



Effects of different language environments on Chinese graduate students' perceptions of English writing and their writing performance



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on findings from a study of the impact of language-environments on the second-year Chinese graduate students' English writing perceptions and performance. Ninety-four students were divided into three groups in order to see the effects of language environments on their English writing. One group, a study-abroad group (i.e., ESL learners), consisted of 31 non-English majors, who moved to the U.S. to pursue graduate education. The other two groups were studying for graduate degrees in universities in China. To find out the effects of language environments on their English writing perceptions and performance, we used a self-designed 80-item questionnaire and two writing tests (a letter-writing task and an argumentative essay writing task). Results suggest that in comparison with the at-home group, the ESL language environment had a statistically significant effect on the study-abroad group's English writing perceptions and performance. The study-abroad group was significantly more competent in English letter writing than the two at-home groups ($p \leq 0.01$). The performance of the study-abroad students was also statistically better than the at-home non-English major group in argumentative essay writing, although they did not outperform the at-home English-major group. Implications of the study are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Ever since Carroll (1967) posited that the best predictor of foreign language proficiency is learners' experiences in the target language country, the context of learning, as one of the crucial variables in second language acquisition (SLA), has been the focus of considerable research (e.g., Sasaki, 2007). Many researchers stated that the field of research on the study abroad (SA) context was likely to expand dramatically and to be recognized as a major subfield of SLA research (Kingtoner, 2011; Sasaki, 2011; Schuman, 1978), and the exposure to the target language environment was likely to be one of the most important causal variables in L2 acquisition or among the most important causal factors (Ferguson, 1995; Hernández, 2010; Regan, 1998). While some claims are contestable with regard to written language skills improvement, research is needed to examine the extent to which EFL students' writing skills can be enhanced through study abroad experiences.

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Writing is the most prized of academic skills, in addition to its role in language learning (Zhang, 2013), and it takes a long time for students to show substantial gains in it even in a study-abroad context. According to Hayward (1994) and Sasaki (2007, 2011), writing skills have been said to be the most crucial for academic success that study-abroad students tend to face, and it is by writing that most students studying at tertiary level are assessed to pass or fail their courses (see also Zhang, 2016). Perhaps because writing is assumed to be the last language skill to be affected by different language environments, “few investigations to date have reported study-abroad students’ changes in L2 writing” (Sasaki, 2007, p. 603). One of the most recent studies still pointed to a “dearth of research on writing development, particularly tracking development beyond one year of immersion in an L2 university context” (Knoch, Rouhshad, Oon, & Storch, 2015, p. 42). Our study, therefore, intended to address this research gap by examining the changes in Chinese ESL learners’ perceptions of English writing as well as their performance as a skill after 1.5 years’ immersion in a native English-speaking environment, and how they would compare with their counterparts in China, which is a typical EFL environment.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Impacts of language environments on learners’ language growth

The significance of SA experiences on learners’ language learning has been of increasing interest to many researchers. As Sasaki (2007) posited, “the differences between the at-home and the study-abroad students, or the effects of study-abroad experiences, have attracted sufficient attention in the field of applied linguistics” (p. 603). Changes in the learning environment are believed to be significant to students’ language learning processes. Indeed, an increasing number of studies have examined the significance of intense contact with the target language environment in facilitating learners’ language growth. For example, Benson (2004) posited that “contextual variables of SLA research are seen as both determinants and outcomes of the learning process” (p. 19). In a similar vein, Gass (2004) and Ellis (2008) argued that there are both quantitative and qualitative differences between the second/foreign learning contexts, which may mean radical differences in both what is learned and how it is learned. Taking a longitudinal approach, Ren (2014) investigated L2 learners’ cognitive processes during SA. Ren emphasized that “study abroad is widely perceived as an ideal context to provide learners the most direct access possible to large amounts of input and interaction with native speakers” (pp. 575–576). Specifically, the benefits reported by L2 learners who pursued their master’s degrees in the target community included the decrease in pragmatic difficulties and the increase in pragmatic knowledge.

While it is often assumed that “the study abroad context offers the best opportunities for language learning” (Alcón-Soler, 2015, p. 62), other researchers (e.g., Brown, 2008; Huebner, 1995) hold that it is still intuitive or even a pervasive myth to think that the best way to learn a foreign language is to immerse oneself in the language and culture of the target language. There were countless cases of people who spent long years abroad without ever getting to even an initial degree of linguistic mastery, and it can be so difficult to learn the language or so hard to find people to talk to while being surrounded by the language (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi & Lassegard, 2002; Titone, 1969). Brown (2008) observed that “students may be denied opportunities to interact in the target language because they stay in residence with other native speakers of their own language, hang out with other students who speak their own language, eat at ethnic restaurants, read the newspaper in their own language” (pp. 201–202). Cohen and Shively (2007) also found that “study-abroad students do not necessarily achieve greater language gains than their peers who stay at home and study the target language” (p. 189).

Nonetheless, other researchers have explored learners’ individual differences or individual traits that may affect success or failure of study-abroad experiences. For example, Freed (1995) stated that “significant changes do not take place within the study-abroad context at least for more advanced learners, and the greatest gains in an immersion environment are made by students with initially lower language proficiency” (p. 27). Norton’s (2000) longitudinal case study of immigrant women learning English in Canada indicates that success or failure depended on their ability to negotiate access to English-speaking social networks, at work or elsewhere. Similarly, Brown (2008) emphasizes the importance of the ability “to interact with the host culture and language, making local friends, using homestays with local families, among other things, for good language learners to extract maximum benefit from immersion opportunities” (pp. 201–202). Learners’ awareness of strategies was also considered to be an important factor in determining the outcome of study-abroad experiences (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Gao, 2006; Zhang & Zhang, 2013). Cohen and Shively (2007) claim that “study-abroad students may have only limited awareness of how they can mobilize strategies to enhance their language and culture learning while abroad” (p. 193). Huebner (1998) stresses that “the range of experiences which falls under the rubric of study-abroad” is so varied and complex that generalizations about optimal learning contexts needs to be made with great caution (p. 1). The target language environment might fail to provide the expected beneficial impact. Study-abroad students need to have adequate awareness of language and culture strategies to take advantage of opportunities, to increase language exposure, and to maximize their potential for language growth (e.g., Zhang, 2001).

2.2. Study-abroad learners’ development of language skills

Study abroad is advocated as a means for language learning, but unfortunately, it is still not clear “what precisely is gained linguistically from living in the country, which language skills, how much language a student must have in order to take maximum advantage of the experience ...” (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 37). Findings on the specific linguistic

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