a clear trend in this type of research to study participants in the 18-30 years old range. Most studies mention the range of ages of their participants, and they usually specify the mean age of the participants as well. Articles (4), (5), (6) and (9) do not follow the same formula: Sasaki (2007) and (2009) only include 20 and 18 year old students, respectively, and Freed (1995) does not even mention the age of the participants in the study but mentions that they are undergraduates, which means they are probably around 18 years old, as most participants in this kind of studies. Muñoz and Llanes (2014) is the only article of the list that clearly differentiates two groups of participants, half of them being 10-11 years old and the other half belonging to the 19-33 interval.

II.3.2. Data collection procedures and instruments

These articles display three different models of data collection. The most common one (1, 6, 7, 8, 9) is the pre-test and post-test design, which includes a test before departure and another one (which can be the same or a different one), during or after the SA experience. Conversely, Sasaki (2007) collected data at three points: the middle of the participants' third year, which was their departure, the middle of their fourth year and the end of that year. Sasaki modified that model in Sasaki (2009) and collected data at four times: when participants were pre-freshmen, mid-sophomore, mid-junior and mid-senior. Articles (2), (3) and (10) belong to the SALA project and also used a procedure with four data collection times across a thirty month period: T1 was an initial test, T2 took place after six months of formal instruction, T3 took place after three months of SA and T4 was 15 months after their return, in order to test if they retained linguistic gains.

The first five articles all included a composition score, for which students were given as little time as 15 minutes in the case of Llanes and Serrano (2011) and as long as 60 minutes in Sasaki (2009). Article (3) also included self report questionnaires and article (4) had the participants take the Secondary Level of Proficiency test and videotaped them during the writing process. Furthermore, (4) then interviewed the participants, showing them the recordings and discussing them with the participants themselves, a similar procedure to that used in Sasaki (2009), in which participants were also interviewed about their writing processes, strategies and motivation.

As for the studies dealing with oral skills, their more varied research questions guiding them explains the variation in the procedures used. Articles (6), (9) and (10) include semi-guided interviews as their main data collection procedure. Students in Llanes & Serrano (2011) were asked to tell a story based on a series of pictures and participants in Martinsen (2008) took a battery of tests, including the test of oral language skills, the inventory of cross-cultural sensitivity, the survey of motivational intensity and, only in the post-test, the language contact profile and the survey of host family relationship. Muñoz & Llanes (2008) accompanied the interviews with a picture elicited narration and a questionnaire in the amount and type of L2 contact in the case of the post-test. Similarly, Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014) also used the interviews, which were conducted in pairs in this case, with the SA Conditions questionnaire, which includes questions about different aspects of the SA experience, such as accommodation, working experience or social interactions with native speakers.

II.3.3. Data coding and analysis procedures

The coding and analysis of data was carried out by the authors themselves in six of the articles reviewed (1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10). Sasaki, however, preferred to leave that task to two EFL specialists in articles (4) and (5). Similarly, in Freed (1995) the prepared trainer who administered the pre-test and post-test was also in charge of correcting them and analysing the data. Muñoz and Llanes (2014), who were studying variation in foreignness of accent, left this task to post-graduate students, who rated FA in a seven point Likert scale and consequently did not need to be specialists to do so. In articles (6) and (8), both dealing with oral skills, the trainer and the author also had the help of a panel of native speakers, who rated fluency in the first case and helped correct and analyse the data from the tests provided in Martinsen (2008).

In terms of statistical tests, articles (1, 2, 3, 6, 7) made use of t-tests and articles (2, 3, 4, 9, 10) used analyses of variance ANOVA. Both are statistical models that are employed to verify statistical significance between tests and participants in order to know if results can be generalised or not. Apart from that, Freed (1995) also used other tests such as chi-squared and regression analyses.

As for the data measured in the five studies devoted to writing skills, articles (1), (2) and (3) measured similar features, namely: words per t-unit, words per sentence and words per clause; errors per t-unit, errors per word and errors per clause; and all three of them use Guiraud's Index for lexical complexity. Articles (2) and (3) also share two more features that were not measured in (1): words per minute and the Coordination Index. Conversely, Sasaki (2007, 2009) used in both of his articles the English Composition Profile, which measures content, organisation, vocabulary and language use, mechanics and planning.

Once again, since the articles selected for oral skills are more varied than the ones selected for written production, the aspects of language measured are also more varied. Freed (1995), Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014) focused on fluency and studied similar dimensions: amount of speech, rate of speech, unfilled pauses and length of fluent speech runs. In Freed (1995) participants were also rated from 1 to 7 based on their perceived fluency, did the Oral Proficiency Interview and were measured for frequency of filled pauses, repairs, and clusters of dysfluencies. Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014), however, also measured phonation time ratio and pause duration. Participants in Martinsen (2008) took a battery of tests, described in II.4. and the data resulting from each of those tests was analysed. As for Muñoz and Llanes (2008), they only measured the degree of foreignness of accent of the participants. Finally, Llanes and Serrano (2011) used the same measures for both gains in written production and oral skills: oral complexity, Guiraud's Index for lexical complexity, errors per t-unit and they replaced word per t-unit by syllables per minute.

II.4. Results

Llanes and Serrano (2011), whose main aim was to compare students who had been abroad two or three months, found no gains in one month in either written production or oral skills. They argued that, since their participants were advanced learners, they may not reflect their gains; the instruments and tests used may not have been adequate for such a short amount of time; or simply that one month may be too short a period of time to see gains. Sasaki (2009), however, carried out her research over forty months and found that students who had been abroad had made more improvements than those who had stayed at home and that, in general, the longer the sojourn, the better. Her Japanese participants from the SA group scored higher in composition scores than those from the AH group, an advantage that the author attributed to SA learners using more materials, possessing meta-knowledge about writing and practising more than their AH counterparts, who remain in a "preactional phase". Sasaki had also found out in previous work (Sasaki, 2007) that SA

participants were superior to the AH group in quantity, speed, organization, planning, motivation and confidence, but they both showed similar attention to the strategy of translating from L1 to L2. Similarly, both articles (2) and (3) showed that students who had been abroad converged with the native speaker control group in terms of fluency, syntactic complexity and lexical complexity but not in accuracy since the NS group had virtually no errors at all. Both articles came to the conclusion that while periods of formal instruction had been beneficial, periods abroad had been even more beneficial to their written production. Another relevant result was that at T4, fifteen months upon return, students had not improved but they had maintained the gains of the SA sojourn. Therefore, while one month may not prove to be enough for improvements to show, as reported by Llanes and Serrano (2011), it seems that the longer the programme, the more progress students will make and they will even retain those gains months after their return. In conclusion, it seems that students who go abroad surpass AH students in practically aspect, since the latter group remains in a "preactional phase", as Sasaki (2009) summed up.

In terms of articles dealing with oral skills, *Llanes and Serrano (2011)* found that one month abroad did not provide any gains, as explained above. *Martinsen (2008)*, nevertheless, found that a period of six weeks abroad, just a bit longer than one month, did prove to be beneficial and short-term programs abroad can in fact have a positive impact in students' learning. Martinsen argued that pre-program levels of intercultural sensitivity was the only variable studied that could predict language learning and explained that participants had moved from intermediate-low to intermediate-mid, according to ACTF guidelines, which seems to support Llanes and Serrano's explanation for their results, participants being already advanced and therefore not showing much improvement after the month abroad. *Freed (1995)* had to face a similar problem, since SA participants seemed to have achieved a greater fluency but it was true that SA students already had a higher level of proficiency than the AH group before departure. Consequently, they limited the study to those students with a lower pre-fluency ratings and found that the SA group did improve in fluency, particularly in rate of speech. Similarly, *Valls-Ferrer and Mora (2014)* attribute greater gains in fluency to pre-departure level of fluency, as well as the amount of language contact while abroad. Their research showed that SA participants improved their fluency greatly but did not actually reach native speaker fluency. Finally, in their study on perceived foreignness of accent, *Muñoz and Llanes (2014)* concluded that the SA group made more improvements in their foreignness of accent than the AH group, as reported by raters, and explained that there was "a statistically significant main effect for learning context but not for age nor for the interaction between learning context and age" (p. 439). They argued that the disadvantage of the AH group could be explained by the lack of phonetic instruction and the lower amount of practice of oral skills. Therefore, contact with native speakers seems to be one of the main predictors for the development of oral skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The ten studies reviewed in Part II reflect some very relevant results, such as the advantage of the SA groups over the AH ones in virtually every aspect, including dimensions such as motivation and confidence apart from linguistic gains. It seems that sojourns as short as six weeks can already have a beneficial effect on students and research shows that gains tend to be kept months after their return. In conclusion, SA programmes represent ideal opportunities for the development of L2 competences. This explains their popularity among university students all over the world and also justifies their promotion in many university settings. However, what our study also evidences is that for SA programmes to be successful, certain conditions (pertaining to the L2 learners and the programmes themselves) have to be given, hence the need for educational authorities to take into account research findings on SA programmes.

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