

Context and Learner Attitude in Oral L3 Development: insights from native and non-native performance after a stay abroad

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Introduction

There is already a substantial body of research, starting around the 1990s, devoted to the analysis of stay abroad (SA) effects on SLA. Collentine and Freed (2004), DuFon and Churchill (2006), and DeKeyser (2007) constitute good examples. Most studies have focused on gains in specific skills in individual programs. Nevertheless, a new line of research in recent years has compared gains in SA contexts with those attained in at home (AH) courses, whether formal language classrooms or immersion programs. Studies have so far investigated lexical, grammatical, phonological, pragmatic and sociolinguistic gains as a result of SA. As for linguistic skills, reading, writing, and listening have received scant attention. Speaking has been by far the most researched skill, since improvement in this area is usually regarded as the major goal of study abroad. Such research, however, has produced mixed results so far.

The present study contributes new evidence on the effects of a SA on speaking. We try to provide a profile of oral development for a group of advanced learners of English. We additionally present information on the effects of the AH formal instruction context that precedes our subjects' SA. Native and non-native performance on the same oral task has also been compared. Finally, we have looked at how individual differences in attitude interact with oral proficiency gains and can help predict them.

Method

Participants in the study were 20 EFL Catalan/Spanish bilingual students enrolled in the Translation and Interpreting Degree at Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona). We also collected data from 19 native speakers (NSs) of English, exchange undergraduate students at the University of the Balearic Islands. As regards treatment, students had no oral skills training during SA, yet practice according to individuals' agency and conditions, while AH they had no oral skills training and scarce opportunities for practice.

Data were gathered over two years at three different collection times: T1, upon university enrollment; T2, after two terms of AH formal instruction treatment and prior to SA; and T3, following a three-month compulsory SA in an English-speaking country. As regards data collection instruments, we used a two-

way, problem-solving, open-ended role-play with a 7' time limit to gather oral data. In the role play, one of the students acted as a decorator and the other one as a client. They had to discuss four different living room decorations and reach an agreement. Participants also answered a questionnaire on attitudes, beliefs and motivation. Oral data have been transcribed and codified with the help of CHILDES tools.

The present analysis focuses on overall grammatical and lexical progress as defined by Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity (FAC) measures (Pérez-Vidal et al. 2000; Wolfe-Quintero et al. 1998). Formulaic speech, which has often been related to fluency, has also been considered. The following statistical tests have been applied: repeated measures ANOVAs, LSD post-hoc comparisons, T-tests, and discriminant function analysis.

Results

Table 1 below displays results for oral development. In the Fluency domain, results are mixed. On the one hand, we find a significant decrease in words per clause (W/C) after SA, and on the other a non-significant increase in words per sentence (W/S), contrary to what happens AH. Overall, there is significant developmental loss in clause length, but a non-significant increase in sentence length. Concerning the use of formulas, a statistically significant increase in their number has been found after SA. In contrast, there is a dramatic loss AH, which SA gains help to compensate for, but not entirely, as can be seen in the overall column. As regards Accuracy, the SA results in significant gains in that the number of errors diminishes after that period in contrast with a slight increase AH. Overall, there is significant developmental improvement in this domain. Finally, as concerns Complexity, again we see a positive effect of the SA period in both grammatical and lexical complexity features. Participants produce a significantly larger number of clauses per sentence (C/S) after SA. Although the rest of values in this column do not reach significance, dependents per clause (D/C) also grow a little in number and the coordination index (CI) improves, as there are fewer coordinates in relation to subordinates. Participants also exhibit a slightly more diverse vocabulary, as the type-token ratio (T/T) indicates. AH, however, we find generalized losses. Overall, developmental gain in this domain is only found in C/S and D/C.

Table 1. Oral development AH, after SA and overall

Domain	Measures	AH (T2-T1)	SA (T3-T2)	Overall (T3-T1)
Fluency	W/C	+0.336	-1.059*	-0.723*
	W/S	-0.220	+0.382	+0.162
Formulas	F/C	-0.102*	+0.063*	-0.039
Accuracy	E/C	+0.023	-0.198*	-0.175*
Complexity	C/S	-0.160	+0.343*	+0.182
	D/C	-0.029	+0.053	+0.024
	CI	+4.258	-1.200	+3.058
	T/T	-18.928	+0.032	-18.895

Native and non-native performance has been compared at all data collection times and for all the measures used. We will just report now on significant comparisons at T3, when non-native performance becomes more native-like. Table 2 below shows that NSs use a wider repertoire of formulas per clause (F/C) than NNSs. NSs are overtly more accurate, just making occasional performance mistakes (see E/C, errors per clause). Their CI is lower, that is to say, they proportionately produce more subordinate than coordinate clauses. And finally they exhibit richer vocabulary (T/T).

Table 2. Significant comparisons between native and non-native performance at T3

Measures	NNS (T3)	NSs	Difference	P value
F/C	0.151	0.238	-0.086	0.0161*
E/C	0.198	0.018	0.179	0.0001*
CI	40.014	26.188	13.825	0.0138*
T/T	0.434	0.546	-0.112	0.0014*

Turning to the analysis of learner attitudes and their interaction with oral development, we first divided participants in the study into two groups, low-scorers and high-scorers, on the basis of their performance in the different FAC measures above. We specifically examined the progress between T2 and T3 to determine which of the students appeared to benefit the most from their SA. Then a combination of 6 variables that could predict group membership was found (see Table 3 below). The analysis performed has enabled us to classify 100% of the cases correctly. The correlation between groups and variables is strong (0.938) and the difference in means highly significant ($p < 0.0001$). The analysis indicates that low-scorers tend to have low values on variables 1, 2 and 3, whereas high-scorers generally exhibit high values on those first three variables, which appears to indicate that they are good predictors of success. The reverse thing happens in the case of the remaining variables, 4, 5 and 6, where low-scorers tend to exhibit high values, while high-scorers usually have low values. Thus, it can be gathered that the latter variables are not associated to success.

Table 3. Discriminant variables

Variables	Coefficient
1. If I were to rate how hard I work at learning English, I would characterize it as: Very little (1) ... Very much (7)	1.838
2. If I were to rate my level of anxiety when I speak English, I would rate myself as: Very nervous (1) ... Very calm (7)	0.860
3. I have a great desire to learn a lot of English. Strongly disagree (1) ... Strongly agree (7)	1.550
4. I am learning English mainly because it is an international language. Strongly disagree (1) ... Strongly agree (7)	-1.729

5. My attitude toward my English teacher(s) during secondary education was... Unfavourable (1) ... Favourable (7)	-0.785
6. If possible, I would like to take English courses not included in the Translation and Interpreting Degree. Strongly disagree (1) ... Strongly agree (7)	-1.361

Discussion and conclusions

We have seen that the SA appears to have beneficial effects on oral development in all the domains and areas examined, except for Fluency, where results are mixed. Quite a number of studies have reported gains in this domain. However, several authors have noted that not all learners in SA groups improve in their fluency (e.g. Segalowitz & Freed 2004). In the present study, improvement is statistically significant in the case of formulas (see also Bradley 2003), accuracy, which does not generally tend to benefit much from SA as noted by DeKeyser 2007, and one feature of syntactic complexity (clauses per sentence). The AH context, on the other hand, does not seem to be beneficial for oral development.

As regards native and non-native performance, native advantage resides, according to our analysis, in the fact that NSs make abundant use of formulaic language, make practically no mistakes, and have turns which are more complex grammatically and lexically. A number of attitudinal variables related to success have been located: strong desire to learn, hard work, and low level of anxiety. Marcos-Llinàs (2006), among others, has also found a similar correlation between these affective variables and proficiency gains. Other variables, however, appear to be less conducive to success.

We can conclude by saying that the SA has visibly positive effects on oral development in formulaic language use, accuracy and complexity. The AH context, on the other hand, does not seem to benefit oral development, which is hardly surprising given that, as pointed out, our students get no training or practice in oral skills AH and their opportunities for interaction are also quite limited in that learning context.

In future research, we intend to incorporate new measures of fluency that can help us capture progress in this area more accurately. We also need to investigate further the ways in which NSs and NNSs differ, as this can throw light on the areas that our students need to devote more attention to. Finally, we plan to look at contact data during SA, since the learners' ability to benefit from communicative opportunities while abroad plays a major role in accounting for linguistic gains.

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