Language Acquisition in Study Abroad and Formal Instruction Contexts

Edited by
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CHAPTER 1

Contributions of study abroad research to our understanding of SLA processes and outcomes

The SALA Project, an appraisal

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Central to research on second language acquisition (SLA) has been the question of the potential effects of learning conditions on rate of acquisition and final attainment, with enough publications to allow for meta-analyses (Norris & Ortega 2000; Spada & Tomita 2010; Li 2010). Typically, the specific learning conditions themselves, whether implicit or explicit, have been motivated either by research on cognitive psychology – memorization vs. rule search, for example – or have been pedagogical in nature – grammar explanation or type of feedback. As of late, however, the field has been reconsidering the breadth of those external conditions to include research on Study Abroad as a special context characterized by an uninstructed (i.e. implicit) component that may or may not combine with an instructed (i.e. explicit) component. With this, research on Study Abroad – the topic of the present volume – has moved to a central place in SLA research. This chapter introduces the SALA Project as an example of the contributions that research on study/stay abroad can make to our understanding of how second languages are learned.

1. Introduction

SLA researchers, practitioners, and of course language learners going abroad and their parents have always assumed that Study Abroad provides the best conditions for language development. "A stay abroad speeds up the learning process." "There are aspects of language, such as pragmatics, that can only be learned while living in the country where the language is common." Whether intuitively attractive or based on anecdotal observation, these are common beliefs. While abroad, learners imbibe the language, soak it in, they feel like sponges, they are surrounded, covered with language, their brains saturated. They learn by doing, by living, until one day they discover themselves thinking in the language, and the ultimate experience:

they dream in the language. These descriptions of what it is to learn a second language in a context where that language is prevalent have a common denominator: A view of learning as automatic reflex characterized by lack of control and even absence of awareness, a view associated with implicit learning and use.

Classic SLA theories such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), and Swain's Output Hypothesis (1995) also suggest that Study Abroad provides the optimal context for language development. Immersion abroad is abundant in rich, meaningful input and keeps the focus on the message (Krashen). It also provides constant opportunities for the negotiation that comes with interaction and information breakdowns (Long), and pushes the learner to produce, and consequently to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing (Swain). With the exception of Krashen, who famously rejected the contributions of conscious learning to SLA, both Long and Swain attach a central role to attention and noticing in the learning process. So, while Study Abroad provides an implicit context for language development, the context leads to opportunities for learning with attention. Perhaps it is not at all coincidental that Schmidt's seminal work on attention and SLA (1990) started with observations of what he labeled *noticing* in the diary he kept while living abroad in Brazil. More recent approaches to SLA, including neurocognitive approaches to SLA (e.g., Morgan-Short, Steinhauer, Sanz & Ullman 2012) show that only 'immersion-like' conditions lead to an electrophysiological signature typical of native speakers. However, and contrary to all these expectations, Study Abroad research often finds minimal or no effects of immersion experience on linguistic development (e.g., Collentine 2004; DeKeyser 1991; Díaz-Campos 2004).

A search of all published reports of empirical studies on effects of study/stay abroad yields seventy-two publications, of which 23 are journal articles, including several in the 2004 special issue of Studies in Second Language Acquisition; 6 appeared in proceedings, and 23 are book chapters in edited volumes mainly dedicated to the topic of SA/immersion, such as Freed (1990), DuFon and Churchill (2006), Ortega and Byrnes (2008), and the most recent by Hansen (2012). The first publications appeared in the US in the early 90s (Freed 1990; DeKeyser 1991; Lafford 1995), with work coming out of Europe only recently. Target languages include Spanish (33), French (13), Japanese (8), and English (8). A few (9) have many target languages. One looks at Russian. Most studies have focused on the differences between the SA context and the traditional L2 classroom context regarding lexical and grammatical development (DK 1991; Guntermann 1995), the development of listening skills (Carroll 1967), communication strategies (Lafford 1995), and fluency (Freed 1990). But there are studies comparing immersion abroad and at home immersion (e.g. DK 1991; Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey 2004). Earlier work looked at morphosyntactic development

and fluency, likely due to the ease of administering and coding tasks to elicit dependent variables that operationalized learning; i.e. gains in morphosyntactic accuracy, increased speed and reduction in pauses between pretests and posttests. While these two areas continue to be researched, others have started to join the game, to the point where the field is now very diverse in nature, too diverse in fact, as it makes it difficult to make sense of the contradicting evidence (but see DK this volume).

Different reasons may account for the disappointing and contradictory findings. For starters, studies typically do not include more than 40 participants (only 42 out of the 72 studies found), which results in low statistical power and contributes to the lack of reliability and generalizability of studies themselves. A count of the samples in the 72 studies mentioned above shows a range from $n = 1$ (Bacon 2002) to $n = 2{,}529$ (Rivers 1998), resulting in a mean of 164 participants and a standard deviation of 579!

A second possible reason is the coarse nature of the tasks implemented, unable to detect subtle changes in development, especially when the learners are in the more advanced stages, in which case we may find ceiling effects (Meara 1994). Slowly the field is including more refined measures of fluency (Mora & Valls-Ferrer 2012) and complementing accuracy data with reaction time data (Grey, Cox, Serafini & Sanz under review).

That evidence of contributions of Study Abroad to language development is unexpected or contradictory may also be due to the nature of the dependent variables studied. For example, while research on fluency development in Study Abroad contexts has produced evidence of significant positive changes (Segalowitz & Freed 2004; O'Brien, Segalowitz, Freed & Collentine 2007), phonological development – still limited to pronunciation, does not include perception – seems to lag behind (Díaz-Campos 2004; Mora 2008; but see Simões 1996 for evidence of improved vowel production). There is also contradicting evidence generated by studies looking at development of specific morphosyntactic targets: Early results from the Barcelona Study Abroad Project (Grey, Cox, Serafini & Sanz under review) suggest that for advanced learners of Spanish, five weeks studying abroad are enough to benefit the development of sentence structure, but not gender agreement.

Another reason for the disappointing results has to do with the design of SA research. Studies comparing progress by students learning abroad and at home are common, due often times to the interest in identifying differences in implicit vs. explicit contexts. Unlike laboratory studies however, where random distribution is easy, SA/AH comparisons end up comparing apples and oranges, because students who choose to go abroad are different from students who choose to stay in their home institutions (see DeKeyser this volume, for more on design limitations). To avoid this important limitation, Study Abroad research should follow recent

advances in bilingualism research, which more and more avoids bilingual/monolingual comparisons and instead looks at bilingual groups that differ along domains such as age of acquisition or presence or absence of literacy skills.

There are three promising approaches for SA research to consider; (1) A longitudinal approach that follows learners starting prior to onset of Study Abroad and follows them until well after their return, (2) Cross-sectional program comparisons along variables such as length of program or content versus language programs, (3) Whether longitudinal or cross-sectional, studies that consider effects not only on the basis of pre-post treatment gains but also in terms of individual differences. These procedures would better answer questions about who benefits most from Study Abroad and how programs can better suit individual students. They would also help explain current contradictory results. In what follows we consider these three options to situate the SALA Project as an excellent example of the contributions that studies following these approaches can make to the field.

2. The SALA project: A longitudinal approach to the interaction between individual differences and context of learning

Let's consider the last option first. While learner variables that determine the amount of proficiency gains achieved during a SA period have been identified (e.g., Collentine & Freed 2004), and despite the growing interest in understanding the relationship between cognitive abilities and L2 language development, only a few studies have looked at the interaction between cognitive variables and effects of SA (see Segalowitz & Freed 2004 for speed and efficiency in lexical access and attention control; Taguchi 2008 for processing speed; Sundermann & Kroll 2009 for working memory capacity; O'Brien et al. 2007; Larson-Hall & Dewey 2012 for phonological short-term memory and LaBrozzi 2012 for inhibitory control). In general, it seems that low aptitude students achieve greater gains in highly structured environments (i.e. an at-home context), whereas their higher aptitude counterparts do better in more informal and unstructured environments (i.e. Study Abroad). While cognitive factors such as working memory play a role in rate and attainment, other variables such as expectations, motivation (e.g., Larson-Hall & Dewey 2012), attitudes (e.g., Llanes, Tragant & Serrano 2012), strategy use (e.g., Adams 2006), cognitive style (e.g., Hokanson 2000), and linguistic outlook also come to mind. Whether cognitive or psychosocial, individual differences have the potential to affect not only the amount of input, interaction, and output the learner is going to seek but, equally important, the way the input is going to be processed, given the roles that working memory and attentional control have in explicit processing of the language.

In the present volume, examples of mixed analyses that include development and individual differences are to be found in Chapters 10 and 11. In Chapter 10, Juan-Garau, Salazar-Noguera and Prieto-Arranz aim to understand the role of motivation in moderating gains in the lexico-grammatical competence of fifty-seven learners in the SA as well as a result of instruction in the at-home university (AH). Their sample, as part of the SALA Project sample, is characterized by homogeneity – participants are advanced learners of L3 English who have graduated from Spanish/Catalan bilingual programs and therefore have oral and written control over Catalan and Spanish. Their results show that integrative orientations towards the target-language community affect morphosyntactic-development. Interestingly, their results could not identify an interaction between context of acquisition and these effects. Evidence from this chapter shows the importance of sociocognitive variables, specifically motivation and attitude, in explaining variations in rate of development across both the SA and the AH contexts.

Chapter 11, by Trenchs-Parera and Juan-Garau follow a cohort of the SALA Project sample at four times; upon entering college, after Formal Instruction, after three months of experience abroad, and then again 15 months after. So many waves of data over such a long period of time makes this study quite unique and allows its authors to take a look at the context-sensitive changes in beliefs and motivation. The authors conclude that context differentially affects these two individual variables: While experience abroad reduces anxiety and motivates students, their classroom experience triggers self-confidence and effort. Taken together, these two chapters show the changing role of individual differences in moderating language development in formal and immersion contexts.

The second option outlined above, cross-sectional program comparisons along variables such as length of program or content versus language programs, has not yet been very productive. Studies that look at short stay programs (Llanes & Muñoz 2009) are not frequent; also, the proportion of studies that focus on native English speakers is too large to draw generalizations beyond English L1/Americans abroad (see DK this volume). However, it is very possible that some of the apparently contradicting evidence emerges from programs that are radically different because they may include language classes or only content classes; they can also be sheltered programs or direct matriculation programs like the ERASMUS program in Europe. Obviously, immersion is not always synonymous with implicit contextual factors: Sheltered programs that offer language classes may potentially be no different from stay home experiences, except for the outings, and not even that if the tour guides address the students in their native language.

Recent work by Alex Housen and colleagues (Housen, Schoonjans, Janssens, Welcomme, Schoonhere & Pierrard 2011) is an excellent example of research on the effects of contextual differences in SLA. These researchers looked at L2

development in four different contexts situated along a continuum of prominence of the L2, i.e., curricular and extra-curricular presence of English. The authors hypothesized that language prominence would make a significant difference in rate of language development, with learners in the foreign language context (a few hours of English Formal Instruction per week in German schools) showing the smallest gains, students in study-abroad contexts (European Schools in the UK) showing the largest gains, and students in the European Schools in Germany and Brussels falling somewhere in the middle. Results do not fully confirm said hypothesis and show instead a pattern consistent with prior research; i.e. language prominence has a role in L2 development, but it does not affect all aspects equally. Specifically, learners in the UK showed substantial gains in fluency and lexical complexity in L2 English, but their performance was comparable to that of students in Germany in terms of accuracy and global proficiency as measured by a cloze test. Given evidence suggesting that language knowledge developed under implicit conditions is more stable (e.g., Lado, Sanz, Bowden & Stafford forthcoming; Li 2010), it is possible to hypothesize that the group studying abroad would outperform the learners in the foreign language context several months upon return. The lasting effects of SA is a recurrent finding in the studies included in Pérez-Vidal's volume: Gains in many different aspects of second language development and skills – perception (Mora), oral (Valls-Ferrer & Mora) and written fluency (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin), listening comprehension (Beattie, Valls-Ferrer, & Pérez-Vidal) and complexity in writing (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin) were maintained several months after the learners' return to their home institution. In contrast, Chapter 12, by Merino and Avello, reports on attrition in intercultural awareness 15 months upon return from the Study Abroad period.

As mentioned earlier, research on Study Abroad has concentrated on SA/AH comparisons, where the SA group was understood as the experimental group and the AH as the control, since the aim of that strand of research was to identify the advantages of SA in leading to enhanced rates of language development. The problem is that a number of uncontrolled variables are unavoidable in that design: Learners in both groups differ in motivation and in risk-taking, for example. Likewise, input in both contexts differs wildly in both amount and quality. And programs also vary in multiple ways. In this respect, work by Housen and colleagues contributes a richer view with more options than just the traditional SA/AH dichotomy and a continuous criterion that allows these authors to explain their results. The SALA Project proposes yet another solution: a longitudinal approach that follows learners for 2.5 years prior to instruction, after instruction, after the experience abroad, and several months later to observe retention. This is the first of the three options advanced earlier: a robust within-subjects design that characterizes all the studies reported in the present volume and that makes them unique.

For the first time we can track learners at four points in their language development; at onset; after classroom exposure, a context with minimal prevalence of the L2; after immersion, with maximal curricular and extra-curricular prevalence of the L2, followed by a fourth period, without exposure to the language, to observe retention. Participants are Catalan/Spanish bilinguals majoring in translation and interpreting at a university in Barcelona, matriculated in an institution of higher learning in an English-speaking area as part of the ERASMUS program for one semester. As bilinguals educated in an additive bilingual context leading to biliteracy, participants in the study are experienced language learners, and as language majors, they are potentially highly motivated and good at learning languages. While this sample is unusual in the US, where most of the Study Abroad studies have been produced, it represents the sociolinguistic reality for many Europeans.

Several patterns emerge from the findings reported in Pérez-Vidal's volume. The first is directly indebted to the longitudinal design of these studies. In Chapter 5, Valls-Ferrer and Mora follow fluency development, focusing on the period abroad and the two periods AH, one before and one after experience abroad. They conclude that fluency was enhanced mostly during the learners' period of stay abroad; gains in that period account for most of the total increase in fluency overall. Valls-Ferrer and Mora also conclude that gains in fluency depend on initial fluency level, but that variation in initial fluency cannot explain the differential impact context has on this aspect of oral proficiency. That the effects of initial level on language development in AH and SA contexts are felt two years after onset of study is not to be underestimated, especially when combined with the finding that most gains took place during the learners' stay abroad. The point we take home from these results is the importance of timing the Study Abroad experience. Furthermore, effects of initial level are not limited to speech production but rather extend to speech perception, as Chapter 7 by Mora reports that initial level determines the learners' final ability to discriminate vowel quality and consonant voicing contrasts. In this case, greater gains were observed among learners at the lower end of the developmental continuum; these gains were more notably felt after AH instruction.

As a reminder, Housen and colleagues could not fully confirm their hypothesis that enhanced language development would be predicted by language contact and show instead a more complex pattern where language prominence has a role in L2 development, albeit different aspects of the language are affected differently. Specifically, learners abroad gained in fluency and lexical complexity, but students in Germany gained as much as them in terms of accuracy and global proficiency. Similarly, several findings reported in Perez Vidal's volume show the differential effect of AH and SA experiences depending on aspects of the language under study. While gains were observed in phonological perception (Mora), and oral and

written fluency (Valls-Ferrer & Mora and Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, respectively), with retention, as commented in the previous paragraph, the chapter by Avello and Lara concludes that the Study Abroad experience does not do much to enhance pronunciation; specifically, vowel duration and quality and VOT in voiceless plosives did not improve following three- and six-month programs. Importantly, length of stay – a variable of interest in previous research on the effects of SA in L2 development – did not seem to make a difference. In conclusion, amount of exposure to the L2, be it in the form of language prominence, à la Housen et al., or in terms of length of stay, may or may not affect language development, depending on how we operationalize language development. Unfortunately, Avello and Lara's is the only study looking at length of stay in the SALA Project, and so we cannot report this lack of effects for length of stay as a pattern. The data are certainly there, so this may be a path for future research for members of the SALA team.

3. Conclusion

Pérez-Vidal's edited volume is unique in many ways. We find together in it an uncommonly wide array of skills – oral (Valls-Ferrer & Mora; Juan-Garau) and written production (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin), lexical development (Juan-Garau, Salazar-Noguera & Prieto-Arranz), listening comprehension (Beattie, Valls-Ferrer, & Pérez-Vidal), and phonological development (Avello & Lara; Mora). Several of the chapters look at both ends of the learning process to include perception (Mora) and production (Avello & Lara), and operationalize development in complex ways by combining fluency, dysfluencies (Valls-Ferrer & Mora), and accuracy (Juan-Garau) measures. Furthermore, the evidence is gathered by means of open ended (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin) and closed tasks (Juan-Garau, Salazar-Noguera & Prieto-Arranz), which allows for comparisons of performance across tasks within subjects. The design allows for depth in how we look at the effects of Study Abroad by putting together a large amount of longitudinal data – four years altogether – gathered following one single protocol that includes explicit and implicit conditions, overcoming limitations noted earlier in this chapter. Key is the contribution that the volume can make to our understanding of retention and specifically of the differential effects on retention of external conditions, a topic that is gathering momentum in SLA. Finally, and much to their credit, Pérez-Vidal and colleagues have moved beyond pure linguistic views of effects of Study Abroad to include psychosocial growth – attitudes, motivation, beliefs (Trenchs-Parera & Juan-Garau) – and intercultural awareness (Merino & Avello).

A particular strength of this volume is its inclusion of Chapters 2 and 3, the former detailing the research methodology that is common to all the empirical

studies (Chapters 4–12) and the latter on the nitty-gritty of the design and implementation of the Study Abroad program. Again, these two chapters make the volume a unique tool for researchers and practitioners alike. After describing the design of the umbrella project, with details on the nature of the sample, design, data collection instruments, and procedures followed, Pérez-Vidal pulls together results from all the studies in the SALA Project and discusses them against findings from previous SA research. Key to understanding the discussion is awareness of the three main goals that drive the SALA Project team's efforts. The first goal is the most ambitious, as the SALA Project aims to analyze the impact of SA as well as FI (conventional Formal Instruction in the country of origin) context on the development of English among college students. Importantly, the team makes an effort to observe the impact of contextual factors immediately after exposure as well as retention of said effects. The SALA Project operationalizes language development as gains in oral production, phonological perception, oral comprehension, written production, and lexico-grammatical ability. The second goal is to evaluate the variable length of stay, as the members of the SALA group suspect that a three-month experience abroad is not enough to lead to acquisition, and so they compare two groups, one who completes a three month (one semester) stay abroad, and one who completes a longer stay (six months) in the target language. Finally, the study aims to show the potential role of interactions between context of acquisition and individual differences in explaining the high degree of variability observed in language development in any context, but especially in SA. Specifically, the project seeks to outline patterns of linguistic development around one key variable, namely, initial competence level, which in turn correlates with other variables such as contact with native speakers, as well as attitude and motivation. Finally, the SALA Project goes beyond language development to contribute to our understanding of changes in motivation and cultural values as a result of SA in comparison with FI. Pérez-Vidal's discussion includes both the main contributions made by the project to our current view of the role of context in SLA, as well as contributions made to our understanding of the efficacy of mobility policies and programs as an engine to promote the development of all language skills.

Beattie's chapter (Chapter 3) looks in detail at all the stages involved in setting up and managing the SA experience of several cohorts of students from the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at a university in Barcelona, Spain. The start of the SA program and the founding of the institution were almost simultaneous and the program, which involved multiple institutions, became a graduation requirement and was fully integrated into the institutional curriculum at the students' home institution.

The history of the exchange is briefly presented, followed by the articulation of all the stages of the exchange; prior to departure, monitoring the students during

the actual period of Stay Abroad and, finally, follow-up activities. The complex interplay of factors involved in mobilising and monitoring large numbers of exchange students is presented and reference is also made to the degree to which it is possible to undertake successful Stay Abroad initiatives from the planning stage right through to their completion. The chapter, written by the Academic Tutor responsible for student placement in the foreign institution, details the set up, which included general orientation sessions, selection process, drafting the Academic Agreement or 'Study Contract' and the welcoming institutions' profiles – either an Applied Modern Languages department or a more traditional Philology department – and how that choice determined the range of courses available. Students were also encouraged to take advantage of the available self-access language learning facilities, which added considerably to their potential for more effective language learning. Importantly, the chapter also details procedures, such as a 25–30 page diary, that assisted learners in evaluating their language improvement in accordance with a series of guidelines. Diaries allowed the tutor to discreetly monitor the students' progress, required students to take a clearly proactive role in assessing and monitoring their own progress, and became an excellent research tool.

As these two first chapters clearly show, the volume is a must read for second language scholars interested in learning conditions and their effects on L2 development. It is of special value for those of us who appreciate carefully designed research that identifies and overcomes limitations found in previous studies. The volume can be equally valuable for language practitioners – teachers and administrators – in need of information on advantages and limitations of the Study Abroad experience; the volume should assist them in making informed decisions on study abroad program designs and the best match for each individual student.

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