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Editors

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The effect of context and contact on oral performance in students who go on a stay abroad

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Abstract

The present study is part of a broader developmental study on the effects of a compulsory three-month 'Stay Abroad' (SA) period on advanced level university students of translation studies, for whom English is their L3, as they are bilingual in Catalan/Spanish. Its objective is twofold. It seeks to analyse the gains obtained in the SA context in the subjects' oral proficiency in contrast with the gains obtained in a normal classroom EFL environment as well as the impact of contact during SA on such gains. For that purpose, 12 subjects were administered a pre-test (T1) before formal instruction, a post/pre-test (T2) after formal instruction and before the SA; a post-test (T3) after the SA, and a delayed post-test (T4) 15 months later, to measure long-term effects. Data were collected by means of a cognitively demanding role-play task. The research looks at improvement in oral linguistic ability through a questionnaire on stay conditions and various indexes of oral performance gains –namely gains in oral fluency, accuracy, and lexical and grammatical complexity, as well as in the use of formulas–. The statistical results and interaction effects show complex relationships between oral proficiency, context of acquisition and language contact.

Key words: stay abroad, context, contact, SLA, L3 English.

Resumen

El presente estudio es parte de un estudio longitudinal más amplio sobre los efectos de una estancia obligatoria de tres meses en el extranjero en estudiantes universitarios de Traducción e Interpretación de nivel avanzado para quienes el inglés constituye una L3, ya que son bilingües catalán/español. Nuestro objetivo es doble. Pretendemos analizar las ganancias en la competencia oral de los estu-

diantes durante la estancia contrastándolas con las ganancias obtenidas durante el período previo de instrucción formal, así como el impacto de las condiciones de contacto durante la estancia sobre las mencionadas ganancias. Con ese propósito, se administró un pre-test a 12 sujetos (T1) previo a la instrucción formal, un post/pre-test (T2) después de la instrucción formal y previo a la estancia, y un post-test (T4) 15 meses después de la estancia para medir sus efectos a largo plazo. La recogida de datos se realizó por medio de un role-play. La investigación examina varios índices de ganancia en la competencia lingüística oral –concretamente fluidez, corrección y complejidad léxica y gramatical orales, así como el uso de fórmulas– y un cuestionario sobre condiciones de la estancia. Los resultados estadísticos y los efectos de la interacción muestran complejas relaciones entre competencia oral, contexto de adquisición y condiciones de contacto.

Palabras clave: factor estancia, contexto, contacto, adquisición de segundas lenguas, inglés L3.

1. Introduction

If we want to justify the interest of studying the effect of a Study Abroad (from now on SA) context of learning on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Collentine and Freed's words can be quoted: "at the very least, the study of SLA within and across various contexts of learning forces a broadening of our perspective of the most important variables that affect and impede acquisition in general" (Collentine and Freed, 2004: 158). The debate here revolves around the contrasting effects between naturalistic versus instructional learning of different sorts, and the extent to which students draw on their previously acquired classroom linguistic knowledge for their foreign language development during SA (DeKeyser, 1991). From a psycholinguistic perspective, the discussion can be traced back to Krashen's most debated view of the benefits of unconscious acquisition in natural 'stimulating, non threatening' contexts in contrast with the irrelevance of conscious formal learning in the classroom (Krashen, 1976; Krashen and Seliger 1976). The SA as a natural context allows for the testing of learner hypotheses by paying attention to relevant input, for the repetition of the same speech acts in daily life, and for the contextualisation of learning in different situations through integrated sensory experiences, enabling better memorisation and retrieval, as opposed to the dryness of conscious learning between the four walls of a classroom (DeKeyser, 1991). SA conditions thus allow for Focus on Form while Focusing on Meaning (Long, 1991; Doughty and Williams, 1998; Ortega, 2005). For other authors the at-home (henceforth AH) context of 'learning' is considered one in which input and learner output is fashioned so

that learners attend to form and take risks toward the ultimate goal of improving their linguistic expertise. In contrast, in communicative contexts such as SA, learners may or may not be as oriented toward furthering their linguistic development as they would be in a learning context (Batstone, 2002). This distinction would explain the unpromising results often found in some of the research on SA. From a sociolinguistic perspective it is obvious that, for those who are willing to make the effort, and in contrast with classroom learning, three factors obtain in a SA context: the sheer number of hours spent in an English-speaking environment, which provide comprehensible input; the sizeable amount of speaking practice gained by getting a variety of things done in a foreign language, and the management of truly authentic conversations with a variety of speakers, which should bring about dramatic improvement.

A number of key studies have focused on what makes a good language learner during SA (DeKeyser, 1991; Huebner, 1995; Regan, 1998; Collentine and Freed, 2004, among others):

If people are to benefit maximally from a stay abroad, they need to be able to monitor grammar inconspicuously and to use communication strategies that mask their problems instead of drawing attention to them. Only then will they [students] be able to take full advantage of the two-way informal interaction that is an essential ingredient of the overseas experience, regardless of whether one takes the view that it is the input or the practice that counts (DeKeyser, 1991).

Others have focused on the impact of the SA conditions such as type of accommodation, activities undertaken, including the impact of working during that period and other similar factors on the ensuing linguistic gains (Huebner 1995).

Consequently, the different impact of different contexts of learning on foreign language skills has been attributed to the amount and intensity of the contact the students avail themselves while being abroad, in turn related to individual variables and to the conditions of the SA (Kasper and Rose, 2002; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004: 174; DeKeyser, 2007). To that theory-based justification we would add that there exists a worldwide massive-scale operation with 'Student Exchange', 'Stay Abroad', or 'Study Abroad' programmes, which is worth a systematic evaluation for its linguistic, pragmatic, emotional and cultural impact. The seminal book by Freed (1995) constituted the first collection of studies from both sides of the Atlantic which captured the state of the art of research on SA, followed by Freed (1998). A summary of the conclusions of this research published in the 2004 SSLA monograph edited by Collentine and Freed reads as follows: "All told, research as of that time [mid 1990s] indicated that, although SA was beneficial in many ways, it might not be superior to AH classroom instruc-

tion in some important aspects of linguistic development (e.g. morphosyntactic abilities) and for all levels of development” (Collentine and Freed, 2004: 158). Indeed, as Collentine further emphasizes, “for all intents and purposes SA programs promise accelerated rates of acquisition, [yet] they may be limited to vocabulary growth (Milton and Meara, 1995), but there is cause to doubt that it leads to significant grammatical gains (DeKeyser, 1991; Freed, 1995)” (Collentine, 2004: 228). In summary, research conclusions seem to indicate that overall oral proficiency gains (as found, among others, by Veguez, 1984; O’Connor, 1988; Milleret, 1990; DeKeyser, 1991; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004), gains in fluency (Freed, 1995; 2000; Towell, 2002), communicative skills (Lafford, 1995), and pragmatic competence (Hoffman-Hicks, 1999) tend to accrue during a period abroad. Formulaic expressions are in turn deemed to partially account for the fluency gains obtained in the SA context (Marriot, 1995; Siegal, 1995; Regan, 1998). The sociolinguistic dimension of learning a foreign language abroad has also been investigated, including the analysis of learning strategies (Huebner, 1995), psychological factors (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005) and the development of sociolinguistic skills (Regan 1995). Other specific dimensions of linguistic competence such as grammatical development (Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 1991) and lexical growth (Milton and Meara, 1995) have been less researched. Similarly, written competence and reading have received little attention (see, however, Freed, So and Lazar, 2003; Dewey, 2004; Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau, 2004, for written data). The same can be said of the literature on L2 phonological development and SA, which is rather scant and has produced conflicting results (see Stevens, 2001; Højen, 2003; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Mora, 2005a; 2005b; and forthcoming).

All in all, a large number of studies in the SA literature measure linguistic gain with no control group. The exceptions to be mentioned are either those studies contrasting the impact on grammar and monitoring strategies of a SA against conventional courses AH (DeKeyser, 1991), or those on pragmatic ability (Rodríguez, 2001). A similar line is taken by Milton and Meara (1995) in their analysis of vocabulary gains using the subjects themselves as their own control group in order to contrast AH and SA linguistic gains. Following such a design and with the same group of learners as the present study, Mora (forthcoming) has measured phonological perceptive and productive ability only to find statistically significant improvement in perception after AH treatment, in line with Rodríguez’s (2001) measurement of improvement in pragmatic ability. Results were slightly different for the measurement of improvement in phonological production, as a SA period seemed to exert a positive influence, higher than the AH period, with a significant decrease after a period with no instruction. These

mixed results suggest the importance of considering not just learning context, but also individual learner factors and contact variables in order to account for differences in L2 learners' phonological development (Dufon and Churchill, 2006).

In this paper we focus on a comparison of the SA and the AH context with learners who first started learning English in a low input educational programme in late childhood. The study focuses on their ability to decrease the frequency of their grammatical errors and to increase the length and syntactic and lexical complexity of their sentences in oral interaction after formal instruction AH and SA periods with a product, output perspective. Neither context includes any specific instructional training in oral communicative skills, yet SA includes practice according to contact specificities. Hence the dynamics of context and contact interaction will be analysed for their possible impact on linguistic oral proficiency gains. Our aim is to investigate the learners' capacity to improve their linguistic oral abilities after general language instruction AH, yet with no component of oral skills training or practice, and SA periods during which they receive no specific training but some practice is assumed.

Following previous research conclusions, it is assumed that exposure to English and conversational practice will optimize LA, particularly in those cases where contact with native speakers is high, and that as a consequence learners' proficiency, as far as fluency, accuracy and complexity in their linguistic oral ability go, will improve. It is hypothesised that this will be particularly so in the SA abroad context. Hence, it is thought that subjects will exhibit greater oral ability at T3 (after SA) than at T2 (after AH instruction). In contrast, and assuming that oral proficiency is directly affected by the input and interaction received when having contact with target language speakers, it is hypothesised that the gains will decrease after a 6-month period back home without English instruction. Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2004) found, for a larger group of learners from the same sample, overall gains in their linguistic accuracy and lexical and grammatical complexity in writing, the AH context proving to have greater effect than the SA context, with the exception of lexical complexity, which comparatively showed greater benefits from the SA. Gains were found not to be significant with a repeated measuring ANOVA. Fluency also improved to a greater degree during SA, but did not show developmental gain overall due to a notorious decrease while AH. Taking into account that subjects received no specific training in academic writing during SA and had little written practice, while they did have instruction and practice during the AH period, these results seem to suggest that the natural context during SA produced no incidental learning while the formal context, with explicit instruction AH resulted in higher levels

of competence. The oral production data presented here will give us interesting insights into the effects of instructional and naturalistic contexts on the linguistic oral ability of the subjects when neither of the two learning contexts investigated has any explicit instruction. Some practice, however, is expected during SA to varying degrees depending on contact patterns.

The study reported here is part of a broader research study, the *Stay Abroad and Language Acquisition (SALA) Barcelona project*,¹ which seeks to analyse the impact of periods abroad on foreign language development, through criterion competence measures obtained at four different times, before and after the SA. The learners' oral competence is assessed through a role-play task, while interacting with a non-native peer, from which Fluency, Accuracy and Complexity measures (henceforth FAC) can be obtained, and a narrative task in interaction with a researcher (see Turell, 2003 for the latter). Their conditions during the SA period are tapped by means of a questionnaire. The present paper is an analysis of the learners' productive linguistic ability during oral interaction in the role-play task performed with a peer and probes into the effect of two different contexts of learning, 80 hours formal instruction AH over a 6-month period, and a 3-month SA period. The linguistic impact of different contact opportunities such as jobs, types of accommodation, and types of activities carried out during SA is also examined.

2. Method

Participants in the study were selected from a larger sample of European exchange undergraduate students with an advanced level of English from Barcelona (*Pompeu Fabra University*), hence Spanish/Catalan bilinguals, who had to go on a SA as part of their degree in Translation and Interpreting. They were chosen with the criterion of their participation in all the data collection times in the design. Subjects with missing data at any of the data collection times were considered non-valid and excluded from the present study. Following Milton and Meara (1995), as there were not two comparable groups (one in an AH context

¹ Project HUM2004-05442-C02-01/FILO (2004-2007) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, from which role-plays at T4 are analysed. Data obtained from a previous project (BFF01-0820, 2001-2004; see Turell et al. 2004) was also used for role-play analyses at T1-T3. This research is also supported by the *Adquisició de Llengües des de la Catalunya Multilingüe (ALLEN CAM)* project funded by the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (2005 SGR 01086).

and one in a SA context) during the same period available to us, subjects were used as their own matched pairs.

Data were longitudinally collected over a two-year period in the AH context. There were four data collection times:

- T1. Students were tested upon entrance at the university, prior to initiating formal instruction there.
- T2. Students were tested after a six-month period of formal instruction AH, covering two terms (80 hours) at UPF.
- T3. Students were tested upon return to the university after a three-month period abroad, their SA in an English-speaking country.
- T4. In order to measure the delayed effects of their SA, students were tested 15 months later, after two terms with instruction in English (80 hours) and subsequently 2 terms with no instruction/exposure to English.

All participants in the SALA project were asked to answer a battery of tests which measured different aspects of their linguistic development as well as two questionnaires, one on attitudes and another one to tap their linguistic background. They additionally filled in a questionnaire on SA conditions upon return in which they were asked about nature of accommodation, amount of formal study during SA, amount of social interaction with native speakers, financial conditions, perceived growth and improvement, and degree of self-satisfaction with the SA, among others.

The oral production data analysed in the present study was obtained from a task-structured situation designed to elicit oral interaction between two speakers in the form of a two-way, problem solving role-play. One student played the role of a house-owner who needed to decorate a living room and the other that of a decorator with a choice of four different decorations to offer the house-owner. Students were given specifications as to what to try to sell or buy which were unknown to their partners, thus creating an information gap (see Bachman 2002; Turner and White 2004). They were also asked to give arguments for their options as well as to initiate and sustain conversations. This was done in order to try and obtain a high level of negotiation during the task and a vivid conversation, replicating the conditions in natural daily contexts of communication. Students had a 7-minute time limit to finish the task. The task was performed in sound-proof booths and the speech samples were recorded on tape.

The samples were transcribed and introduced into a CHILDES database. The entire transcription of each of the elicited protocols was included in the analysis. The resulting corpus was tabulated on the basis of the different FAC measures displayed in Table 1 below according to subject and data collection time (Wolfe-Quintero, Kim and Inagaki 1998; Pérez-Vidal, Celaya and Torras, 2000; Torras et al., 2006). The answers to the questionnaire on SA conditions were compiled and analysed with the help of the SPSS package.

Table 1. Measures for the analysis of advanced oral production

Fluency	Accuracy	Complexity	Formulas
Words per clause (W/C)	Grammatical errors	Clauses per sentence (C/S)	Formulas per Clause (F/C)
Words per sentence (W/S)	Lexical errors	Dependent clauses per clause (D/C)	
	Total errors per clause (E/C)	Coordination Index (CI)	
		Type/token ratio (TT)	

3. Results and discussion

A statistical analysis of the subjects' oral linguistic ability was carried out to establish development over time and between two different subsequent contexts of acquisition and their delayed effect: a formal instruction context AH (T1-T2), yet no specific training or practice in oral skills; a SA context over a term (T2-T3), with similarly no specific training in oral skills but some amount of practice; and a four-term period or Delayed Effect period (from now on DE) after SA with two terms of formal instruction followed by no instruction over another two-terms (T4). The amount of contact during the SA period as a result of SA conditions and its impact was equally explored. Our data show no ceiling effect or insensitiveness of the measures used as we find improvement in all areas measured.

As expected, the results prove that Spanish/Catalan learners' oral abilities are positively affected by a SA period. Tables 2 through 5 show the mean gain scores according to context and over time. In each case, the first column on the left presents gains during the AH period, while the second and third columns show gains as a result of SA and its Delayed Effect after 15 months respectively. The fourth column in turn presents overall gains between T1 and T4. The measures obtained show that when contrasting the two contexts of acquisition, the

SA has a positive effect on the learners' oral ability with only one exception: the proportion of subordinates as measured by a coordination index (CI, where a positive sign indicates a higher proportion of coordinates in relation to subordinates), which seems to benefit from greater improvement AH. The AH context is clearly negative in the length of clauses and sentences (W/C and W/S), the use of formulas, the number of mistakes the learners make, which actually increases, and the complexity of sentences (C/S and D/C). However, there is some improvement AH in the increased proportion of subordinates (as indicated by the minus sign in CI) and in lexical diversity. The latter is smaller than that after the SA, while the former is greater. In other words, learners AH seem to concentrate on learning vocabulary and subordinating at the expense of accuracy and fluency, whereas after the SA they seem to have increased the length and number of main and coordinate clauses and their lexical repertoire, particularly in terms of formulaic routines. They make fewer errors and also increase their vocabulary at a slightly higher rate.

The results of a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test show an overall positive effect of the SA context for the different data collection times on the learners' linguistic proficiency, but significant gains obtain only for fluency measures. The lower values in the DE column show that the period without formal instruction has a generalized negative effect. However, the gains during SA tend to ensure that there is overall developmental improvement in fluency, number of grammatical and lexical errors, and sentence complexity, the exceptions being at a lexical level, with a smaller number of vocabulary items and formulaic routines than at the beginning of the study.

Table 2 displays results for the two measures used to capture fluency improvement, i.e. number of words per clause and words per sentence in English. In contrast with a loss both during the preceding AH period and the subsequent period, the SA effect results in statistically significant improvement. Such a gain has the effect of increasing the overall developmental fluency of the subjects over the period under investigation. The sentence seems to be the most sensitive unit of analysis to capture the increase. These results suggest that the SA period has a clearly positive effect for length of clauses and sentences in oral production. The nature and number of opportunities for interaction in a variety of social domains, speech events and social relationships typical of the SA context result in longer clauses and sentences in the learners' oral production, whether with or without any negative feedback remains to be investigated. In contrast, the nature and opportunities for interaction in the classroom context the learners experience result in a loss of fluency and shorter clauses and sentences.

Table 2. Mean Fluency gain scores

	AH (T2-T1)	SA (T3-T2)	DE (T4-T3)	Overall (T4-T1)
W/C	-0.161	+0.823* (Sig. 0.012)	-0.448	+0.244
W/S	-0.811	+2.828* (Sig. 0.041)	-1.164	+0.853

Table 3 shows mean gain scores for number of errors both lexical and grammatical. We can see that the SA results in significant gains in that the number of both types of error decreases during that period in contrast with an increase of mistakes in the AH context. As with the fluency results, the DE period has a negative effect, yet there is overall sustained developmental improvement at the end, although not statistically significant. These results again suggest that the SA period has a beneficial effect, in contrast with the AH context's negative effect, in which learners seem to increase the number of mistakes they make when speaking.

Table 3. Mean Accuracy gain scores

	AH (T2-T1)	SA (T3-T2)	DE (T4-T3)	Overall (T4-T1)
Lexical errors	+0.50	-1.00	-0.03	-0.53
Grammatical errors	+0.25	-1.83	+0.71	-0.87
Total errors	+0.75	-2.83	+0.68	-1.40

As concerns Complexity (see Table 4), the pattern repeats itself. There is a positive effect of the SA period in both lexical and grammatical complexity. Subjects use a larger number of clauses per sentence (C/S), dependent clauses per clause (D/C), and exhibit a more varied vocabulary as measured by the type/token ratio (T/T). Such a gain contrasts with losses during the AH period except for coordination (CI) and lexical diversity (T/T). The DE period has a general negative effect, which still results in developmental gain in clauses per sentence and dependents per clause, yet not for proportion of subordinates and wealth of vocabulary. These results suggest that the AH context allows for an increase in the use of subordinates and for some vocabulary improvement, while the SA results in an increase in the number of clauses per sentence and dependents per clause and a slightly higher increase than the AH period as far as vocabulary is concerned.

Finally, as Table 5 reveals, we find a significant increase in the use of formulaic routines during SA, even if it is not statistically significant, but there is dramatic developmental loss at DE. It has often been suggested that foreign language classrooms provide environments in which grammar and literacy can successfully be learned, but that they are inadequate contexts for developing pragmatic, discourse and sociolinguistic ability, especially in informal spoken interaction (Kasper and Rose 2002).

Table 4. Mean grammatical and lexical Complexity gain scores

	AH (T2-T1)	SA (T3-T2)	DE (T4-T3)	Overall (T4-T1)
C/S	-0.08	+0.20	-0.05	+0.07
D/C	-0.001	+0.022	-0.004	+0.017
CI	-3.39	+3.27	-1.20	-1.32
T/T	+0.01	+0.017	-0.018	-0.009

Table 5. Mean Formula gain scores

	AH (T2-T1)	SA (T3-T2)	DE (T4-T3)	Overall (T4-T1)
Formulas	-0.17	+0.25	-0.71	-0.63

A detailed analysis of the relationship between the scores for linguistic oral ability over time and in the two different contexts and the SA conditions was established by means of a Kruskal-Wallis test. Level of significance was set in this case at $p < .01$. The examination of those conditions allowed us to establish patterns of contact with native speakers in relation with different types of social domains of interaction for which statistically significant relationships obtained. Table 6 summarizes the significant comparisons between linguistic improvement (rate variables) and stay abroad conditions (grouped variables). Our results indicate that students who did not have a job during SA had lower gains in syntactic complexity (C/S) than those who did. Participants who listened to English media the most were the ones to make less grammatical errors, thus improving their accuracy. It is also apparent that little involvement in independent study tasks goes hand in hand with a decrease in the number of words per sentence as well as in the number of clauses per sentence. That is, fluency and grammatical complexity seem to be negatively affected by a lack of independent study.

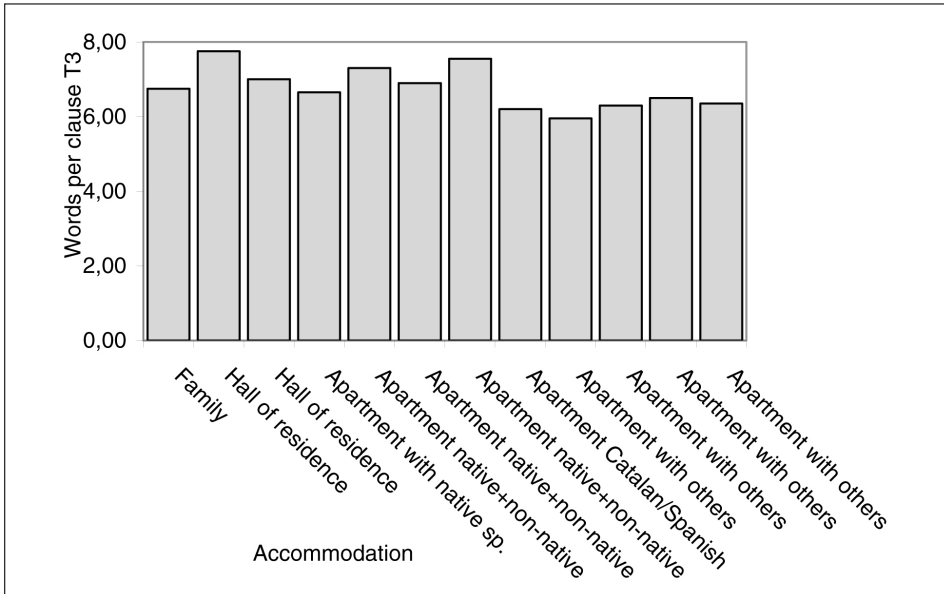
Participants who often studied with friends were the ones to exhibit a higher lexical diversity (T/T ratio). Those subjects who had more contact with native speakers showed an increase in the number of formulas per clause used, whereas those who had less contact actually showed a decrease in the use of formulas with respect to the AH period. Subjects who had international friends, on the other hand, were seen to increase the number of dependent clauses per clause and to decrease the number of errors per clause, thus obtaining gains in grammatical complexity and accuracy.

Table 6. Summary of significant comparisons between linguistic improvement and SA conditions.

Rate variable	Grouped variable	Sig.
Clauses per sentence rate (T3-T2)/T2	Having a job	0.098*
Grammatical errors rate (T3-T2)/T2	Media: TV, radio, cinema	0.067*
Words per sentence rate (T3-T2)/T2	Independent study: self-set tasks	0.084*
Clauses per sentence rate (T3-T2)/T2	Independent study: self-set tasks	0.044*
Type/token ratio rate (T3-T2)/T2	Independent study: study with friends	0.096*
Formulas per clause rate (T3-T2)/T2	Relationships: contact with native speakers	0.046*
Subordinates per clause rate (T3-T2)/T2	Relationships: international friends	0.098*
Errors per clause rate (T3-T2)/T2	Relationships: international friends	0.099*

As for the examination of type of accommodation, we found high disparity among individuals. As displayed in Figure 1, the linguistic impact of this variable measured on the basis of clause length (W/C), that is, syntactic fluency, shows a general tendency for students who lived either in halls of residence or with native speakers to do better than others. This perceived advantage is confirmed by other measures (e.g. participants in halls of residence showed advantage in W/S and the subject who lived with native speakers had the best T/T ratio). On the other hand, the subject who stayed with other Catalan/Spanish students did worse on average than any other subject (e.g. lowest results in C/S, D/C, and more grammatical errors). This may reveal a tendency for subjects who live with other Catalan/Spanish students or with other non-native speakers to have lower production rates when compared to students in other types of accommodation.

Figure 1. Accommodation and words per clause



4. Summary and conclusion

These results confirm our hypothesis concerning advanced Spanish/Catalan learners' ability to improve their linguistic oral skills above the levels reached as a result of a three-month term spent in an English-speaking country and in contrast with two terms of formal instruction AH. What they are proving is that learners are able to put their linguistic repertoire to use and to compensate for gaps in their knowledge, while they are learning new language forms (cf. DeKeyser 1991). In other words, they are focusing on form at the same time as they focus on meaning in order to communicate. This has been explained as the ability to make use of the input while abroad so as to selectively pay attention to relevant parts of such input, in order to test linguistic hypotheses, while the recurrent scenarios where communication takes place allow for the repetition of the same linguistic strings, conducive to focusing on form and to subsequent communicative practice (DeKeyser 1991).

Our results also indicate that the gains, although decreasing after a period with no formal instruction, are retained developmentally as reflected by the overall columns, with the exceptions of formulaic routines and subordinate clauses. Consequently, our data prove that a SA context can be beneficial and can change the rate of linguistic development in some areas, although its gains are not necessarily linear over different contexts of learning.

More specifically, the learners' oral fluency improves to a statistically significant degree during SA (cf. DeKeyser 1991; Freed 1995; Towell, Hawkins and Bazergui 1996). Their use of formulaic routines shows considerable improvement, yet the most conspicuous decline once back home as there is dramatic overall loss (see also Regan 1998; Hoffamn-Hicks 1999). The AH context, on the other hand, seems to exert a negative effect as far as the frequency of errors, the length of clauses and sentences, and their grammatical complexity go, whereas subordinates and vocabulary wealth show important gains throughout that period (vocabulary to a lesser degree than during SA while subordinates to a higher extent).

Our results show that the opportunities for input and interaction that a SA period provides are conducive to linguistic gains in oral skills, more so when certain sociolinguistic and pragmatic conditions are met: working in an international setting with native speakers, involving oneself in independent study, and listening to the media are among the best possible ways to increase one's opportunities to further oral performance, while other conditions may be detrimental such as living with Catalan/Spanish mates. Future studies involving more participants are required to confirm these observed tendencies. Furthermore, we still need to investigate further the ways in which learners differ in their ability and readiness to seize and benefit from the extracurricular communicative opportunities available during SA (see Segalowitz and Freed 2004). In fact, such conditions amount to using the language in much the same way as native speakers do, something which has been described in terms of the attitude taken by the learner abroad as "wearing a native speaker badge" (Regan 1998). According to DeKeyser (1991), in order to take full advantage of a stay abroad, learners also need to monitor their grammar and develop their communication strategies in such a way as to make their problems go unnoticed as far as possible.

At a psycholinguistic level, our data prove that in a formal instruction context, where there is no specific training or practice organised for oral communication skills, and where typically there is scarcity of input and very limited possibilities for authentic and varied interactional exchanges, no incidental learning takes place. In contrast, in a natural environment during a sojourn abroad, with the best possible conditions for accessing comparatively massive amounts of input and opportunities for interaction, incidental learning accrues, particularly for those learners who avail themselves the opportunities at hand. This depends on the individual, a question which needs to be further explored with our data as much as the quality of the interaction, as intensity of interaction seems to count.

We can also tentatively conclude that a limited length of stay does not seem to hinder linguistic improvement, as our data collected after a relatively short

period abroad show statistically significant improvement with respect to fluency. This is all very good news for the SA policies and schemes organised in different countries and sides of the globe these days as it is confirmed that the social, economic and human effort results in clear benefits for the learners.

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