

Language Learning in the Study-Abroad Environment

SZIJÁRTÓ HAJNALKA

Studies

“It has long been assumed that the combination of immersion in the native speech community, combined with formal classroom learning, creates the best environment for learning a second language.”¹ To that end, many students decide to learn a foreign language in a study-abroad environment. This study is going to find a conclusion to the question, how effective it is, to study a foreign language in the SA environment. Moreover, the study will also focus on what factors might influence the effectiveness of L2 acquisition in the study abroad environment.

According to Barbara Freed, the extent to which the language (be it oral or written) is learned, and the style and dialect that is acquired, depends on numerous variables. In the case of American students studying abroad, the degree to which they are actually “immersed” in the native speech community plays a significant role. She believes test scores alone reveal little about the actual linguistic gains made by students who study abroad.

The study abroad students in Freed’s study speak both more and significantly faster than those who have not been abroad, and their speech is characterized by a greater smoothness with fewer clusters of dysfluencies and longer streams of continuous speech. Students in Freed’s study also exhibited sometimes surprising individual differences on each of the variables studied.

It is also important to mention that in a narrative analysis of stories and reports written in the extensive journals of 40 of the participants (half men and half women) in the larger Russian study, Polanyi² finds sexist behavior toward female students. Polanyi portrays the discomfort of these female students, their self-doubts and frustrations in face of the sexual harassment they encounter. According to Polanyi, these “severe gender-related problems” are responsible for the women’s lower scores on both tests of listening and oral proficiency.

¹ Freed: An Overview of Issues...

² Polanyi: Language Learning...

Brecht was interested in finding out whether learning a foreign language in the study-abroad environment is beneficial or not, and if yes, what factors might make the process easier. Richard D. Brecht, Dan Davidson, and Ralph B. Ginsberg published their study under the title *Predictors of Foreign Language Gain during Study Abroad* in which they start from the assumption that truly functional competence in a language requires spending time living in the country where that language is spoken. His study about Russian learners concludes that one can gain by learning abroad. The analysis in the report is based on data relating to 658 students who studied in four-month ACTR programs in Russia. The OPI and proficiency-oriented tests of listening and reading were ministered just before and at the very end of the programme and are the basis of measures of gains. Approximately 13% of students with four years of college Russian scored “advanced” level on the preprogram OPI, but when tested after their semester spent in Russia, 40% of the students scored “advanced” in speaking.³ Some factors determine how successful the students could acquire the language during their stay abroad, as can be seen in *Chart 1*.

In another study by Jennifer Bown, Dan P. Dewey, and R. Kirk Belnap, 82 learners of Arabic

Variable	ETS Listening	ETS Reading	OPI (0/1)	OPI (0/1/2)	OPI 1+ to 2↑
Gender	2.04	—	—	—	2.84
Age	-4.25	—	—	—	—
High school Russian	-1.68	—	2.03	2.23	1.72
College Russian	—	—	—	—	—
Slavic languages	-1.60*	—	—	—	1.99
Non-Slavic languages	*	*	—	1.48	1.96
Previous immersion	2.23	—	—	—	—
Major	—	—	—	2.13	—
Program date	—	—	-3.55	-3.93	—

Chart 1 Summary of Factors Affecting Gains on Three Language Modalities

Source: files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED360828.pdf

were examined who participated in an intensive semester-long programme in Amman, Jordan in fall of 2011 or fall of 2012. It was organized by a private university in the US, including native English participants (except one bilingual speaker of English and Spanish). Before leaving the US, learners received an Intermediate-Mid level on the ACTFL oral Proficiency Interview, which means it was roughly equivalent to A2/B1 according to the descriptors in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Participants studied the foreign language three hours a day, five days a week during their 4 semesters, but “students also received regular coaching on maximizing their SA experience, including instruction on cultural differences and strategies for improving the quality of their speaking

³ Brecht – Davidson – Ginsberg: Predictors of Foreign Language...

experiences.”⁴ At the end of the programme, seven of the participants were rated Advanced Mid, fourteen Advanced Low, ten Intermediate High, and five Intermediate Mid. However, the data might not be exact, as the students were asked to evaluate the questions several months after they finished their studies abroad and regarding the fact that they rated themselves (which might be subjective).

Sonia López Serrano focuses on more areas of language learning in the SA context such as the number of participants, use of L1, proficiency level, duration, design of the studies, instruments in linguistic progress, lexical and grammatical development, speaking, and writing. She found that the SA context favors the development of oral skills as students who learned abroad were able to express more native-like phonological variants during informal conversation than those learning at home. However, the grammatical abilities of the SA students were not better, they seemed to have issues with monitoring the accuracy of linguistic productions, the acquisition of discrete grammar points, or the development of vocabulary. Concerning writing, a motivational factor was found among SA students, therefore their writing skills were slightly better than of those staying at home.⁵

In their study, Anne Ife, Gemma Vives Boix, and Paul Meara focused on the impact of study-abroad on vocabulary development. They used A3VT to test the SA students' vocabulary knowledge after a year spent in the native environment. The study was conducted over a period of two years with students from two successive cohorts of Spanish learners from a British university. The results did not align with the hypothesis that low-level learners improve more than advanced learners during SA. The results of the vocabulary tests showed that both groups made the same amount of progress. It was also found that the length of the SA can influence effectiveness. Those students who spent two semesters abroad scored better on the organizational vocabulary test.

“Among the advanced learners the improvement in organisational knowledge was almost 3 times the improvement made over just one semester, while among the intermediate students the improvement was 3½ times greater than that achieved over one semester.”⁶ Kinginger⁷ argues that although the knowledge base has certainly grown and become more inclusive since Freed’s (1995) volume, certain aspects of learner identity, such as religion, sexuality, or social class are not taken into account and are avoided, as if taboo. As Kinginger writes, studying abroad is a class-inflected activity, involving class-related desires and aspirations and a population overwhelmingly of middle-class origin. In her previous study, Kinginger concludes that overall, researches present an encouraging picture of studying abroad. She believes SA has the potential to enhance students’ language ability in every domain. “Secondly, study abroad appears to be particularly useful for the development of abilities related to social interaction, precisely those abilities that are least amenable to

⁴ Bown – Dewey – Belnap: Student interactions...

⁵ Serrano: Learning Languages...

⁶ Ife – Boix – Meara: The impact of study abroad...

⁷ Kinginger: Social and Cultural Aspects...

classroom instruction.” She mentions Coleman’s study⁸ as an example, that language learners who spend time in “L₂land” broaden their repertoire of speech acts, become more aware of register and style, develop greater autonomy as conversationalists, and incorporate fluency-enhancing formulaic language into their speech. Kinginger also emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of student sojourns abroad. According to Kinginger, individual differences can influence how effective the SA is. “Outside the home and the classroom, some students develop close ties to local communities through service work, social or religious organizations, or internships.” Therefore, one can state that motivation and social willingness to practice L₂ in various contexts when learning abroad may affect the effectiveness of L₂ acquisition.

Conclusion of the studies

The above-mentioned studies clearly show that learning a foreign language in a study-abroad environment can be considered successful foreign language learning. However, language learners did not necessarily perform better in every area.

Brecht’s study showed that the Russian L₂ learners mainly improved in speaking. The study carried out by Jennifer Bown, Dan P. Dewey and R. Kirk Belnap also focus on oral rather than written results. The language programme for Arabic learners put much more emphasis on their speaking experiences. Sonia López Serrano, however, did conclude that SA language courses tend to focus on speaking rather than other areas of language learning. In her study, she writes that the grammatical abilities of the SA students were not better at the end of the programme.

Anne Ife, Gemma Vives Boix, and Paul Meara examined the importance of improvement in vocabulary and concluded that both low-level and advanced students made the same amount of progress after having time spent abroad. Most importantly, it was found that the length of SA can influence effectiveness. Those students who spent two semesters abroad scored better on the vocabulary test.

To summarize the main components of successful SA learning, it is worth having a look at the study of Christina L. Isabelli-García and Casilde A. Isabelli. They found that learners’ needs and characteristics may affect their performance in the different programmes. In addition, their programme choice may affect the acquisition of the language they are learning. The main factors that would predict a successful language study abroad sojourn are the following: length of the program abroad; second language competence at the start of the program; the language used in course work; the context of academic work; type of housing; and availability of help with cultural interactions, among others.⁹ Moreover, it was Kinginger who emphasized the importance of social and cultural interactions. According to

⁸ Coleman: Language learning and study abroad.

⁹ Isabelli-García – Isabelli: Researching Second Language...

Kinginger, studying abroad appears to be particularly useful for the development of abilities related to social interaction.

Interviews

To have more insight into why many people choose to learn a foreign language abroad, two interviews were carried out with a Hungarian person studying English in England and an Iran student studying Hungarian in Hungary. The main aim of the interview was to show the importance of learning a foreign language abroad – in the native environment – through the personal experiences of the interviewees.

1. For how long have you been learning a foreign language? (Hungarian, English)

The first interviewee, the Hungarian student learning abroad gave the following answer: She was 21 years old when she decided to learn English abroad, which means she has studied English for 5 years. The Iran student on the other hand did not have any experience with the Hungarian language, he started learning the foreign language in Hungary.

2. Why did you start learning a foreign language abroad?

In the case of the English learner, the foreign language meant an opportunity to work as an au-pair in England. What is more, she wanted to improve in speaking and pronunciation. After 5 years of language experience, she thought it would be a good idea to deepen her knowledge in the native speaking environment and for practicing communication and working on her intonation, England seemed to be the perfect place.

Regarding the Iran student learning Hungarian, he started because of his university studies. As a foreigner, he needed to learn Hungarian during his stay and studies in Hungary. He is on the medical faculty and his goal is to become a doctor. He started his studies in Hungary as it is cheaper than most medical schools in Europe. He also mentioned in the interview how he likes it here, in Szeged, and that he wants to stay and practice there after finishing university. Another important factor why he started learning Hungarian is his interest in Hungarian culture – and the most important element of a culture is the nation's language.

3. Where did you learn the foreign language? (language school, school, university, etc.)

This interview question is important, as the place or set-up the FL is learned can play a significant role in the effectiveness of language acquisition. In England, the student attended an English language course in a language school and worked at a family simultaneously. In the