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## L2 development during study abroad in China



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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzed L2 Chinese development in regards to fluency, tonal accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and task fulfillment during a study abroad (SA) program in China. Tonal accuracy has not been investigated in previous SA research, which has focused largely on non-tonal languages. Furthermore, task fulfillment, a metric linked to L2 proficiency and linguistic ability has not been included in previous SA research either. Twenty-two L2 learners of Chinese completed Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews (SOPi) before and after SA. These SOPi recordings were analyzed for a series of fluency measures (speech rate, filled pauses, unfilled pauses, and mean pause length), tonal accuracy percentages, type-token ratios, and task fulfillment. Mixed linear model analyses of these repeated measures showed that, when compared to participants' pre-test scores, their post-test scores showed significant improvement for tonal accuracy, vocabulary development, and task fulfillment as well as for all measures of fluency, showing a faster speech rate and shorter pauses.

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## 1. Introduction

The number of students embarking on Chinese study abroad (SA) is increasing. A government report on education demonstrated that the number of U.S. students who go to China for SA is on the rise ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2010](#)). While China was the eleventh most popular SA destination during 1997 and 1998, it became the fifth most popular SA destination during 2007 and 2008. The [Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange \(2013\)](#) demonstrated similar trends, with the number of U.S. students seeking degrees in China particularly standing out (+46.2% over a three-year period). That same report listed China as the third most popular SA destination worldwide, behind only the United States and the United Kingdom.

This increase in the popularity of Chinese SA may be due to China's increasing role in the global economy. According to the 2013–2014 World Factbook from the [Central Intelligence Agency \(CIA\)](#), China has become the second largest economy in the world after the United States. A 2013 report by the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) also shows that China's economic growth for the past 30 years averages at 10%. Additionally, experts in international politics assert that China's economic power “translate[s] into much greater political power, affecting all other countries, as well as its international relations at the regional and global level” ([Fernández Jiberto, & Hogenboom, 2007](#), para. 2).

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Heightened interest in SA in China may also be attributed to the common belief that SA leads to greater language improvement (Freed, 1995). However, research has demonstrated that going on SA does not always lead to improved L2 skills (Hayden, 1998; Magnan & Back, 2007). Making L2 gains depends on several factors including the amount and quality of L2 use on SA (Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Bown, & Martinsen, 2014; Briggs, 2015; Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Hernandez, 2010), the learner's level of proficiency (Davidson, 2010), and even which aspect of L2 acquisition is examined (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014).

Most of this earlier research on SA, however, examines learners whose first and second languages are Indo-European languages such as Spanish, English, or French. Unfortunately, research on Chinese SA is scarce. Thus, it is difficult to say if native English speakers learning Asian languages on a study abroad would improve similarly in their language abilities during a typical length of time for a study abroad (four–six months). Among the relatively rare research pertaining to SA in Asian languages, studies dealing with Japanese second language acquisition (SLA) during SA are the most numerous. Many of these studies (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2015; Dewey, 2008; Huebner, 1995; Iwasaki, 2008) indicate that learners can achieve significant gains in speaking, reading, vocabulary knowledge, pragmatics, and other areas. In contrast with Japanese SA research, Korean and Chinese SA research is virtually nonexistent.

The few studies examining Chinese SLA on SA have suggested that learners can make significant improvement. In particular, Hayden (1998) examined the reading skills of 21 English-speaking students who spent a semester in China and found that most students in this study gained one sub-level or more on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale. Similar to the L2 gains that Hayden (1998) reported, Bourgerie and Dewey (2010) found that 44% of the advanced American L2 learners of Chinese gained one or two sub-levels on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) after an overseas capstone experience in China. This experience involved four months of direct enrollment in a Chinese university and three to five months of internship at a Chinese company. In the most recent study, Taguchi, Li, and Xiao (2013) discovered that learners improved significantly in the production of specific formulaic expressions in Chinese, including doing so more accurately and fluently.

Du (2013) investigated the fluency development of 29 SA participants in China. The researcher recorded the participants' speaking sessions at four different times and calculated the total number of characters (syllables or morphemes), total number of characters per minute (speech rate), and longest turn of speech per each two-minute segment. Results showed that students improved in all three measures of fluency during the entire SA, but they showed the most drastic improvement during the first month of the SA.

While these findings are helpful, analyzing additional aspects of L2 acquisition in Chinese SA should also help us understand the linguistic complexities and benefits of SA. For example, many researchers argue that, in addition to being important for fluency development, SA can promote pronunciation accuracy (Díaz-Campos, 2004; Lord, 2010) and vocabulary development (Briggs, 2015; Dewey, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Ife, Vives-Boix, & Meara, 2000). SA may be especially important because, presumably, participants are engaging daily with native speakers of the language in authentic language situations. Thus, participants should hear native speakers' vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency on what is most likely a daily basis.

Due to the growing importance of China in global affairs and policies, research regarding Chinese language development during SA is especially necessary. Thus, this paper contributes meaningfully to the existing literature dealing with Chinese acquisition during SA and L2 Chinese acquisition in general. Specifically, this study examined the development of oral fluency, tonal accuracy, vocabulary, and task fulfillment among L2 learners of Chinese during SA program in China. What follows next is a literature review, which includes descriptions for the four aspects of L2 development examined in this study—fluency, tonal accuracy, vocabulary, and task fulfillment—and our arguments for choosing them.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Fluency

Scholars have defined *fluency* most broadly as the ability to produce speech smoothly and easily (Lennon, 1990; Segalowitz, 2010). It has been examined often in SA contexts (e.g., Freed, So, & Lazar, 2003; Freed et al., 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), perhaps because native speakers tend to equate overall proficiency and grammatical accuracy with fluency (Freed, 1995). This assumption is at least partly accurate, since fluency in the L2 may indicate what Segalowitz (2007, 2010) has termed *cognitive fluency*, meaning how much control and automaticity a learner has over producing grammatical, lexical, and phonological features appropriately and accurately. Moreover, SA seems an ideal location to develop fluency because gains in fluency may outstrip gains in accuracy and complexity (Mora & Valls Ferrer, 2012).

As Segalowitz (2010) has indicated, determining the fluency level of speech is usually done through examining either *perceived fluency* (native speakers' perceptions of fluency) or *utterance fluency* (temporal or uttered aspects of speech usually examined through acoustic analysis). Both methods have been used to examine improvements in the L2 fluency of SA participants, and both are important measurements of language development. One example of measuring perceived fluency is explained in Freed (1995), who asked 6 native speaker (NS) raters to listen to segments from the OPIs of 30 students studying L2 French. Their ratings indicated that SA students spoke faster than students who had received domestic, at-home (AH) instruction. Similarly, Dubiner, Freed, and Segalowitz (2007) asked 9 NS Spanish judges to write their definitions of fluency. The NS judges then listened to speech samples from AH and SA participants and gave them fluency ratings on a scale of 1–7 (1 being the lowest level of fluency and 7 being the highest).

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