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Examining L2 development in two short-term intensive programs for teenagers: Study abroad vs. “at home”



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 March 2015

Received in revised form 14 January 2016

Accepted 18 January 2016

Available online 13 February 2016

Keywords:

Learning context

Study abroad

Intensive courses

Short-term L2 programs

ABSTRACT

Although research on the effect of spending time abroad on language learning has become popular in the last few years, there are only a few studies that concentrate on short-term stays abroad for teenagers or that include intensive second language (L2) “at home” programs as their comparison groups. The purpose of this study is to fill these gaps and analyze the L2 development of two groups of Spanish–Catalan bilingual learners of English in two short-term programs: a study abroad (SA) in the UK ($n = 54$) and an intensive course “at home” (AH) ($n = 58$). The learners (mean age = 14.37) were tested on several tasks that focused on different language areas (grammar, formulaic sequences, written and oral production) before and after their respective program. The results of our analyses suggest that the participants in the two contexts significantly improved in most of the measures. Our findings also indicate that the SA context was more beneficial for the improvement of oral lexical richness while the learners in the AH context were slightly better in their receptive knowledge of grammar. These results seem to be the product of the specificity of the two contexts and the type and amount of L2 use that they offered.

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1. Introduction

In the last few years there has been an increasing interest in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature concerning the effect of learning context on second language (L2) development (Housen, 2012; Housen et al., 2011). One of the contexts that has received more attention is the “study abroad” context, which offers a combination of L2 instruction in a rather formal setting (i.e., classes) with immersion in the native speech community (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Other terms used in the literature are “residence abroad” or “stay abroad”, which refer to those programs that do not necessarily include the L2 instruction component. In this section the relevant literature on learning context will be reviewed, focusing on the following aspects: L2 development, L2 use, intensity of L2 exposure and short-term programs for teenagers.

1.1. L2 development in the SA context

Researchers have been trying to empirically assess the “folk myth” that the best way to learn a foreign language is to spend some time abroad. The studies so far have shown some results that back up this belief, but not for all the areas under

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examination. Concerning oral fluency, most studies suggest that this area typically improves after spending some time abroad (no matter how short the time is) (DeKeyser, 2014; Llanes, 2011). For example, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) reported that, after a semester abroad, a group of North-American college students ($n = 22$) significantly improved in several measures of oral fluency in Spanish; namely, speech rate, number of words in the longest turn, longest fluent run, and absence of filled pauses. Likewise, Mora and Valls-Ferrer (2012) also reported a significantly positive effect of a SA on oral fluency, this time for 30 college students who learned English abroad for three months. As for vocabulary development, most of the studies show that participants increase their lexical repertoire as a result of an SA experience (Dewey, 2008; Foster, 2009; Ife, Vives, & Meara, 2000). On the other hand, there are other L2 areas, such as grammar, for which the SA context does not appear to be so beneficial. For instance, Collentine (2004) found that a group of 26 North-American college students did not improve their Spanish grammar skills significantly after spending one semester in Alicante, Spain. Similarly, in the case of pragmatics, the literature shows contradictory findings. Taguchi (2015) suggests that the learners abroad do not always improve their pragmatic/sociolinguistic skills and that there is a “shaky link between study abroad experience and pragmatic gains” (p. 16).

1.2. L2 use

Most studies that have examined L2 development in the study abroad (SA) context have often compared this context with classroom instruction in the participants' home country (or at home, AH, context). Comparing the two settings, variables such as the quantity and quality of L2 input as well as the opportunities of producing L2 output and engaging in interaction in the L2 are all potentially higher in the SA context (see also Sanz, 2014). The significant roles of these factors in L2 learning in general has already been established, and it is interesting to examine the ways in which learners benefit from a context (SA) where L2 input and interaction are more easily accessible.

Nevertheless, despite the vast number of opportunities for L2 practice that the SA context theoretically offers, research has shown that not all learners benefit from these opportunities equally. Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) report that some learners use the L2 significantly more than others, and that some are more inclined to practice their productive skills and others their receptive skills (or, similarly, some prefer aural to written input or the other way round). In the same way, Kinginger (2008) demonstrates that some SA participants hardly ever use the L2 and therefore they experience few (if any) L2 gains: out of the 24 participants in her study, 13 did not experience any change in their L2 level. However, there are some learners that integrate within the L2 society, which offers them multiple opportunities to practice their L2 skills, and thereby they significantly improve their L2 (three out of the 24 students in Kinginger's study moved from the basic level to the advanced one).

The range of opportunities to use the L2 abroad also varies depending on SA program type. While there are some SA programs that encourage participants to use the L2 to a high degree, there are others in which this is not the case. An example of the former type would be the program for child L2 learners described in Llanes and Muñoz (2013). In that program, a group of Spanish–Catalan bilingual learners of English spent three months in Ireland, living with Irish families and attending regular Irish schools. In both settings, they were forced to interact in English, as every child was placed in a home and in a class where there were no other Spanish or Catalan speakers. An illustration of an SA experience that would not encourage so much L2 use would be the example of a university exchange student living in a residence hall or in an apartment together with other L1-speaking students (as was true of some adult learners in that same study).

1.3. Intensity of L2 exposure

The differences between the SA and AH context can also be analyzed in terms of “intensity” of language exposure, another well-established factor in SLA. The SA context typically provides not only more contact hours than the typical AH context but also more intensive exposure to the L2. When analyzing L2 acquisition in general, Carroll (1967) suggests that more time learning the target language usually translates into higher proficiency levels (all other things being equal). However, Stern (1985) claims that, when analyzing time, it is important to consider not only “total time” (that is, duration) but also time distribution. Stern suggests that concentrated exposure to the L2 might be more beneficial for learning than spreading out the contact hours over long periods of time. Several studies have confirmed the positive effect of intensive exposure to the L2 in classroom settings in contrast to the “drip-feed” approach that characterizes many EFL programs (Spada & Lightbown, 1989). For instance, White and Turner (2005) found that L1 French-speaking children receiving intensive English instruction in Canada (approximately 400 h in five months) significantly outperformed their peers receiving regular instruction (36 h in 10 months) in oral production in several tasks. As for adults, Serrano (2011) found that a group of Spanish learners with intermediate English L2 proficiency enrolled in a one-month intensive course improved certain L2 skills more significantly than a comparison group who received the same number of hours of instruction (around 80) distributed over a whole academic year.

As the SA setting provides more intensive exposure to the L2 than the typical AH setting, more L2 gains can also be expected, following Stern's argument. The previous studies that have found an advantage for the SA context included “regular” (or non-intensive) AH programs, which typically provide 2–4 h/week of instruction. However, the studies that have compared the SA context with programs that offer intensive language contact (e.g., “domestic immersion” or intensive AH courses) have not found advantages for the SA setting for adult learners.

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