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Measuring social interaction during study abroad: Quantitative methods and challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways of measuring (assigning numbers to) social interaction and language use during study abroad. It reviews the development of instruments for such measurement and describes some of the connections that have been made between quantitative measures of social second language use and language development while abroad. Measures addressed include the Language Contact Profile, language logs, the Social Network Questionnaire, the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire, online social media, photo elicitation, mobile phone surveys, and other computational methodologies. The paper encourages mixed methods for clearer and more elaborate understanding and more detailed documentation of tools and procedures for better understanding of cross-study similarities and differences.

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1. Introduction

Accurate measurement is important for second language acquisition (SLA) studies. (Norris & Ortega, 2003; Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). To understand language acquisition, we must observe and measure it; to determine the contribution of any variable to SLA development, we must accurately gauge that variable. We cannot draw solid conclusions about how SLA occurs without accurately measuring language acquisition and the factors that influence it. Pedhazur and Schmelkin (2013) note, "Of various definitions of measurement in socio-behavioral sciences, the preeminent, although by no means universally accepted, is one offered and elaborated upon by Stevens... (1968) 'the assignment of numbers to aspects of objects or events according to one or another rule or convention' (p. 850)" (p. 16). Measurement as defined here will be the focus of this paper.

In the study abroad (SA) setting, one challenge is determining the degree to which learners are immersed in the second language (L2). While learners are generally thought to experience all-out immersion in the L2 while abroad, some research challenges this assumption (Diao, Freed, & Smith, 2011; Iino, 2006; Magnan & Back, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998a, 1998b). Evaluating the accuracy of this assumption and establishing more clearly the amount of contact learners have with locals and the degree to which they use the L2 are challenges that merit careful and thoughtful measurement.

Studies of language contact during SA have gathered information on time spent reading, writing, listening to, and speaking the L2 (Badstübner & Ecke, 2009; Dewey, 2004; Ferenz, 2005; Llanes & Botana, 2015; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2009). Understanding amount of time using the L2 and how that time is used in a SA setting can enhance general knowledge of the processes of SLA. When acquiring a language in communities where the language is not spoken natively, access to written

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linguistic resources is typically greater than availability of native speaker interlocutors (see [Tse, 2001](#)). Hence, SA provides greater opportunity for exposure to and interaction in the L2 than at-home foreign language learning and social interaction in the L2 is therefore a rich topic for research in SA.

From an SLA perspective, one could argue for promoting social interaction through SA in the name of increasing input ([Krashen, 1981, 1985](#)), providing opportunities for negotiating meaning with interlocutors ([Long, 1985](#)), being forced to output language necessary for various communicative interactions ([Swain, 1993, 1998](#), pp. 127–140), or encouraging the higher-order cognitive activity involved in participation in cultural and linguistic settings requiring meaningful social interaction ([Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Lantolf, 2000](#)). Based on [Krashen's \(1981, 1985\)](#) input hypothesis, one could argue for the importance of exposure to extensive input and the value of having a readily available native speaker (NS) interlocutor adjust that input to be comprehensible. One could also emphasize the importance of experiencing a broad range of communicative situations during SA (conversational frames, confirmation checks, clarification requests, self-repetitions, other repetitions, expansions, or other adjustments) where the speaker needs to work with an L2 interlocutor to accomplish various communicative goals ([Long, 1985](#)). Next, advocates of SLA through social interaction abroad could argue for SA to promote “pushed output” ([Swain, 1985](#)). Swain states, “Comprehensible output is, unfortunately, generally missing in typical classroom settings, language classroom and immersion classrooms [at home] being no exception” (p. 252). Swain contrasts classroom learners with “street learners” who are forced to engage in more “two-way, negotiated meaning exchanges” (p. 247). SA participants could be characterized as “street learners” who are pushed to engage in such negotiated meaning exchanges. Finally, advocates of sociocultural theory could argue that SA provides an ideal setting for social interaction through formal, organized institutional settings such as schooling, internships, and sport activities, but also through informal social interaction with host families, neighbors, peers, and others. Learning can be mediated by authentic objects within the SA setting and scaffolded by other speakers of the L2 (both native and nonnative), and individuals can move beyond their current independent capacities as they stretch toward the higher end of their zone of proximal development through the scaffolding of others around them. In short, interaction with and scaffolding by others in one's environment is a key component of SA in line with sociocultural theory ([Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Lantolf, 2000](#)). [Johnson and Golambek \(2011, 2016\)](#) illustrate well from a sociocultural perspective how SA can better prepare teachers to engage learners in dialogic interaction in the classroom based on the needs of out-of-class social interaction typical of immersive SA. From all four of these perspectives (input, interaction, output, and sociocultural), the value of investigating social interaction is clear.

In this paper, I focus on the measurement of L2 social interaction during SA based on the assumptions that SA is important for SLA and that accurate measurement is critical for understanding the SA experience and its linguistic benefits. I show that social interaction can be measured in multiple ways and from various perspectives, and that each of these approaches can contribute to our understanding of SLA during SA. Although qualitative methods such as ethnographies, interviews, and journal studies are valuable for understanding social interaction, treatment of these methods is beyond the scope of this study, so they are only touched on to illustrate the value of mixed methods.

2. Measuring social interaction: the language contact profile, language logs, and social network surveys

L2 social interaction abroad has been measured using a number of tools, including the Language Contact Profile (LCP), language logs, and social network surveys. The LCP and language logs focus primarily on amount of time spent using the L2 in various situations, and social network surveys focus on the individuals a person interacts with and relationships with those individuals.

2.1. The LCP

Barbara Freed, a pioneer of research on SA and SLA, first published a complete version of the LCP in 2004 ([Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004](#)) as a refinement of versions used previously in her SA research (e.g., [Freed, 1990, 1995](#)). Freed credits [Seliger \(1977\)](#) and [Bialystok \(1978\)](#) for the title and the foundational concepts behind her LCP, which she describes as “a questionnaire to assess second language contact for students entering and completing language study programs in various contexts of learning (academic classrooms, intensive domestic immersion, and study abroad)” ([Freed, Dewey, et al., 2004](#), p. 349). The 2004 post-SA version of the LCP consists of questions on coursework and living arrangements and selection items where respondents circle the average number of days per week they used a language during their SA and select a range indicating the average number of hours they used that language on those days (0–1, 1–2, 2–3, etc.). Weekly totals are generated by multiplying the two. Questions focus mostly on interactive face-to-face contact (17 questions) but also on reading (9 questions), writing (7 questions), and listening (4 questions). In short, [Freed, Dewey et al.'s \(2004\)](#) LCP is a comprehensive self-report for quantifying language contact and use that “has been continuously fine-tuned and has been used in a number of complementary studies” both before and after its publication (p. 350).

2.1.1. Studies utilizing the LCP

Many of the articles included in the 2004 volume of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition (SSLA)* in which the LCP was published utilized that same version of the LCP. [Díaz-Campos \(2004\)](#), for example, examined L2 Spanish phonological development, finding that the number of days per week and the number of hours each day learners reported using Spanish

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