

# Analyzing the effect of context of second language learning: Domestic intensive and semi-intensive courses vs. study abroad in Europe

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## Abstract

This study examines the second language (L2) written and oral performance of three groups of Spanish-speaking university students after being exposed to English in different contexts. One group of learners was spending some time abroad (Erasmus students in the UK), and two groups were following classroom instruction in two different types of intensive courses in Spain: “intensive” and “semi-intensive”. The learners’ L2 written and oral production were analyzed at different time points through different measures of fluency, syntactic and lexical complexity, and accuracy. The main objective of this study was to compare the performance of the students abroad with each of the two intensive programmes. According to the results of the statistical analyses, after an equivalent period of exposure to the L2 in the two contexts, the students abroad outperformed the learners in the “at home semi-intensive” programme in the post-test in some of the variables under study, namely fluency and lexical complexity. Nevertheless, the students’ written and oral performance after an intensive course at home and after the equivalent time abroad was similar.

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## 1. Introduction

Context of learning is undoubtedly a factor that needs to be considered when examining second language acquisition. As Collentine (2009) suggests, “one of the most important variables that affects the nature and the extent to which learners acquire a second language (L2) is the context of learning, that is, whether the learning takes place within the society in which the L2 is productive or where the first language (L1) is productive” (p. 218). L2 learning contexts vary in terms of the quantity and quality of L2 input they provide, and the opportunities they offer for learners’ output and interaction with native speakers. Moreover, contexts also determine the degree of explicitness/implicitness of the L2 knowledge that tends to be attained and whether automatization is fostered (DeKeyser, 2007). According to DeKeyser (2007), learning the L2 abroad provides more opportunities for practice in real-life situations

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and thus automatization of L2 skills. On the other hand, L2 classroom learning in the students' country usually promotes the development of declarative knowledge to a larger extent (DeKeyser and Juffs, 2005; DeKeyser, 2009).

The objective of this particular study is to analyze the effects on L2 proficiency of two types of contexts which provide different input for the L2 learners, as well as different types of practice: a study abroad (SA) context and two types of "at home" (AH) programmes (intensive and semi-intensive). In the former, L2 learners—who have previously been exposed to classroom teaching in their home country—have the opportunity of regularly using the L2 for everyday interaction as well as of being exposed to an extensive amount of input in the L2. In the second context, however, students only interact with their teacher and their classroom peers, and the input these learners obtain is greatly limited to the classroom hours and is, in many instances, not native-like. Even if, technically, we are considering two contexts (at home vs. abroad), our main interest is in the comparison of three different types of exposure to the L2, and that is why semi-intensive and intensive courses will be analyzed separately.

Although research on contexts of learning or SA is becoming more popular within the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, there are few studies that examine L2 learning abroad in Europe (Byram and Feng, 2006; Coleman, 1998; Dyson, 1988; Llanes, 2010; Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Papatsiba, 2005; Regan, 1995, 1998; Teichler, 2004), and even fewer studies that consider intensive courses when analyzing L2 learning in a foreign language context (Serrano and Muñoz, 2007; Serrano, 2011). Nevertheless, intensive courses are comparable to the SA context, considering the concentration of exposure to the L2 at the learners' disposal. Our study aims to fill the gap in these areas by including the European SA context and two types of AH programmes that offer more intensive L2 practice than those traditionally considered as control groups in previous research on SA. The AH intensive courses under examination here offer 10 h/week (semi-intensive) and 25 h/week (intensive) of instruction, as opposed to the typical AH courses (2–4 h/week). Freed et al. (2004) considered AH courses that offered approximately 17.5 h of instruction a week. However, such courses were rightly classified as "immersion" courses, since the learners had the opportunity of practicing the L2 after finishing their classes. The students in the intensive programmes included in the present research went home after the instructional time—and not to a dormitory or residence area with other L2 learners—therefore, the exposure they received was restricted to the classroom. In this sense, the contexts included in the present study (European SA and two types of AH intensive programmes) have not been previously compared. Additionally, whereas most studies examining context of learning have only concentrated on one skill or a specific area within one skill, this particular study examines different areas of both written and oral production.

### 1.1. Literature review

Even though there is a general belief that learning/practicing the L2 in the country where it is spoken leads to quicker and more remarkable language progress than L2 classroom learning, most empirical studies investigating the issue have failed to find such clear superiority for the SA context with respect to the AH context except for a few areas, most notably oral fluency. It has been claimed that students abroad are significantly more fluent after the experience than their peers who stayed at home learning the L2 in the classroom (Freed, 1995; DeKeyser, 1991; Lafford, 2004; Möhle, 1984; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004). Similarly, students in the SA context have often been reported to significantly increase their vocabulary after their experience in the foreign country (DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2008; Ife et al., 2000; Lennon, 1990; Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Milton and Meara, 1995). The progress SA students make in other language areas has not been generally reported to be superior to AH students (Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2004; Díaz-Campos, 2004; Freed et al., 2003; Lennon, 1990; Mora, 2008).

What many studies analyzing the effects of the SA experience on learners' L2 skills have claimed, however, is that most educators and researchers perceive that the majority of the students after staying abroad demonstrate a qualitative change in their L2 skills. Nevertheless, the measures that have traditionally been used to analyze learners' progress tend to focus on features which are highly related to formal instruction: that may be the reason why some studies have found advantages for the AH context, according to Collentine (2004). He also thinks that it is important that measures that examine other types of language gains are developed in order to quantify the impression that "the SA learner can 'tell a story' a little better and can 'get their point across' more effectively" (Collentine, 2004, p. 245).

It is true that there might be some L2 gains in the SA context that are hard to quantify, yet most—if not all—of the students staying abroad whose performance has been examined also received formal instruction, even in higher amounts than the students in the AH context. It is thus surprising that the SA students' results are not superior—or are in fact lower in many cases—with respect to their peers at home (Collentine, 2004). One explanation can be that the

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