



# Out-of-class language contact and vocabulary gain in a study abroad context



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## ABSTRACT

This article reports a study of the relationships between out-of-class language contact and vocabulary gain in a study abroad (SA) context. The sample ( $n = 241$ ) were adult, mixed-L1 SA learners of English. Vocabulary testing took place at the beginning and end of the SA period and a questionnaire was administered between those time points to determine the types of out-of-class language contact most identified with by the sample. Analysis grouped participants by location (Oxford or London) and length of stay (short, medium or long). The findings indicated that the types of out-of-class language contact that the sample identified with most were not facilitative of varied input and opportunities for use of L2 lexis and as such, regression analyses failed to identify a significant relationship between informal contact and vocabulary gain. The pedagogical implication of these findings calls for inclusion in SA curricula of guidance for learners on how to plan, manage and manipulate informal language contact for maximum linguistic gain.

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## 1. Introduction

Study abroad (SA) describes the act of travelling to a foreign country for the purpose of study. In common usage the term encompasses both cultural exchange programmes (e.g. U.S. students studying in the UK) and programmes designed to promote language acquisition, such as tertiary-level academic exchanges for university language majors (e.g. the ERASMUS programme in Europe). Academic SA (i.e. programmes delivered by a university/FE college) can last from one semester to one or two academic years. Further variation exists in non-academic SA for language acquisition (i.e. programmes delivered by private language institutions): programmes include work internships, summer language courses, intensive and extensive language courses, language holiday homestays (whereby the student lives with a language tutor abroad and receives one-to-one tuition in the home), and educational trips abroad. Non-academic SA ranges from a long weekend to over a year spent living and studying in the target language community.

SA is unique as a language learning context because of the constant availability of L2 contact. The majority of a SA learner's time is spent outside of the classroom and students often cohabit with people who do not speak their L1 (e.g. with a host family or in mixed-L1 halls of residence). Indeed, SA courses at private language institutions are sometimes sold on the promise of out-of-class language contact and resulting native-like L2 mastery. For example, [Eurolingua \(2015\)](#) guarantee native-like speaking proficiency as a result of studying abroad on their programmes: "No matter what your level, you will soon be speaking fluently, with understanding, ease and confidence. By taking part in one of our study abroad programs ... you will be armed with an authentic accent." Misleading (and often inaccurately worded) promises are also made about the

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L2 contact that learners will experience on SA: “Most people choose study English in an English-speaking country because it is the best way to improve in a short time their English skills, you will be able to practice your English everywhere not only in classes” ([LearnEnglishGuide, 2015](#)).

Heightened exposure to the L2 does not always materialise ([Pellegrino, 1998](#); [Wilkinson, 1998](#)): Learners who live alone or with speakers of their L1 may sustain little L2 contact outside of class, and those living with native English speakers may not interact with their cohabitants. Individual differences (e.g. motivation, personality, age) may also withhold some learners from the rich and frequent exposure to the L2 that SA promises ([Tanaka, 2004](#); [Woodman, 1998](#)). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research into the specific types of out-of-class language contact that SA learners encounter, and neither has the relationship between different types of out-of-class contact and specific linguistic outcomes been comprehensively addressed. Are some types of language contact more beneficial to vocabulary acquisition than others to engage in? Which are likely to beget meaningful language processing? It is questions such as these that remain largely unanswered yet have the potential to dramatically impact upon the linguistic outcomes of SA. Therefore, this study set out to determine the specific types of out-of-class language contact that SA learners in England identify with, and whether a relationship exists between that contact and vocabulary gain. Moreover, as one could hypothesize that the location and length of a sojourn abroad may impact upon out-of-class L2 contact, so the role of these variables in the relationship between out-of-class contact and vocabulary gain was explored.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Study abroad and vocabulary gain

The literature on the impact of SA on second language acquisition has suggested that SA learners are significantly more orally fluent after SA in comparison with learners who studied in the home country context ([DeKeyser, 1991](#); [Lafford, 2004](#); [Segalowitz & Freed, 2004](#)). Moreover, L2 learners experience a significant impact of SA on the development of their vocabulary knowledge ([DeKeyser, 1991](#); [Dewey, 2008](#); [Ife, Vives Boix, & Meara, 2000](#); [Llanes & Muñoz, 2009](#); [Milton & Meara, 1995](#)). However, for other components of second language competence (e.g. listening comprehension, grammatical control) the benefit of SA over ‘at home’ settings has not yet been firmly established ([Collentine, 2004](#); [DeKeyser, 1991](#); [Dewey, 2004](#); [Díaz-Campos, 2004](#); [Freed, So, & Lazar, 2003](#); [Mora, 2008](#)).

The present study focuses on the impact of SA on gains in vocabulary knowledge. Research has provided strong evidence as to the primacy of vocabulary knowledge in L2 competence. Vocabulary knowledge has been found to predict reading comprehension ([Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000](#); [Laufer, 1992](#); [Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010](#)) and listening comprehension ([Staehr, 2009](#); [van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013](#)). There is also robust evidence in favour of the positive impact of vocabulary knowledge on productive ability in the L2 ([Koizumi & In'nami, 2013](#); [Laufer & Nation, 1995](#); [Staehr, 2008](#)). Research suggests that over and above its relationship to the four skills, breadth of vocabulary knowledge may impact on grammatical competence ([Bardovi-Harlig, 2002](#); [Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998](#)) and phonological control ([Bundgaard-Nielsen, Best, & Tyler, 2011a, 2011b](#)).

A large number of studies on vocabulary knowledge and SA have found evidence of gains. Studies have either taken a prospective, within-subjects design or a between-groups design that compares the gains of SA learners with participants in other settings. In terms of within-groups studies, SA has been found to have a positive impact on rate of lexical acquisition ([Milton & Meara, 1995](#)), lexical organization and vocabulary size ([Ife et al., 2000](#)), and development of receptive vocabulary knowledge ([Pizziconi, 2013](#)). However, [Fitzpatrick's \(2012\)](#) study of a L1 Chinese SA learner of L2 English indicated that the relationship between SA and lexical development may not be entirely straightforward: her participant's acquisition of individual lexical items was subject to frequent, non-linear change.

With regard to between-groups designs, there is a convincing body of evidence to suggest that SA is more beneficial to L2 lexical development than at home study ([Dewey, 2008](#); [Foster, 2009](#); [Laufer & Paribakht, 1998](#); [Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011](#)). However, the evidence is not entirely clear cut: [Dewey \(2008\)](#), in his study of at home, domestic immersion and SA learners of L2 Japanese found no significant difference between the lexical outcomes of the domestic immersion and SA participants. Similarly, [Serrano, Llanes and Tragant's \(2011\)](#) study of L1 Spanish learners of English found no significant differences between the gains of the SA group and an at home group who had studied the L2 intensively for the same period of time. Furthermore, [Collentine's \(2004\)](#) study of at home and SA learners of Spanish failed to find any significant differences between the groups in terms of frequency of use in oral production of conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, verbs and nouns.

### 2.2. Out-of-class language contact

Many language learners view a stay in the target language community as the *sine qua non* of second language mastery and believe that heightened exposure to the L2 outside of the classroom is what makes the difference. Out-of-class language contact has been measured most frequently in the SA literature using a questionnaire called the Language Contact Profile, henceforth the LCP. The LCP was developed by [Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, and Halter \(2004\)](#) for use with L1 English learners of L2 Spanish and comprises two sections; one for use before the SA and the other to be administered after the SA has ended. The pre-SA section collects demographic data and information about the respondent's proficiency in the L2. There then follow 13 items that describe contact with the L2 in the home country to which the respondent chooses from a 5-point frequency scale

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