

Chapter 27

Disentangling Research on Study Abroad and Pronunciation: Methodological and Programmatic Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Despite intuitive and theoretically motivated claims that Study Abroad (SA) is an optimal environment for language development, including pronunciation gains, research on its effectiveness has produced contradictory results. Furthermore, there is little known about short-term study abroad programs, where matriculation numbers are increasing faster than ever before. This chapter analyzes pre- and post-SA oral production data from 18 advanced learners of Spanish, focusing on stop consonants (/p, t, k, b, d, g/). Development was defined in terms of voice onset time for /p, t, k/ and a 5-point lenition measure for /b, d, g/. Learners produced significantly shorter VOT values after the SA program, though there was not a similar improvement in lenition score. Therefore, the intensive, six-week SA experience yielded substantial gains in L2 pronunciation for these advanced learners of Spanish. Results are discussed in light of advances in both research methodology and study abroad program design.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2013 Open Doors Report from the Institute for International Education, the number of students from the United States (US) enrolled in credit-granting Study Abroad (SA) programs has more than tripled over the past two decades. This impressive growth reflects the fact that students, parents, and language practitioners have come to regard SA as the keystone to a successful language learning

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experience. This sentiment is echoed by institutions like the Modern Language Association (MLA), which included SA as a continuing priority in its call for translingual and transcultural competence in foreign language education (2007).

SA as an engine of linguistic and cultural development has intuitive appeal. While abroad, students immerse themselves in the language and culture and learn by doing, until one day they discover themselves thinking and dreaming in the target language. This line of thinking is not simply impressionistic, however. Indeed, classical theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) such as: Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis; Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis; and Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, lend support to the notion that SA is an optimal learning environment, one that is rich in meaningful input and opportunities for interaction and negotiation in the Second Language (L2). Moreover, some models of L2 pronunciation development such as the Speech Learning Model (Flege, 1995) have postulated that speakers' phonetic categories evolve over time to reflect the input they have received. Thus, the richer the input, the faster the categorization process.

To test these assumptions, empirical research on SA has grown and diversified in recent years, examining not just programmatic characteristics such as length of stay, but also attitudinal and language use variables that purportedly regulate the quantity and quality of input. Much of the research on pronunciation reviewed here has focused on US students in Spanish-speaking countries. Despite numerous studies on this specific population, results have remained inconclusive, perhaps due to the methodological diversity of research in this area, which has included learners of varying levels of proficiency in programs that differ in lengths of stay, operationalized development in terms of both continuous and categorical measures, and analyzed variables related to core and regional (i.e., dialect-specific) pronunciation features. Moreover, this work has routinely compared learners studying abroad to a group of learners at home. However, unlike laboratory studies where random distribution is easy, at-home (AH) vs. SA comparisons end up pairing populations that are often poles apart, not only in terms of individual differences such as motivation and personality, but also academically and financially. Given the complex interactions between learner differences and the environment, as well as potential differences in learners' pretest proficiency levels, the validity of previous reports comparing SA and AH learners seems questionable.

In this research domain, two key variables are pre-departure proficiency level and length of stay. DeKeyser (2007, 2010, 2014) suggested that learners may need to possess a certain level of language skill in order to maximize benefits from a SA experience. To that point, research has shown that lower proficiency learners appear to achieve greater gains in oral skills than their higher proficiency peers (e.g., Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Valls-Ferrer & Mora, 2014). Still, more research in this area is warranted, particularly research on more advanced learners participating in short-term programs, which are growing in popularity. Sixty percent of US students studying abroad during 2012-2013 participated in short-term SA programs, such as summer programs, January term programs, or programs that were eight weeks or less, as compared to one semester, 6-month, or year-long SA programs (Institute of International Education, 2014). Thus, given the growing popularity of SA programs and their financial cost, we have both an epistemological and ethical imperative to understand the outcomes of stays abroad at a range of skill levels, particularly for short-term programs.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to explore what effect a short, but intense SA program had on pronunciation development among advanced L2 learners. Specifically, this study examined changes in the pronunciation of stop consonants /p, t, k, b, d, g/ among 18 female students who had completed 3+ years of college Spanish at a private US university and who participated in a six-week SA program in Barcelona. This research aimed to fill two gaps regarding current knowledge on the efficacy

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