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Book Review: Language acquisition in study abroad and formal instruction contexts

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Book Review: Language acquisition in study abroad and formal instruction contexts.

Pérez-Vidal, C. (Ed.). (2014). *Language acquisition in study abroad and formal instruction contexts*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands/Philadelphia, PA: Benjamins.

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A very welcome addition to the field of second language (L2) acquisition in study abroad (SA) and classroom-based contexts is Pérez-Vidal's (2014) edited volume, *Language acquisition in study abroad and formal instruction contexts*. The growing number of adult language learners who study abroad—often in order to complement formal language instruction at home—is just one demonstration of the need for this volume. Pérez-Vidal has assembled a compilation that takes research in a new direction in order to intensify and improve investigation. This journey guides us beyond the traditional “at-home vs. SA” comparative method and toward multi-faceted analyses that are sensitive to individual and dynamic factors within groups. Two key issues, among others, that readers will surely appreciate from this volume are the implications for SA and student mobility policies and the illumination of the individual and educational factors that affect L2 development and lead to successful SA experiences.

One of the many strengths of the book is its consistent focus on the Study Abroad and Language Acquisition (SALA) Project, a large-scale research project that sought to measure changes in English-as-a-foreign-language students' linguistic abilities, motivations, language beliefs, and intercultural awareness while studying and residing abroad. Cristina Sanz begins the dialogue with the SA research field in Chapter 1 by contextualizing and rationalizing the SALA Project in a discussion of previous research and pointing out methodological shortcomings. Her disciplinary motivation for a longitudinal study such as the SALA Project sets the stage for PART I, which provides an overview of the SALA Project. In Chapter 2, Carmen Pérez-Vidal describes the general goal of the project, its research questions, and the empirical methods that motivate and guide the investigations presented in the subsequent chapters. John Beattie in Chapter 3 provides important details behind the SALA Project's programming and administration. This chapter provides enhancements for future programming and offers advice to interested SA leaders and administrators.

PART II consists of nine studies reporting empirical findings from the SALA Project while comparing them with the formal instruction context. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on oral production and accuracy. In Chapter 4, Maria Juan-Garau finds significant improvement—both short- and long-term—for L2 grammatical accuracy in speech production, especially among learners who began the SA experience with lower levels of accuracy. In Chapter 5, Margalida Valls-Ferrer and Joan Mora also demonstrate that oral fluency increased while abroad, but, instead of being modulated by pre-departure accuracy, the amount of contact with native speakers while abroad seemed to be more influential.

Phonological development is the topic of Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6, Pilar Avello and Ann Rebecca Lara explore pronunciation accuracy, reporting that length of time abroad may only have marginal effects. The study shows that three months was not enough time to make gains in

pronunciation accuracy and six months was barely enough to show minor gains. In Chapter 7, Joan Mora demonstrates that L2 learners did not improve when it came to phonological discrimination after a SA experience, whereas learners in formal instruction contexts did show improvement.

In Chapters 8 through 10, the volume transitions to listening performance, academic writing, and lexico-grammatical development. In Chapter 8, John Beattie, Margalida Valls-Ferrer, and Carmen Pérez-Vidal find that listening comprehension improved for SA learners, especially for novice learners, but not for learners in a formal instruction context. In Chapter 9, Carmen Pérez-Vidal and Elisa Barquin similarly show that SA learners, but not formal instruction learners, showed improvement in L2 writing abilities. Partially following the same trend, Maria Juan-Garau, Juana Salazar-Noguera, and José Igor Prieto-Arranz show in Chapter 10 that lexico-grammatical abilities improve for *both* SA and formal instruction learners.

The last two studies in PART II look at motivation, beliefs, and intercultural awareness. Mireia Trenchs-Parera, and Maria Juan-Garau argue in Chapter 11 that formal instruction may result in higher linguistic self-confidence while SA might foster a reduction of anxiety by coming to understand the importance of L2 listening skills. Elena Merino and Pilar Avello explore student writings in Chapter 12, revealing that SA learners were much more open to the target culture compared to formal instruction learners. This positive effect, however, was not retained over time by the SA learners.

PART III consists of the concluding Chapter 13 by Robert DeKeyser in which he comments on and synthesizes the findings of the SALA Project while situating them in the wider body of research on SA and L2 development. Importantly, DeKeyser outlines fruitful areas of inquiry that are still unresolved and offers useful recommendations on how to better integrate quantitative and qualitative methods into future work.

Pérez-Vidal's volume shows us that the learning context matters but that the differences we observe within and between SA and formal learning contexts are not generalizable for all language learners or in every area of language learning. Indeed, one complex issue that the volume may face is whether or not its findings can be replicated among typical learners, for instance, in the United States. Given that most learners in the studies in Pérez-Vidal's volume were balanced bilinguals learning an L3, it may make the reader wonder whether these results could be applicable to learners just beginning to learn an L2. Furthermore, while readers will appreciate the volume's incorporation of *cognition* into research on SA, these factors were mostly related to psychosocial variables such as motivation and cultural awareness. Although these factors are novel and important to consider, future work should explore cognitive processing issues such as accessing or losing access to a language during a SA experience (see Linck, Kroll, & Sunderman, 2009).

A noteworthy strength of the volume is its data from a wide-range of linguistic domains including phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse along with its in-depth discussions on the effects of individual differences and length of sojourn abroad. This innovative volume is a commendable resource not only because of its timely research objectives and cutting-edge methodological approaches, but also because of its practical implications for a deeper understanding of SA programming and administration.

Reference

Linck, J., Kroll, J., & Sunderman, G. (2009). Losing access to the native language while immersed in a second language: Evidence for the role of inhibition in second-language learning. *Psychological Science*, 20, 1507–1515.